

One button = total control

Touch screen is not quite the stuff of Click, but integration of home electronics is in demand

BY ALLISON LAMPERT

One stroke of the finger on Khaled Bulgasem's touch-screen remote raises or lowers the blinds at his Montreal boutique.

Another touch turns on the electronic fireplace.

Hit another box on the screen and instantly the room is dimly lit with romantic music playing and the surround-sound speakers.

Think of it as a universal remote on steroids.

"Do you see any light switches on the wall?" Bulgasem, president of Discreet Systems Design Inc., asks a visitor to his new store.

Not one.

The lights, music and television screens are connected through 20,000 feet of cables hidden within the walls and behind the master control rack.

"At the end of the day, people only want to push one button," said Bulgasem, 40. "Instead of having 50 switches, you have one system."

He's one of a handful of Montreal electronics retailers who specialize in the niche custom home integration industry.

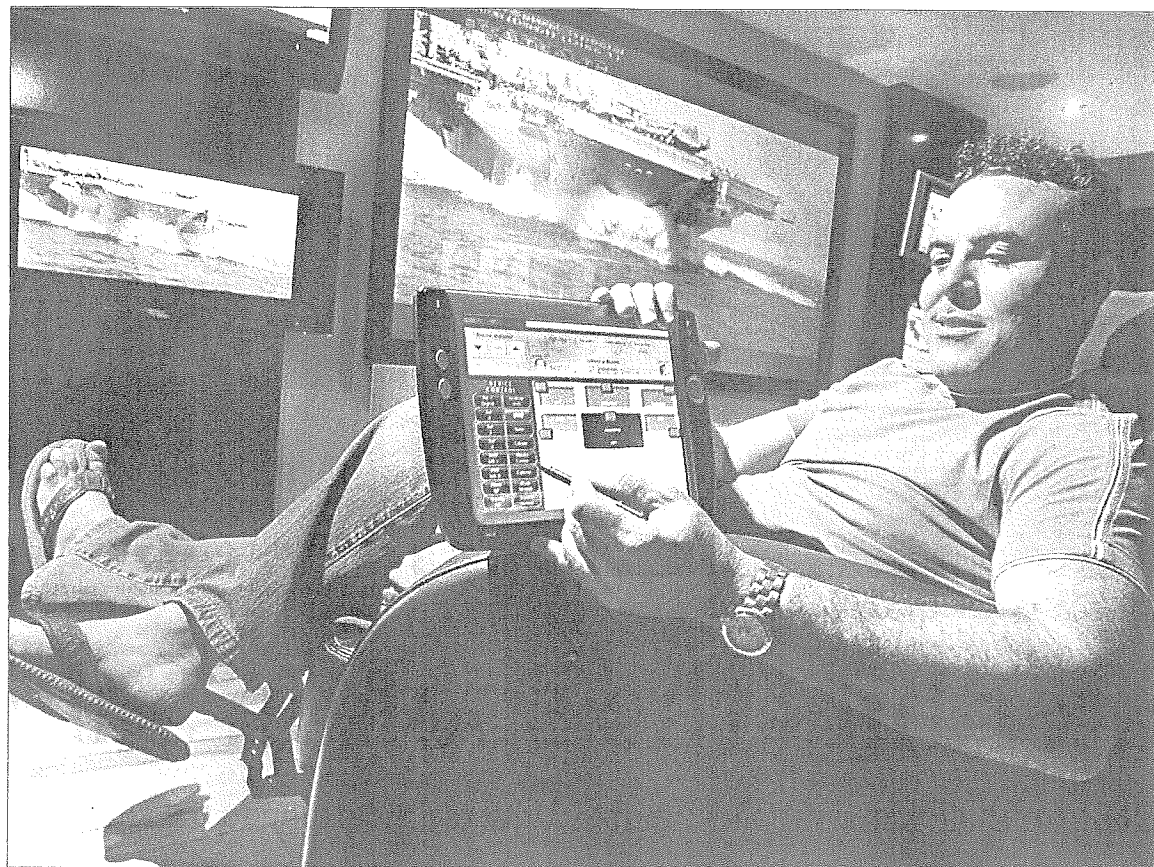
"It's not a very large market, but it's a growing market," said Reinhard Goerner, a technology writer for the Quebec trade publication *Son & Images*.

"We are in the early part of the curve. Five years from now, I expect to see 10 times the number of homes being integrated."

Home integration takes the universal remote control — now being popularized in the new Hollywood film *Click* — one step further.

While the industry hasn't come up with a touch screen that can muffle a barking dog — like the "super remote" discovered by actor Adam Sandler's character in *Click* — home integration sells convenience: clients can access their homes' communication, entertainment, security and climate control systems through one remote, wall panel or phone call.

For example, a weary traveller could turn on the home air conditioning by phone so it is cool



GORDON BECK/MONTREAL GAZETTE

Khaled Bulgasem, president of Discreet System Designs, shows the control panel that operates everything from TVs to fireplaces.

when he arrives from the airport.

"It makes life so much more simple," said Pierre Spenard, a former Montreal audio specialist who was customizing home theatres for clients as early as the 1970s. "It [the technology] follows people's lifestyles."

Because home integration is personalized to the individual client — visits to the Discreet store are by appointment only — the cost varies widely.

At Discreet, prices can range from a standard package — which includes two televisions, a touch-screen remote and music

in six rooms — for \$10,000, to high-tech systems that cost more than \$1 million, Bulgasem said.

Clients pay for the service. It can take months for a Discreet technician to install the system at a home.

"That's why I go to him," said Montreal businessman Raymond Croubalian, who hired Bulgasem to install the television and audio systems at his Bread Garden chain of 14 restaurants in British Columbia.

Before opening Discreet, Bulgasem was a home integration specialist at Audio Centre.

Demand for integration will grow as prices fall, predicted Spenard, who is Bulgasem's mentor: "As the prices go down, the technology is going to become more available."

Indeed, Bulgasem's showroom — \$1 million worth of TVs, surround-sound systems and other electronics in the ambience of a downtown condo — would have cost \$7 million just five years ago.

Besides, demand for electronics, including televisions, DVD players and phones is booming.

Spending in Canada on home theatre equipment alone has

grown from just over \$3.7 billion in 2002, to nearly \$4.5 billion in 2005, figures from Statistics Canada's 2006 retail commodity survey show.

Before he opened his downtown boutique last week, Bulgasem serviced 200 customers from his house.

The store's opening night party last week yielded 128 new requests.

"In five or 10 years, this is going to be so standard," Bulgasem said.

"Just like a fridge or a stove."

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