

The Evolution of the PC

I've talked at length every now and again about how the computer world has changed over the few decades since its inception as a consumer-grade thing. In the early days—the EARLY early days, a home computer wasn't much more than a technophile's toy. It was this box hooked to a screen that one used to show off whatever programming prowess they'd learned to anyone who might appreciate it. It had fairly little impact on real life unless someone was resourceful enough to write a program that applied the computer's strengths to real-life issues. Fortunately, over time a lot of people did, which led to an era where people and companies started putting computers to work.

The “big three” pieces of business software, the word processor, the spreadsheet, and the database, made using computers very advantageous to businesses, since suddenly accountants didn't have to do an hour of math every time some number in a payroll column was changed. From then on, home computers were a means for workers to “take their work home,” which was usually a rationale to buy the same kind of system they had at the office, cementing an early hold by the IBM-PC and compatibles (later known as the Windows boxes) on the market.

Kids wanted computers too, and parents believed (or rationalized) that it was an important educational tool, while the kids were mostly in it for the games that were beating the Ataris and Intellivision game systems of the time. Still, the average person of the time had to know some programming, or at least a few DOS commands, to get their favorite game running. That too would change, with the next generation of hardware and operating systems. I guess we can blame Steve Jobs and Apple for popularizing the mouse and graphic user interface, followed by all the others, along with the idea that computers should be easy to use. Exactly how easy they were is up for debate, but they were more accessible to someone who preferred not to memorize a lot of text commands to get from here to there.

Sort of like having a car or a television, owning a computer was one of those things that was not a life necessity, but it seemed weird if you DIDN'T have one, followed shortly after by the yardstick of being connected to the Internet. Computers and the Internet moved quickly from the territory of the savvy (those who needed it for their career or those just attracted to the tech) to damn near everyone, and the market went along as a result. We might stand on the precipice of a new era coming soon, as the proliferation of Internet-

connected “smartphones” and items like Apple's iPad look set to usher in some vision out of Star Trek, where people pass around those informational PADDs like they did with papers and clipboards years ago.

As sort of an observer on the developing scene, I've come to the general conclusion that in the current computer climate, we are left with two primary uses for machines; the secondary, “doing stuff,” and the primary, “messing around.” “Doing stuff” is a lot like “work” from years ago, though it doesn't necessarily have to be job-related. It involves doing things like serious work or creative efforts. It also usually involves some sort of productivity software which has to be purchased (or pirated if you're amoral about it). On the other side, “messing around” is the thing most people do with their computers on a regular basis which use up time and can be entertaining or even enriching, but offer little beyond that. These are the activities like playing games, puttering around with the various facets of the Internet, and organizing ones' photos, music, videos, and other media. Basically, it's the stuff that can be done with any Mac running a copy of iLife (except maybe the games). It's the computer equivalent of doing the daily crossword or sudoku puzzles in the paper, or redecorating your home—something to do and enjoy, but

ultimately somewhere between diversion and pointless in the



greater scheme. There's nothing wrong with "messaging around," as everyone needs at least some diversion and play in their lives to keep themselves from going either insane or freakishly dull, but it seems like that's the only thing some ever do with the astounding technology at their disposal. I wonder what the early semiconductor engineers and operating system programmers might think about the revelation that the evolution of those technologies they helped create would be used to exchange 128-character snippets of inane text with "followers," or search out free porn.

I mentioned the possibility of a new paradigm of computer usage,

marked by those devices that refuse to call themselves computers: the iPhone, iPad, and other iGear. There's also the netbook, a scaled-down laptop computer geared strongly toward a "messaging around" priority. Where the netbooks took a "real" computer and scaled it down, items like the iPad took the interface formerly designed primarily for PDAs and smartphones and scaled it up. The mouse/keyboard/GUI interface and the touch-screen



interfaces each have their advantages. While it's not yet determined how far things like the iPad can go, it seems like the old interface may remain advantageous for more complex productivity applications. Perhaps in a few years the touchscreen devices will

become the preferred "messaging around" method, leaving the "doing stuff" to the full computers, creating a true schism between different types of users and applications, at least until the brain-implant computers come a decade later. I'm pretty sure the Amigas will be in there somewhere.

...by Eric Schwartz
from the AmiTech Gazette,
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November Calendar

November 1 — Amiga-By-The-Loop Chapter
7:30 PM — Main Grand Prairie Library
901 Conover Drive, Grand Prairie

November 1 — Board of Director's Meeting
Approximately 9:15 PM — Location TBD

November 27 — Newsletter Deadline — 7:00 AM

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