

The post-PC era

Ever since personal computers appeared in the late 1970s, the trend has been towards greater personalisation and ease of use. To begin with, the innovations were slow to come. The graphical user interface, first popularised by apple, then Microsoft (with windows), and then the development of laptops, were the main developments over two decades. In recent years, however, the personalisation innovations are coming fast, with the introduction of smart phones and tablet computers we're truly shifting into the era of mobile computing. Computers no longer need to be something you operate on a table-top, they are increasingly mobile and instant-on. However, what makes this development so interesting is that, whilst it depends on increasing miniaturisation of electronic chips, its development and adoption is subject more to human psychological considerations such as what people find comfortable, beautiful, useful and familiar.

One implication of this is that location-based services are gradually appearing. These are apps that know where you are, and therefore which businesses and services you are near, or how far away people in your social network are. How far these will go is anyone's guess. It depends on what numbers of people are comfortable with what level of sharing of their personal location. Many, perhaps particularly women, might feel uncomfortable with this. Nevertheless, the possibilities are huge. Imagine having a profile of yourself, including details on your interests, ambitions, habits, tastes etc., stored on a personal device, then as you walk about during your daily life, the device could constantly be alerting you for opportunities to meet people who you'd really benefit from meeting, and try new products and services that it knows you'd like, as you walk past them. The apps and technology for this are already in existence, all that's needed is for them to be developed further and adopted more, before the true potential

of this is seen.

Where are personal computers heading next? Undoubtedly even more mobile. Already we're seeing wearable computing devices. Bracelets and belt clips are available for tracking your activity levels, storing the information online for health tracking, watches that can communicate with your cellphone, and devices such as hearing aids that are getting increasingly smarter. Nokia have even just patented a type of metallic tattoo that vibrates when your phone rings or a text message arrives!

As devices become more personal and mobile, the need for them to look aesthetically pleasing increases. The archetypal PC was basically a large beige brick, boring and somewhat ugly. But the archetypal mobile device is the iPhone: a sleek beautiful design classic.

The next big category of device could be 'smart glasses'. These would be spectacles which have displays built into the lenses, like a lighter-weight version of the heads-up displays worn by pilots. Then, as you walk around in your daily life the lenses can overlay information on the world around you. Can't remember the name of that person you've just bumped into? No problem, the glasses would be displaying information on them, including their name, where you last met them, when their birthday is etc., all only visible to you. These devices could also enhance our world in more personally creative ways. Imagine you set a profile on your own glasses, which then broadcasts colours, graphics, and information that hovers on and around you when others look at you through their glasses. The educational and commercial potentialities are considerable. Imagine, for instance, being able to walk around a city and instantly see historical information overlaid on buildings and monuments. Again, the technology to make this happen is just around the corner, the limiting factors will be human. Can we make sure smart-specs work in a way that is safe, and doesn't constantly cause car or pedestrian

accidents? Will people be tolerant of not knowing when others are viewing information about them? Or what about the inevitable built-in video cameras: would people be happy interacting with others knowing they are being constantly filmed?

Whatever the next decade brings in terms of personal computing it should be fascinating to watch, and is sure to tell us as much about the 'personal' as about computers!