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Editorial

By Tony Mobily

The desktop computer is not dead, but it's doomed. Laptops are not dead, but they are doomed. And our mobile phones are going to kill them... sounds unlikely? Well, please read on—and let me know what you think. People have predicted the death of the desktop computer and the death of the laptop many times. These death sentences have often sounded like those religions which predicted the world would end by the year 2000—then the year 2000 came, and the end of the world was then rescheduled for 2004—then 2004 happily came and went—and so on.

Just like the end of the world, the end of the desktop computer and laptops, as we know them, never seems to be getting any closer. The “killers” have been dodged every time, swiftly and quietly. First, it should have been the “smart television”, which would've made computers obsolete... but didn't. Then, it should have been the dumb terminal—just a screen and a keyboard in your house, with the real computer residing elsewhere. Again, a flop. The internet tablets came along, armed with big PR funds and promises. Nope. Then, it should have been the mobile phone. Well, as far as I know, there are a lot of people right now who are after mobile phones that are just that—mobile phones, without all the extraneous stuff. If the computer, as we know it, was a person it must have had a good laugh at all the attempted assassinations which have failed one after the other.

However, I believe it's time for the computer to stop laughing. Now, something has changed.

Four things have happened:

- Technology has evolved, and everything now can indeed be small and cheap (rather than big and cheap or small and expensive).
- PDAs are becoming as usable and as powerful as computers.
- Thanks to bluetooth, there is now a way of adding bits and pieces (see: keyboard and mouse) to your PDA.
- The internet. The computer itself today is less and less important—being able to read and answer email today is the big deal.

Microsoft realised this very early. This is why it tried to force-feed Windows Pocket PC to anybody releasing anything powerful enough to run it (turning a lot of neat pieces of hardware out there into useless, crashing junk. But that's a different story.)

PDA is a very old term. I used it back in 1993) referring to a big bar code scanner which could be programmed in Basic. We used to call it the cockroach—it was square-ish, black, and you felt a little uneasy when it was strapped to your hand. Little I knew, that 14 years later I would be writing an article about PDAs taking over the world.

“Internet tablet” is a relatively new term: it refers to ultra-portable computers often without keyboard and mouse.

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Mobile phones are relatively old (I remember some people sacrificing their boot space in their car for the “receiver”), and always immensely popular.

In 10 years, our “phones” won’t be “phones” anymore. They will be called “phones”, but they will be a mixture of a PDA, an internet tablet and a phone—and they will kill the personal computer. They have existed for a while, but right now they are on the verge of becoming immensely popular.

It will start in 3 or 4 years: there will be a technology to send the signal from your phone to an LCD screen. (This is, in my opinion, the real missing piece in the puzzle.) People will realise that with an LCD screen (under \$30), an external keyboard and their phones, they are able to write emails, browse the Internet, and write their blogs. The revolution will start from the “normal” people—our mothers, our grandfathers, and (why not) our children. Internet connectivity will be through WiFi or equivalent in 10 years.

In 6 years, people will start noticing: it won’t be a “computer in every home” anymore. It will be a “combination-of-screen-and-mouse-and-keyboard in every home—and a computer in everybody’s hands”.

Sales of normal computers will decline, and sales of such devices will increase. Apple will come up with something perfect for the goal—a combination of screen-and-mouse-and-monitor, with a neat proprietary slot to insert your Apple iPhone which will have anything you could possibly want.

In 10 years, the desktop PC sales will be very limited; laptops will still sell; mobile phones will outsell anything else, by far.

The irony? Apple will come up with a fantastic name (iPC? iPDA? iTablet? iAM, short for iAppleMac—I think therefore iAM!). Trademark war will break out. But people will still call it “my phone”. Can I connect my phone/computer to your screen for a minute? I want to type a longish email.

Does this sound unrealistic? Well, then you need to look at:

- [The Nokia 800](#)
- [A list of PDAs running Windows Mobile](#)

They are here. More of them are coming. They will take over the computer world and eat the desktop and laptop markets alive—all they need, is a way of connecting to a big, flashy monitor.

Free software is already moving towards the PDA market, and it’s doing it well. Who wants to spend money for a Windows license when the PDA itself costs probably less than the license?

Ubuntu’s recent announcement of a new portable Ubuntu distribution can only make me happy.

We shall see.

Biography

[Tony Mobily](#) (/user/2" title="View user profile.): Tony is the founder and the Editor In Chief of Free Software Magazine

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