

Will cross-over devices be the end of personal computing?



By Peter Menyasz

Personal computing is turning into a disappointment, and is in danger of becoming an irrelevant afterthought as the real technology progress shifts to cellular telephones and phone/computer crossover devices.

Both in hardware and software, personal computer developments in recent years have been incremental rather than game-changing. Prices have gone down significantly over the past 10 years, but the trend seems to have leveled off lately. Computing power keeps growing, but even that seems to have reached a plateau. Monitors are bigger and cheaper, and laptop prices keep going down.

But where are the mind-blowing hardware advances that used to come every 12-24 months?

The same is true for software. The major packages keep bringing out new versions, but improvements are minor, and in some cases the upgrades aren't worth the cost. Windows 7 is an excellent case in point. It's incrementally better than Windows Vista, but I'm wondering how many people are bothering to make the change, other than those who are forced to use it when buying a new desktop or laptop.

A change in focus by gamers is surely partly behind this. Games were the primary drivers of the personal computer revolution – as each new iteration of hardware and operating system was released, gamers pushed the new envelope to its bounds, spurring further development. Faster processors, huge amounts of cheap memory and lightning-fast graphics processors created revolutionary advances.

But the new generations of console gaming systems have turned the attention of gamers, and those who design games, away from the PC toward gaming-only systems. Better controls and greater flexibility, together with easy connectivity to home networks and the Internet, make those systems the ideal platform for the amazing graphics and high-speed game play that gamers demand.

The revolution in cell phones, which is expanding to include cross-over devices such as Apple's new iPad, is also a major factor in the shift in focus away from personal computing. When an iPhone or similar device can perform many of the functions of a laptop, or even a desktop, and even provide a platform for increasingly sophisticated games, the attraction to teenagers, and many adults, is obvious.

Will PCs become obsolete? As the functions and features of desktops, laptops, cell phones and tablets converge, it seems as if it can only be a matter of time.

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Speaking of Windows 7, I finally took the plunge and replaced my pre-release version with the retail one, despite dire warnings that it couldn't be done without wiping my system clean. Fortunately, judicious Googling turned up an upgrade process that seems to have worked perfectly.

Is Windows 7 worthwhile? All things considered, I would say the answer is a qualified "yes".

It's certainly stable, and more so than many of its predecessors. Vista was quite stable, and yet it produced the rare "blue screen of death". That has never happened with 7 so far, although it inexplicably slows down to a painful crawl. This could be a hardware issue, but from what I've read it could also be the operating system, or non-compliant software. Fortunately, a simple reboot is enough to fix the problem.

There are new and interesting features, for example a cool new way to display your open windows. There's touch-screen capability, but of course you need a touch-screen monitor to take advantage of it. There are tons of multi-media features, including one that allows remote access to videos and music on your home PC.

One great feature of Windows 7 is its backwards compatibility, on which Microsoft seems to have spent much more time than in previous operating system upgrades. Compatibility allows you to select a number of previous Windows versions under which to run non-Windows-7-compliant software, and seems to cover most eventualities.

Mind you, I haven't tried any older games, which are often the most difficult issues for backward compatibility, so ... as always ... check to make sure any software that is important to you runs on Windows 7 before doing an upgrade.

You can upgrade for \$119-\$219, depending on which version of Windows 7 works best for you – Premium, Professional or Ultimate. The system requirements are: 1 GHz or better 32- or 64-bit processor, with minimum 1 gigabyte of memory, 16 gigabytes of available hard disk space and a DirectX 9 graphics card with WDDM 1.0 or higher driver. Some features impose further requirements, and a full outline is available at <http://www.microsoft.com/windows/windows-7/get/system-requirements.aspx>.

Since Windows 7 is standard on pretty much any new PC, you can always wander into a computer retailer and try it out on one of their new systems. An ounce of prevention is worth much more than a pound of cure when it comes to your home computer! Make sure everything will continue to work the way you expect before jumping off the cliff ...

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