

Back in the day, it was all about the desktop PC. Starting with the Altair in the 70s and accelerating with the IBM PC in 1981, the desktop PC was the focus of personal computing innovation.

Used to be all the good stuff started as an add on for the PC and found its way on to the motherboard. It was an all too predictable obsolescence curve. Remember the AST 6 Pack, Hercules Graphics Cards, 3com Network Cards, US Robotics Modems? When you bought a PC, you used to have to buy all these cards to make it get where you wanted it to go. How many slots the PC had was actually an issue because any power or corporate user expected to add features via cards. There was even a time when it seemed like a good idea to try to upgrade the CPU.

All those features migrated from separate cards down to the motherboard. Hercules Graphics. Gone. AST. Gone. There is a long list of casualties over the years of companies who made good money for a short period of time selling products that soon would become part of the PC Motherboard.

The PC Desktop used to be a happening place. It was fun to read PC Week, PC Mag, Computer Reseller News, Infoworld and other publications that would speculate about the latest and greatest products coming to a PC near you.

Not any more. Could the PC desktop be any more boring these days? Could it be any more emblematic of a mature product?

Sure, HP, Dell, IBM, Gateway are trying to liven it up. The hard drives are bigger and faster. There is more memory. The graphics cards can do more. The industry tried to juice the PC by coming up with a faster, better express slot on the motherboard, but next to nobody is even using it!

About the only thing even resembling anything fun is coming from Modders. Typically gamers who are putting flames on funky case designs and bumping processor speeds. The PC desktop has gotten to the point where kids turbocharge the old family PC rather than throw it away like kids used to turbocharge the old car in the garage.

The desktop is boring.

All the fun is happening with portable devices. Phones, Ipods, gaming consoles, PDAs, digital cameras, even hard drives and flash drives. All the good stuff is coming in small packages.

Remember the frustration of shopping for a PC in the 90s. Every couple months the PC would have something new and cool in it, and the price would drop. It was tough to know what to buy and whether you should do it now or wait.

That's exactly what is happening in the portable/mobile device market. My Ipod, My Sidekick, my hard drives, my PSP, my Xbox even my laptop all have overlapping features. Each is getting closer to each other in feature set every day.

Which means that the war for my pocket is on. Which is going to allow me to only fill one pocket rather than the 2, or 1 plus beltclip that I'm filling now.

It's a fun time for portable/mobile devices. It's the 80s and 90s for desktops all over again. Every time I go into CompUSA or Best Buy to see what new stuff is on the shelves that I can play with, every phone has a new feature. Every hard drive is smaller, cheaper, faster. Every PDA has new features and software.

The implications of this transition are huge. Particularly for the retail world. Right now most new technology is sold in big stores. Lots of room for monitors. Lots of room for desktops. But those are the stagnant products.

All the good stuff is small. All the traffic generators are small. Which means that we could see big changes in how retail stores are merchandised and in the size of future retail stores.

It won't take much square footage to show every possible cellphone, PDA, console, portable hard drive and attachable device. About the only "big" product that will need to be there are HDTVs.

Better yet, all of those devices, including the HDTVs are purely digital and consume and store or playback digital content. For under 20k dollars in storage (and falling in price every day), it's feasible to store EVERY digital product and offer it for sale.

Even more interesting is the fact that we are used to buying service agreements with these devices. Our phones, our PDAs, we want phone service and more and more often, broadband service with it as well. We don't buy them, we subscribe to them.

That can be a problem in a world where new features are appearing every 3 to 6 months, but we can't trade out our devices for 12 to 24 months. Service Contracts will have to be more flexible, or they can impact the success of the very products and services they are trying to sell.

We are entering a golden age of features in portable devices that will far exceed the fun we had with desktop PCs. The quick rate of change in these products and how they are sold, will completely alter both how the products are sold, and how we expect to buy them.

Finally, if you are expecting new and exciting features from your PC Desktop...forget about it!