

Gordon Laing likes the look of the **new Pocket PCs** and he doesn't care who knows it.

Mine's better than yours



I recently had a childhood flashback. I'd just started describing my fondness for Windows CE to various colleagues, when I was suddenly met with complete and utter disapproval. 'Oh no!' they cried, 'you can't really be

serious can you?' What followed went along the familiar lines of the Psion 5 being the superior-keyboarded PDA, and the Palm V being the preferred choice for discerning pockets everywhere.

In an instant I was transported back to the school playground with me defending my Sinclair Spectrum against the richer Commodore kids. To be honest I don't really mind which PDA (or indeed classic home computer) people prefer, but what I'd really missed in recent years was the passionate defending of your chosen machine.

I used to be a die-hard Psion 5 supporter you know. However, after experiencing problems with decreased

which is pretty much make or break for the platform.

It may be Windows CE v3 underneath, but Microsoft has dropped all negative branding associations and simply called the new devices Windows Powered Pocket PCs. The Windows-powered badge may be a little misleading for anyone expecting to find anything resembling what they have on their desktop PC or notebook, but note the pocket bit: that's right, no v3 OS for the keyboard-based devices, at least for the near future. No, Microsoft is going after Palm, and this time it looks like it's not going to take any prisoners.

I'll go out on a limb right now and say something that will probably get me lynched at the next Symbian conference: I've seen several of the new Pocket PCs, and you know what? I really like them. While the Windows 95 styling of CE v2.11 may have worked on the larger 'HPC' devices, it was far too cramped on the palm form factor. Microsoft has done the right thing by completely redesigning the UI from the ground up for new pocket devices, dumping unnecessary details like 3D buttons which slowed the whole thing down.

Versions of Word and Excel have finally made an appearance and, supporting Office 2000 formats, they're great for opening attached files. The unforgivable lack of a web browser in Palm CE 2.11 has been addressed, although it remains to be seen how effective its scaling will be on the relatively low-resolution display. The

Transcriber which lets you hand-write anywhere on the screen, and have it recognised and turned into real text is very impressive, and the whole system also feels much quicker too. Best of all, though, Pocket PC boasts a proper audio media player with big friendly buttons and a headphone jack, allowing the devices to double as portable stereos.

Previous Microsoft Palm CEs promised the world, but delivered it in such a sluggish and clunky fashion, that you'd get fed up and reach for the pen and paper instead. These new Pocket PCs are a different kettle of fish though. However much Palm and Symbian defenders believe Microsoft has no part to play in the handheld world, the fact is, Pocket PC looks like a winner. If the device manufacturers get it out sooner rather than later, and at a competitive price to the Palms, then it may be time to discard those anti-Microsoft prejudices, and maybe even

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battery life, and going through several replacements with similar issues, I decided to give Windows CE a shot. While we could argue about operating system pros and cons, it was the sheer convenience of a modem fitted as standard to almost every keyboarded CE device that really sold me. It's hardly rocket science, but clearly a step that has eluded Psion so far.

Today I use a discontinued US IBM Z50 Windows CE device, spotted at a knock-down price of £250 by fellow columnist David Fearon – the PCW editorial team cleaned the shop out of this one. Built inside a ThinkPad case, it boasts a superb keyboard and, indeed, this very column was written on it.

But note the discontinued part. That's right, no-one bought the Z50, or indeed Windows CE in general. It got so bad that about half the device manufacturers have abandoned the platform, with IBM, Philips, Everex and Sharp moving on to pastures new. Microsoft too has had a rethink and in April launched the new version,

Barry Fox is fed up with BT and suggests **if you've got a complaint, get on the hotline to Oftel.**

Pity poor, I mean inept, BT



The words may sound dull, but their importance is colossal. Telecoms watchdog Oftel is pushing through 'local loop unbundling'. Trials will begin in January, with a full service on offer by July 2001 at the latest.

BT owns the copper wires into at least 20 million UK homes. So, unless those residents have signed up for any one of the cable services, all phone calls into and out of those homes must rely on BT's wires. To use alternative services, such as Eurobell or Mercury, the subscriber must enter key codes before a call (either from the phone's memory or a plug-in adaptor), which routes calls out of the BT network at the nearest exchange.

Oftel's unbundling gives BT's rivals direct access to the company's copper wires: they can install their own equipment in BT's exchanges. This is possible because replacement of the enormous old analog Strowger equipment with compact computer switch racks left the exchange buildings nine-tenths empty. Now, over a dozen companies, including NTL, Energis, Colt, Easynet and MCI WorldCom, are filling that empty floor space with ADSL modems that will talk direct to matching modems in consumers' homes and offer always-on net access at several Mbits/sec at the same time as plain old telephony speech.

Kicked into gear by this first real level-ground competition, BT is offering its own ADSL service. So, at last, UK consumers have access to affordable, high-speed data.

But spare no sympathy for BT. It has messed up on new technology, and got away with it, for much too long. And exciting new developments are still being mishandled through poor management.

ISDN, for example, has been so over-priced and badly sold that it will be killed by ADSL before it ever breaks through. And when hackers demonstrated that Prestel viewdata security was hardly secure by going into Prince Philip's mailbox, BT vindictively prosecuted.

BT's defunct Telecom Gold email system was horribly unfriendly and could not be modified to take an @ symbol. Online directory service PhoneBase was then built on the same technology as dead Prestel; it needed the old 'accept' key found on dumb terminals but missing from PC keyboards. The first Electronic Yellow Pages was also based on Prestel and an obstacle course to use.

Unfortunately, the EYP Help Line was nothing more than an answering machine.

Phone Disc, the CD-ROM version of BT's paper telephone directories, was launched at £2,200 ex VAT for a one-year disc. After years of pitifully slow sales, the price was dropped to £200 and BT tried to sue cut-price rivals. It has now been at least a year since BT dropped the price to £40, yet it never even issued a press release.

The first launch of BT Internet was a fiasco, with buggy software and helpline staff who admitted that they could not help.

Link stores claim it is easy to use a Cellnet SIM in a new WAP phone. But it isn't. Step one is to get the SIM card enabled for fax and data; step two is to set up the services option which involves saving an SMS file that contains the settings. The Cellnet Help Line (08705 772255) charges a national rate (8p a minute peak) to play recorded options before referring callers to the Genie helpline (0906 3020220), which charges 50p a minute. Genie promised to send me an SMS settings message but never did. When I called back, it referred me to Cellnet.

Now MMail promises WAP-like services with an ordinary cellphone. Enter the destination email address (with ! if there is no @), leave a space, write a message and send it to 212. Mail came through to my PC, but replies

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did not go back. If you need help call BT Customer Services, says the company's MMail literature, without giving out a number to call. The usual number, (0870 5772255), wasted my time at national rates before admitting, 'We're not properly trained, try data and fax services on (0345 196000)'. They couldn't help either. MMail shouldn't even work at all until enabled by keying 'on' and 'sending' to 212. Cellnet is still trying to work out why MMail can be sent before this is done. Cellnet group product manager for text messaging Sam Whitely says the missing phone number is nothing to do with her and all Cellnet's helpline staff are fully trained.

Enough of this! I have asked Oftel to investigate. If you have suffered similar problems, tell Oftel too.

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Brian Clegg pushes paper aside and extols the virtues of **working with electronic documents**.

Paper chase, lost the race



I was fascinated by a throwaway line I came across recently in a report on application service providers (ASPs) – the companies that rent software. The report noted that desktop productivity packages (word processors and the like) were

ideal candidates as ‘they require an inordinate amount of IT time and resources to maintain... despite the fact that they are not core applications’.

I’ll be coming back to ASPs in another column. But for now, just think about those words, ‘not core applications’. Could the report have got things back to front? Certainly traditional computer programs such as payroll and invoicing are needed for a company to function, but all they do is enable things to stay the same. With these systems alone, a company would be doomed. To thrive there has to be communication and change, and that means a flow of documents. And what produces documents? Those non-core applications.

In the early days, documents meant paper. It’s easy to

team functions in word processors, edocuments have become practical tools.

Some would say that the second development, the ability to format documents, is a major contributor to wasted business time. When you had a single font and no fancy layouts, you just wrote a document. Now you design it, and redesign it. Once the initial thrill of being able to lay out a table 500 different ways has been overcome, users settle down to produce documents just as fast as they ever did – only they look a whole lot better. And illogical though it seems, that means they are more likely to be valued.

At their most sophisticated, electronic documents can rival and better print. In my office I don’t have a stack of PCW magazines; instead, a couple of neat CD-ROMs hold more than four years worth of issues. This is possible because the document is formatted using Adobe Acrobat. This sophisticated electronic document software can reproduce every nuance of the page layout. Unlike the paper edition, I can search the whole CD. In the latest version, Acrobat 4, it is also possible to reproduce other facets of the conventional document. For example, an Acrobat file can be distributed and signed digitally, just as a real document can be passed around for signature. It seems to me that document-oriented desktop productivity packages are about as core as you get.

The subject of unmetered phone calls for web access has cropped up in this

column before. And right about now, BT should be launching its unmetered service, Surftime. This was announced in the same week as AltaVista, Telewest and NTL’s unmetered offers, though BT claims the timing was just a coincidence.

Surftime seems good for companies. Unlike its competitors, it is available for business use. And, BT stresses that Surftime can be used with any ISP supporting 0844 numbers, while its competitors tie you into one source. But there is a teeny catch. At the time of writing, few ISPs have taken the plunge. They are, no doubt, nervous of the impact of longer connection times on their servers. The service provider my company uses, Mistral, is ‘studying BT proposals’ and ‘as such no decision has been made’. By the time you read this, things might be different and there may be a host of industrial-strength ISPs lined up behind Surftime.

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It’s easy to mock paper-pushing, but it kept the MACHINERY OF BUSINESS flowing. At first computers did little to change that.

mock paper-pushing, but it kept the machinery of business flowing. At first computers did little to change this. Mainframes don’t work like people. They aren’t document-driven. But the arrival of the PC did more than put computing power into the hands of individuals, it brought the document into the electronic world. Two further developments have reinforced this move: networking and formatting.

Document networking began with sneakernets, shifting files from place to place on floppy disks without ever producing paper, but it was the LAN that launched the edocument revolution. LANs made it simple to dump a document onto a shared drive to be picked up by someone else, like pinning it on a noticeboard. This technique was soon enhanced by email, a technology that evolved on the Internet’s ancestor ARPANET. With software to aid collaboration, from bulletin boards like Lotus Notes to sophisticated

Sometimes, the only thing that **separates a popular site** from an unpopular one is perception.

A lumpy playing field



After writing last month's Retro column on the BBC Micro, I found myself drifting into that saddest of all geek realms – the vintage computer collector.

In my subsequent web wanderings, attempting to find

the computers of my youth (anyone got a ZX80 or Acorn Atom they don't want?) I stumbled on a new and fascinating way to make myself poor: online auction sites. Don't worry, I'm not going on a nostalgia trip: check out Niall Magennis' account of the Amstrad CPC series of machines in this month's Retro for that.

It's just that auction sites illustrate one of the features of web commerce that eager businesspeople tend to overlook. That feature is the flip-side of the web's levelling effect: the popular Utopian view being that small companies can set up shop on the web free of conventional overheads and have a perceived presence as impressive as a multinational company.

Things may start out level, but ONCE A SITE HAS A SMALL LEAD the web accentuates the idea of branding rather than levelling things out

True enough, but a conventional shop or business has to compete with perhaps half a dozen others in its area: there's plenty of custom to go around. A website has to compete with every virtual retailer on the planet involved in selling that line of goods or services: there's no sense of location and no captive customer base.

Website success is like a weather system; unpredictable, unstable and, in some senses, independent of quality. The ease with which millions of surfers can hop over to another site when they're looking for a particular product or service leads to an interesting effect. When there's no money involved, the effect is stalled: I can open 20 different browser windows on the subject of canine distemper or the mating habits of the Tuscan mountain goat, and pick the best one based on what I see. There's no risk, so I can trust my own judgement. Non-commercial sites also link to others in the same field, generating cross-traffic.

When I'm in consumer mode, however, things are

different. Where our own money is involved, we tend to be cautious: if site A only has a few hundred hits per day and we've not heard of it before, the chances are we'll hop over to site B, because it looks more reputable, professional, safe or whatever. It only takes a tiny difference in the quality of one site, or a national ad campaign or random luck, for it to get marginally more visitors. Once that happens, a positive feedback loop takes hold, driven by the subtle workings of the FUD (fear, uncertainty and doubt) factor.

The safer a site appears to be relative to the competition, the more hits it generates. And the more hits it generates, the safer it appears to be. That tiny difference in initial conditions generates an avalanche of hits further down the road. It's the virtual equivalent of the butterfly effect, where the air disturbed by the wings of a butterfly in India can, in theory, precipitate a typhoon in South America.

Things may start out level, but once a site has a small lead, the web accentuates those boring classical retail ideas of branding and market presence rather than levelling things out. Think of an online bookstore, any online bookstore. Did you think of Amazon? I'd be really impressed if you didn't.

I conformed exactly to the model I've just described while looking for a site on which to bid for 20-year-old computers, opening a dozen-odd browser windows containing different auction sites and immediately closing all but the two that seemed to have by far the most bidders and sellers: QXL and eBay.

At the moment, there are thousands of commercial web start-ups, and venture capital isn't exactly hard to come by these days. But the less successful are going to fall by the wayside very rapidly and be swallowed up by the leaders in a familiar echo of current conditions in the real world.

And while we're on the subject, auction sites are good for a bit of entertainment too: check out the domain name auctions. Anyone fancy owning daylight-robbery.com for a minimum bid of £15,000? No? How about double-glazed-windows.co.uk, starting at £795? Perhaps not. But who can pass up the chance of owning charliedimmock.org.uk when bidding starts at a mere £100? Believe it or not, those were some of the better ones available on QXL the day I had a look.

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