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Fri, Feb 11, 00

'Digital jewellery' is where it's at for the technohip

Personal computers are becoming lifestyle choices and the PC, that ubiquitous, icky-looking beige box that screamed gauche, is dead

By NIALL MCKAY

TECHNO-HIP? Forget your Pentium 500 processors, your multi-megabyte harddisk, your SD-RAM, your CPUcycles, your USB Ports and your STD companions.

It just doesn't matter any more. Who cares if your computer, mobile phone or personal digital assistant actually works? The question is does it look good?

We are entering the age of techno-fashion, digital jewellery, hip-gadgets and smart looking computers. Or should I say computing devices. Why? Because personal computers are becoming more personal. Mobile phones are not just handy little devices that you use to locate your pals in a crowded pub, they're fashion statements.

Computers are not just business tools they're lifestyle choices. As the oily boys and girls in the marketing department would say "we're going through a paradigm-shift". Oh no! Not again!

The PC, that icky-looking beige box that screamed gauche in offices and living rooms everywhere, is dead. Sony and Apple saw to that. They released sleek looking computers packing all the punch of an IBM but also making a fashion statement: Computers can be cool. Of course they're not. But in the consumer society we are all suckers for a good marketing message.

Now, Nokia and Ericsson are trying to get hipsters to buy

a big phone for the working hours that does everything save put out the cat and a cute little style-bunny phone for the evening.

Of course your leisure phone will not only go well with those fashion slacks but include a portable personal stereo system, a list of trendy restaurants and it will automatically re-order the Solpadeine.

It's sad really, but these nasty little devices are even beginning to penetrate the collective unconscious. A recent cartoon in the New Yorker magazine summed it up. It depicted a prostitute leaning in a car window. The caption read: "Yeah, yeah, and for an extra fifty bucks I let you show me your Palm Pilot."

Techno-hip is a question of size. Gone are the days when big was beautiful, in geek society small is stylish. IBM calls its strains of computational wizardry "digital jewellery".

Big Blue is touting a collection of wristwatches that exchange contact details with friends and colleagues, earrings that act as headphones and glasses that have embedded screens so that you can watch the telly during that boring PowerPoint presentation.

They may be on the money. Certainly, there are new technologies on the drawing board that will enable this brave new world. Take for example, BlueTooth, a kind of mobile phone for computing devices. This enables two gadgets to talk to each other over the ether.

What does it mean? No wires. That's what. Digital freedom. Your stereo, your PC, your TV, even your camera can chatter away like a gaggle of old school buddies.

Meanwhile, our friends such as Silicon Systems in Dublin are working on a wireless telephone headset that is about the same size and shape as a hearing aid. Pop it in, tell it to call mammy, and it asks the hand-held computer in your pocket to find the number and dial away.

But be warned. Don't tell her you are at your friend's house when you're really in west Cork for a steamy weekend. A Global Positioning Satellite (GPS) technology could give her your exact location. Science fiction? Not at all.

The US Federal Communications Commission has ruled that all mobile phones must include GPS technology because, they say there are 80,000 999 calls a day and many of them are bogus. Rubbish of course. Big Brother

is just getting bigger.

Already, in the US, many of the digitally enlightened use one of the Web-based mapping services. These enable you to type in your start and finish address and it draws a nice little map.

Combine that with a mobile phone GPS system and it will guide you to your destination. Of course, you could just stop and ask somebody for directions. But who has time to talk anymore? I am too busy programming my gadgets.

Niall McKay can be reached at www.niall.org

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