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Take me to...

GO

THE IRISH TIMES BREAKING NEWS NEWS IN FOCUS SPORT BUSINESS TECHNOLOGY WEATHER

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In the Newspaper  
Daily

- Front Page
- Ireland
- World
- Finance**
- Features
- Sport
- Opinion
- Letters
- Crossword
- Article Index

Weekly Index

- MONDAY
- Health
- TUESDAY
- Education and Living
- WEDNESDAY
- Motors
- An Teanga Bheo
- THURSDAY
- Science Today
- SATURDAY
- Weekend
- News Features
- Obituaries

Search

Search the newspaper  
archive...

Finance

Fri, Nov 03, 00

## Life: digitised, miniaturised and stuffed into a hard disk

By NIALL MVKAY

Last week I had the good fortune to sit down with the Consumer Electronics Association and have a chat about the future of the industry.

From the punter's point of view, things are looking decidedly digital. Digital video recorders, MP3 (digital music) players and digital cameras are all about to storm the market. Or so the association believes.

One of the most interesting developments is the hard-disk video recorder. Companies in the United States such as Tivo, ReplayTV and Microsoft have developed machines that are somewhere between a video recorder and a computer. Films or television programmes can be downloaded on to the device's hard disk, allowing the viewer to watch the images at their leisure. They can also interact with game shows and, of course, buy stuff.

Great, eh? But what is really happening here? I believe the association has a point. Most, if not all, of our personal content is moving to the hard disk.

This means that the cupboards full of photographs, shelves full of records, tapes and CDs and the boxes full of old letters are all going to be stored on one tiny hard disk. Indeed, when our day is done, our grandchildren will probably not want to poke around our dusty attics but delve into our hard disks.

Personal computers are becoming more personal, holding our favourite music and photos of our loved ones. Of course, nobody under 35 writes letters anymore; they e-mail. So, instead of love letters we have love e-mails.

This shift towards the hard disk is already happening with kids downloading games and music to their PCs. Using a little cable to hook up their computer to a stereo, they can create a CD or download tracks directly to a digital-music player.

There are, however, significant hurdles to overcome before we all go digital.

Indeed, technologies such as that used by Naspster, enabling people to download free music have got the public used to the idea that they can choose their songs, one at a time, from any artist or album and make their own CDs. So why bother buying a complete CD?

This is, of course, driving the record industry nuts because there is no way they can charge as much money for a single as they do for an album.

The second big problem is that computers are still fragile devices. It does not take much to trash a hard disk.

The third stumbling block is that there is no way to manage or keep track of your digital data. So before you go off trying buy the latest PC and digital electronic gizmos - thinking that you need never lose that photo album again - just remember that it is going to be just as difficult to find your digital content.

Instead of ripping open drawers, emptying cupboards and moving that book shelf just far enough from the wall to get a look behind it, you will be pointing and clicking, pointing and clicking, pointing and clicking . . .

Why? Because, incredibly, the computer industry has not given us a decent electronic filing cabinet or database yet. Woe betide you if you have upgraded to a new computer recently.

If you have, you have spent two weeks trying to get all the files off your old PC on to your new PC and half of them don't work because the software is incompatible. Recently, I moved house and it was easier than buying a new computer.

So here's an idea for all you entrepreneurs and computer engineers: go and write a decent database, one that can act as a photo album, store MP3 music and digital-video disks, and that can store your contacts and email files.

Most of all, it must be a database that can be transferred easily to a new PC and can upload files to a personal digital assistant or MP3 player, because what is changing here is that the data we keep on our personal computers

is becoming more and more important to us.

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