The Tablet PC Nonrevolution

I ORDINARILY TYPE MY COLUMNS. BUT SINCE THIS column is about tablet computing, I decided to compose it in longhand on the Compaq tc1100 tablet computer that Hewlett-Packard lent me earlier this year. ∎ For people who never learned typing, or for those who find it a painful chore, writing on a computer's screen and having your words turned into beautiful text must be a liberating experience. I'll never know: I learned to type when I was in ninth grade and can easily crank out 120 words per minute. Still, Microsoft's Tablet PC edition of Windows XP has a handwriting recognizer that's nearly flawless. This computer was able to recognize my weird mixture of printing and cursive the very first time I picked up the stylus: neither I nor the computer required any training. The tablet PC could even recognize my seven-year-old daughter's handwriting—misspellings and all! In fact, it corrected each word as she went on to the next.

Driving this high-quality handwriting recognition is an incredibly rich dictionary (built from millions of handwriting samples), spelling and grammar smarts, and software that takes into account not just the electronic "ink" left on the page but the movement of the pen as you write. None of it would be possible without today's fast processors and huge memory chips. Computer hardware just wasn't up to the task a decade ago, when Garry Trudeau lambasted the Apple Newton in *Doonesbury*. Today the tables have turned.

But while entering text is a joy with this computer, going back and editing it is painful. It's easy to correct the occasional mistake that the recognizer makes by selecting the word and then choosing an alternative interpretation from a pull-down menu. Serious moving around of words or ideas, though, is better left to the keyboard. That's because precision counts

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when editing, and it's all too easy, when wielding a stylus, to get a punctuation mark wrong or flummox a word into something that looks the same on the tablet PC's small screen but has a completely different meaning.

That's why just about every tablet PC on the market today has a keyboard hidden underneath the writing surface. Just lift up the screen, spin it around some hidden hinge, and—voilà!—you have a traditional (albeit expensive) laptop computer. And from my people-watching around MIT, it seems that tablet PCs spend a large part of their lives serving as traditional laptops, with the stylus snug in its holster while the keyboard gets a vigorous workout.

Tablet computing isn't exactly a fraud, but it's not the revolution that PC makers would like it to be. I find it a lot easier to read text on the flat tablet than on a clamshell laptop. And for applications like taking inventory or filling out surveys, the tablet format is clearly superior. My daughter sure likes curling up with the tablet on our couch while she surfs those kids' websites. And PC makers love the way that turning a laptop into a tablet lets them add $500 or more to its price.

But Microsoft is selling the tablet short by trying to make it operate within the traditional Windows framework. The menu bars, pop-up controls, and scroll bars of Windows have evolved over the past 20 years for a computer that's driven with a keyboard and mouse—not a pen. It's downright awkward to try to fill a text field by tapping it and then writing in the recognition area.

One of the reasons that the original Palm Pilot was so successful is that its developers weren't afraid to experiment with new and frequently simpler interaction paradigms. Palm developed on-screen widgets that were easy to use on a small display amidst a lot of visual distractions. It came up with a fast way to switch between applications and an integrated database that freed users from thinking about files and folders. Yes, you can configure the Tablet PC version of Windows XP to let you enter text anywhere, but Microsoft Word still thinks that you are using a keyboard and a mouse. Word doesn't know about gestures like proofreader's marks—things that are easy to write with a pen but nearly impossible to input with a mouse.

One good thing about tablets is that they're pushing PC laptops in the right direction. The tc1100 unit that I tested weighs just 1.8 kilograms (four pounds), yet it is loaded with input/output options including two USB ports, Ethernet, Wi-Fi wireless networking, and a dial on the side for fast scrolling. As these machines become more prevalent, I'm hoping that the software catches up.

Because it sure is comfortable to lie back on my couch while surfing those websites: the tablet is lighter, easier to hold, and easier to read, and the clamshell doesn't get in my way. ▥

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