Pelikan's Antidisambiguation -- "Content Producer Goals vs. Public Perception"

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Pelikan’s Antidisambiguation — “Content Producer Goals vs. Public Perception”

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What’s a computer? Or rather, what’s a computer for?

It’s an interesting question because its outcome tends to define a subclass: not just of users, but ultimately, of devices and of market segmentation.

Early uses to which computers were put, such as artillery ballistics calculations or code breaking, bespoke a very serious purpose for such devices. Prototypical attempts to model and predict weather, economic trends, or election outcomes underscored the “largeness of purpose” reasonably associated by the lay public with the idea of a computer. The image was the antithesis of something that might be used for personal or even frivolous purposes.

As this column goes to print, the death of Michael S. Hart on September 6, 2011 provides occasion to note just how radical what he did in 1971 really was. His account on the University of Illinois mainframe was created on July 4, 1971, and, ruminating on that fact, he opened a file on the system and typed in on July 4, 1971, and, ruminating on that fact, he did in 1971 really was. His account on the

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your product with “legitimizing” the product category, if not inventing it outright.

Take Apple’s iPad. Apple didn’t invent the tablet computer — everybody knows that Gene Roddenberry did, and that James T. Kirk was one of its early adopters. Chief Science Officer Spock could explain how an early adopter of a product category in the 23rd century could influence product development in the 20th. Spock, of course, was one of the first to use a USB Drive. Those early 23rd-century models were kind of big and boxy, but they were hot-pluggable, non-volatile memory — every kid knew that! And don’t forget how the flip-form communicator warped into our time and space, once Motorola worked out how to build one.

Serious things have taken off not because some company jammed them down our throats (with the possible exception of the iPad), but because people decided they wanted them, had to have them, and were willing to part with the coin to get their hands on them.

But let’s get back to eBooks for a moment. Right about the time we were hearing of Michael Hart’s death, speculation was heating up about the details of Sony’s and Amazon’s coming Android tablets.

Sony’s machines are going to be drop-dead gorgeous pieces of hardware, and are coming from a gigantic company that has been in mass media for years, selling not just consumer electronics, but also occupying a key throne in the motion picture industry and owning one of the world’s last remaining Large Record Labels. Sony’s advance blurbs prominently state that their tablets will run the latest version of Android — meaning Honeycomb for certain, and holding out a tacit promise of a timely upgrade to Ice Cream Sandwich when available. (Sorry — if Honeycomb and Ice Cream Sandwich don’t resonate: Android OS versions have been using food names — Gingerbread, Honeycomb, Ice Cream Sandwich...)

Amazon’s widely expected decision to build their new machine around the open-source core of an earlier version of Android that is running on most other Android tablets marks a potential fork in the evolutionary path of the Android operating system, and given the sheer mass of Amazon and the size of the shadow they cast, this is no small development.

People have been confusing software for hardware for years. Executives wishing to sound “with it” used to walk into early computer stores and tell the bemused pony-tailed salesman, “Say, I’d like to buy one of those Visicals.” Visicalc, you see, was the first commercially significant spreadsheet program. It ran on an Apple II. The suit had seen someone in the Finance Department running Visicalc on an Apple II and asked, “Say, what is that,” and having received the answer “Visicalc” thought they ought to have a Visicalc on their desk, too.

One may expect that Amazon’s plans for their Android-based tablet will give us something somewhere between the Kindle and the iPad. It will ultimately, if not immediately, have a beautiful color screen. The stock Android store will be replaced with Amazon’s Android app store. There will also be Amazon’s Music Store, Cloud Drive, Prime Instant Videos — oh, and eBooks, for those in the audience who haven’t forgotten how to read. Actually, that’s hyperbole, and I admit it. The Kindle is a huge seller precisely because millions of folks still love to read.

But there are several interesting things going on here. First, unlike Apple or Sony, Amazon is primarily a retailer, not a hardware manufacturer, nor a software house. “They’re a content retailer!” You can practically hear the scoffing — except that no one’s scoffing. For Amazon is a Very Big content retailer. And we all have to watch and see what happens.

What’s more, they’ve signaled a move toward a subscription-based model for content distribution, like Netflix (by which I mean both Netflix and Qwikster) but for eBooks. But again, folks’ reactions to this news so far seem very quiet. We have to watch and see what happens.

The “what happens” part of this relates to the adoption or non-adoption — no, that’s too dry: the seizing or non-seizing of these offers by the people with the money. That’s us. Well, in some the case of some Against the Grain readers, that’s our customers, er, your customers. In other cases, the people with the money are the kids with the backpacks, getting younger every year (the kids, not the backpacks). They’re the one whom we believe we’ve chosen to enhance service to by opening coffee shops in our campus libraries. They’re the ones who vote with their feet.
E-Everything ...
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Endnotes
1. PechaKucha Night: This presentation style was developed in Tokyo in 2003 and has evolved into PechaKucha Night events which consist of approximately a dozen presentations; each presenter has 20 slides that are shown for 20 seconds. Thus, each presenter has 6 minutes and 40 seconds to explain their ideas. — Wikipedia

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It’s the feet that are so troubling. No, seriously. They represent the fact that business models and service approaches we’ve grown comfortable with are continuing to undergo assaults of increasing intensity. We can’t simply discount any given scenario as too implausible or unexpected to take seriously.

Back when Capt. Kirk was first signing off on the Captain’s Log on his tablet computer (over forty years ago), who’d have thought that tape cassettes would surpass the reel to reel, or even the vinyl, along with their accompanying business and distribution models? Who’d have taken seriously, back when Capt. Kirk was flipping open his communicator, that the digital cell phones his grandchildren would see with that form factor would be the cheap ones (or are they his great, great, great grandparents)?

Next thing you’ll be telling me is that it’s time to take 3-D seriously.

By definition, it’s the things that haven’t caught our attention that take us by surprise...