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Pelikan's Antidisambiguation — Everything as We Know it Will Change

by **Michael P. Pelikan** (Penn State) <mpp10@psu.edu>

This time around, I thought a resoundingly upbeat column might serve as a tonic to the somewhat bleak outlook given voice in my prior offering.

Where shall we turn for the answers to all the dark concerns raised before: that our students are in trouble, that we're having trouble connecting with them, that we keep designing systems to win the previous battle we've lost, rather than look at what's about to hit us in the face (let alone try to see a little way down the road), in short, that we've gradually permitted ourselves to be maneuvered into equivocation as a strategic planning model — where, indeed, shall we turn?

Well clearly, the technologist says, solutions come through the unflappable, insistent, relentless application of technology to each and every problem until they're either solved, or just go away in disgust...

So this time, accompanied by trumpet choir with mutes in place — the mighty, nasal fanfare heralding the approach of the Modern Age (always either the Good Old Days, or Just Around the Corner), and relying on the design premise that when two systems don't work together, the answer is to place a third system between them (This is sometimes called the French Automotive Engineer School of Design, "Never use one part where you can use three to do the job..."), I offer the following glimpse into the future as seen in my own projected view, ever and always revealing a mix, ever and always seeking balance between the Old we must never lose, the Old we can do without, the New we must embrace, and the New we must head off at all cost....

My comments are biased by the fact that I've been a diehard **Tablet PC** user since about 2004. Even worse; from the start, I gravitated toward the pure "slate" products such as those from **Motion Computing**, rather than the "hybrid" tablet/laptop products from a variety of laptop vendors. I have several reasons for this.

First of all, for all of its bugs and quirks, I've felt a great affinity to the goal of handwriting recognition. A tablet with a pen harks back to the straightforward comfort level of the clipboard and the pencil. Admittedly, handwriting recognition got off to a shaky start. The **Apple Newton's** reputation for handwriting recognition was devastated, even though few real people ever actually used it, by **Mike Doonesbury's** experiments with it in the funny pages. End of Product.

Meanwhile, the folks at **Palm** got hold of **Graffiti**, a handwriting recognition system based upon making the user adapt to a fairly rigid hand printing style, rather than asking the operating system to adapt to a million people's different writing styles. **Graffiti** worked well

— after a fairly short while, one could write letters on that little postage stamp-sized spot almost as quickly and easily as one could take any other notes by hand. For those who absolutely required and demanded it, **Palm** made the concession of offering an attachable, full-sized keyboard that would fold up by fours into a package little larger than the **Palm** itself. So you could have it both ways — a quick note taker that was the size of a little assignment book, or a heads-down bang-out-the-column word processing approach.

But the **Palm's** operating system was never designed from the core out to be much more than a note taker. It was a purposeful point of pride that one of the "features" missing from the **Palm OS** was the Hourglass; that little icon endlessly turning over and over on your screen as your computer chewed through some horrendously appalling task you've asked it to do (such as, maybe, opening a new window). In the original **Palm OS**, if a task couldn't be done in a flash, it was best not to ask the machine to do it: and that's why, as small computers became more and more capable, or as more capable computers became smaller and smaller, the **Palm OS** just couldn't keep up in the world, elegant as it was. (hideous technical details omitted here...)

With the **Tablet PC**, introduced running **Microsoft Windows XP** with **Table Extensions**, **Microsoft** drew a line in the sand. The **Tablet** effort at **Microsoft** had the personal blessing and active interest of **Bill Gates** himself. By the time of **Vista**, handwriting recognition was built into the operating system itself. In **Windows 7**, it becomes even more touch and "multitouch" capable (two-finger-tip actions such as squeezing to make something smaller, or the opposite to make it larger), and this arrives just in time for the highly touch responsive and visually stunning screen technologies now emerging into the supply chain.

But many users, much like **Tarzan**, are loathe to let go of one vine until they've got a really good grip on the next. For these, the majority of users, whole multiple-product-cycle generations of machines are designed to ease their transition. Remember how cell phones used to look like telephones? Now they look like data-centric multimedia devices with near perpetual network connectivity and oh, by the way, if you want to, you can make a phone call on them as well. This design change was purposely stretched out over a period of time to avoid turning people away. Instead, incremental enhancements were gradually introduced, each of which was not too great a conceptual leap from the status quo.

Point is, the vast majority of **Tablet PCs** sold today (when sold at all) are of what's termed the "hybrid" variety. People making a transition to pen-based computing need to permit-

ted to stay in their comfort zone — and the hardware designers understand this. The flexibility comes at a number of costs: weight, for one. Add to this the complexity in the swiveling, pivoting hinge designs that are even more exotic and overstressed than ordinary laptop hinges, which are already a primary point of failure. And through that skinny hinge must pass the ribbon cable, connecting the screen to the mother board and keyboard; that cable is flexed over and over again, every time you use the product as directed. It doesn't make for a very long product life, but the product life cycle isn't very long either... The pure slate, once you get used to it, is by far and away **The Dream Machine** available today. It blows the **Kindles** or **Sony Readers** away when it comes to reading. Slate screens are very high-resolution, full motion, full color output devices — no different than your lcd monitor. A slate takes more juice than a **Kindle**, so the machine doesn't go as far between battery charges, but even that has gotten better with each iteration in design. The whole thing is about the size of a clipboard and weighs in at about three pounds

In exchange, however, you get a full-fledged computer running **XP**, or **Vista**, or **Windows 7**. You get drop-dead gorgeous color graphics. You can use all of your standard computer applications. You can connect via **Remote Desktop** into your home of office machine. You've got wireless networking and **Bluetooth**. You can load and process your photos. You plays mp3 files, or .avi or .mp4 (or any other codec you can think of) so you can watch **The Guns of Navarone**, or **CSI Miami**, or **The Cannonball Run**.

(You could probably even watch **Masterpiece Theater** or, even, if you've got the constitution for it, an adaptation of something or other by **Jane Austin**, brought to you through the good offices of some petrochemical company or pharmaceuticals megalith.) Machines have no human rights, and a good thing, too. Anyway, **EAWKIWC** (Everything As We Know It Will Change), and pretty soon too, regarding the form factors we typically associate with computers and access to digital content. The **Motion Computing Tablet PC** was a harbinger, and the **iPhones** and the **Kindle's** and the **Sony Readers** represent the next wave. But there are far bigger sea changes coming...

One of the lesser-recognized features of the **Tablet PC**: you can talk to it. Alright, you're saying, I already talk to my computer, and sometimes not very nicely — but no, what I mean is, the **Tablet PC** will take dictation. You "train" it to your voice by reading prepared, known texts to the machine (just a

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Back Talk — Books with Feet

by **Bob Holley** (Professor, Library & Information Science Program, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI 48202; Phone: 313-577-4021; Fax: 313-577-7563) <aa3805@wayne.edu>

I've approached eBook vendors at the last several ALA meetings with what I think would be a surefire idea to sell a new type of eBook package — "books with feet." According to the OCLC glossary, "books with feet" "refers to library books that are commonly lost, stolen, vandalized or misshelved. They are typically popular titles and cover a wide range of subjects and contemporary issues." (<http://www.oclc.org/support/documentation/glossary/oclc/default.htm>) These titles pose collection development problems to all types of libraries because, no matter how many times the library reorders these titles, the books disappear soon after reaching the shelf. Putting the title behind the desk helps a bit but does not guarantee that the book won't be stolen and hinders access by users who are too shy to ask the librarian for what are often controversial items. As a concrete example, my librarian spouse has stopped ordering titles on witchcraft and tells students that it's not an issue of censorship but rather of economics since her budget is too small to keep ordering replacements.

An obvious solution would be to buy these titles as eBooks. eBooks can't be stolen, vandalized, or not returned. Many library patrons could access them at home over the Internet in addition to reading them within the library. An even better solution would be for vendors to develop packages of eBooks for subject areas where books most frequently walk away. If such eBook collections already exist, I don't know about them so that a bit more advertising would be in order. (Since I enter all the contests that I can at the ALA exhibits, I get email advertisements from a broad range of publishers and vendors for all types of libraries. I briefly look at most since I teach collection development to future librarians in all types of libraries.)

I could see vendors using several strategies to identify such collections. The first step would be to identify the areas where materials walk away by searching library literature, talking with individual librarians, sponsoring focus groups, searching library wikis and blogs, or simply making educated guesses. I'd immediately include witchcraft, the occult, and sex. Some potential high theft areas such as materials on pop and sports stars might not remain popular long enough to be worth the effort. To find less obvious areas, the vendor could ask for lists of lost items from a representative sample of various types of libraries. At **Wayne State University**, the library has difficulty keeping materials on race relations on the shelf; but other libraries may not have problems with this subject.

Vendors could use the same lists to identify individual titles. Other resources could be bibliographies of all sorts including pathfinders and reading lists, searches by subject headings (*Library of Congress Subject Headings* and *Sears*) and classification (Dewey and Library of Congress), and suggestions from librarians and other experts in the chosen subject ar-

eas. I don't know how difficult it is for publishers to acquire eBook rights; perhaps this would be the stumbling block for my proposal. I would like to see collections of various sizes/prices and for different types of libraries — academic, public, and school. As another option, an inventive jobber might identify clusters of such titles among existing eBooks and sell them as a package to customers. Finally, librarians needing a publication or two for tenure might compile such lists, preferably in a digital format suitable for online ordering.

This idea makes a lot of sense to me. The library can finally buy "books with feet" and know that the titles can't walk away. I think some libraries would pay a premium for this assurance. The idea also has positive service aspects. Shy users can more easily consult titles on controversial subjects such as sex without having to ask the librarian for the titles behind the desk.

If any publisher, vendor, or librarian implements this idea from reading my column and makes money or gets published, I'd appreciate being taken out for dinner at the next ALA. A relatively cheap ethnic restaurant would do. 🍷

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normal spoken voice level — the machine uses a pair of built-in mics to cancel out echoes and pull the sibilants out of the ambient noise). How does it work? Not too badly, actually, and it's absolutely going to get better. The designers know: this is really the Next Big Thing. In short, hardware keyboards are going to go away, or at least, be optional. Probably many sporting people will continue to use them, even enjoy them, their skill a point of pride — much as I enjoy a five-speed manual transmission in a responsive automobile — but in five or ten or twenty years, believe me — probably most people simply won't bother with them. Think **Bluetooth** headsets for speech input and audio output, and projected images onto fashion eye wear for video output. How about motion sensing gloves or finger rings with accelerometers built in, or a pair of tiny cameras (for three dimensional vision) turning gestures into commands, or text, or even speech (a frightening thought, if you think of it...) Spelling checkers? Primitive! No, what we'll have will be Colloquial Speech Cleaner-uppers! Here's how it will work:

End-user spoken input: "...So **Churchill** was like Wow, he's like, I mean, forget it, like, no way, I mean, I'm Sure! But **Stalin's** like, Woah!"

Cleaner-upper textual output: "**Churchill** held deep reservations about **Stalin's** geopolitical aspirations in the disputed zone. **Stalin's** rejoinder, however, was both unequivocal and unyielding."

Many of our college students will come to rely upon this technology, and some of our educators will regard these developments with growing alarm. A few will declare that the written word and spoken word themselves are in mortal peril.

Yet others will embrace it, saying, "Like, we've got to speak to the student like they're feeling, thinking, entities, glowing matrices of subjective actuality, if we can just overcome our generational elitist cultural bias and connect with them on her own level!" Make no mistake — this will be in our lifetimes — and sooner than we think... 🌱

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