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From the Sept. 2008 Issue

Hopefully, you read my recent column discussing surface computing (see www.CPATechAdvisor.com/go/1934).

For those who haven't, I'll attempt to quickly bring you up to speed.

Microsoft Surface is the first commercially available touch-screen type computing device in a tabletop form factor. Think of it as an iPhone in a bigger (actually, much bigger) form factor. What is interesting about the release of this device and the iPhone is that our paradigm is slowly changing ... away from the mouse. Both Microsoft Surface and the Apple iPhone rely on our sense of touch to not only move and select items and applications, but to also now modify those applications. An example would be a photograph or map that could previously be selected using traditional touch screen devices. But if you want to zoom, flip, enhance, merge, etc., you previously had to get back to the mouse/keyboard or stylus. The new surface computing devices are beginning to change all that. I mused in that recent article that perhaps we would see a surface device in an accounting firm and use this touch/surface computing technology to open and modify client documents.

Microsoft and Apple have both invested in this "more natural method" for interacting with our computing devices. The enhancements in the pen and handwriting technology in Windows Vista are evidence of the advances being made in this form of input. Many students are now using Tablet and Ultra-mobile PCs to capture notes electronically, which further saves the step of scanning or OCR-ing handwritten notes. Speech recognition has seen major enhancements, as well, which although not appropriate for say a college class does provide yet another natural way to interact with our computing devices. Physicians and lawyers have traditionally been the biggest users of dictation, but that dictation required

the interim step of transcription. Speech-enabled computing devices will serve

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ago).

Obviously, development of this version is progressing. And as with previous versions of Microsoft's operating systems, they tend to build upon the successes of the past and learn from the failures. The reason I mention all of this background is that during the presentation and discussion of what Windows 7 might look like, there was an interesting demo offered by Julie Larson-Green. It was interesting for a few reasons: First, Microsoft has been very careful about talking about the next version of the operating system, and for good reason. As Microsoft's Chris Flore noted on the Vista blog, "We know that when we talk about our plans for the next release of Windows, people take action. As a result, we can significantly impact our partners and our customers if we broadly share information that later changes." Secondly, what was shared in this demo felt very much like the Surface platform.

Larson-Green proceeded to pull up a brand new application called "Touchable Paint," and using all 10 fingers she began to draw freehand. Then, she brought up a photo gallery. And again, using her fingers, she selected, zoomed, flipped ... well, you get the picture (no pun intended). Anyone vaguely familiar with Apple's iPhone or iTouch would be familiar with this functionality. From there, she moved on to a mapping application that called up information from Microsoft's Virtual Earth and allowed her to pan/zoom to a location on the map (in this case Carlsbad, California). "Search for Starbucks," she said. And since there must be thousands of Starbucks, sure enough multiple push-pins appeared on the map.

After the demo, Bill Gates commented that this new technology referred to as Windows Multi-Touch is the beginning of an era of computing based on a new hierarchy of input systems. That may be an understatement, and we most likely

won't know for sure until we get a look at Windows 7, which isn't

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This is very early, and much of this flashy functionality may or may not survive to the released version of Windows 7, but it is clear with recent devices and software from both Apple and Microsoft that the use of the mouse and ultimately the keyboard is being de-emphasized, especially as technologies for more natural and intuitive methods of interacting with computing devices become useful. And remember, we don't teach our children to type and use a mouse at least initially; rather, we teach them to speak, listen and write.

If you want to read the transcript of the Gates/Ballmer Windows 7 preview and/or watch the multi-touch demo, follow this URL:
http://d6.allthingsd.com/20080527/gates_ballmer.

Technology

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