JOHN C. D[illegible] K



The Desktop, Dumbed Down

Traditionally, the growth of practical applications for desktop computers has closely paralleled the growth in gaming applications.

The gap between computer gamers and the rest of the computing community is wider than it has ever been, and I now believe that this gap is solely responsible for the stagnation we've seen in the software applications business

It's apparently easier for most people to blame Microsoft for application stagnation than to look for deeper causal factors Even at Microsoft, the rift between the company's gamers (the game division and the Xbox division) and the rest of the employees mirrors the comprehensive problem in the computing community

HAND IN HAND

Traditionally, the growth of practical applications for desktop computers has closely paralleled the growth in gaming applications and technologies Games and applications traditionally fed off of each other, with users tending to play more games on computers and demanding that many of the gaming advancements be incorporated into other applications The eventual rise of the color memory-mapped display that we all enjoy, for example, owes itself to gaming

The original desktop computers, such as the Altair, the IMSAI, the Sol-20, and the Apple I and II all featured memory-mapped video displays of one form or another Apple tinkered with the idea of the built-in display, and the others mostly used a popular card called the VDM-1 You attached a monitor and keyboard to the Altair/IMSAI/Sol machines in exactly the same way you do today

Within a few years, memory-mapped video was replaced with an old-fashioned dumb terminal, then a supposedly smart terminal This created the appearance of a mini-computer, and machines suddenly looked more businesslike The development of jazzy graphical games seriously stagnated during this period, with most games built as adventures where you typed in a lot of detailed instructions telling the computer what to do Go West Pick Up Rock

The whole computing revolution might have stalled right there if IBM had not shown up with the PC and reintroduced the three-piece concept (monitor, system, and keyboard) with memory-mapped video The three-piece design was an inexpensive way to sell a whole system The PC put memory-mapped video back into play and allowed the evolution of the graphical user interface and mouse The PC also put the gamers back on track and ushered in the golden age of desktop computing

Then two things happened that severed the ties between the gamers and the business-applications users The first was the development of the add-in graphics accelerator The second was the rise of the Internet, and the corresponding decimation of the CD-ROM business The development of the add-in graphics accelerator was, I believe, the most significant event in this regard

Graphics accelerators—such as today's Voodoo5 card—emerged as third-party add-ins Systems sellers saw no incentive to include them During the emergence of the graphics card craze, all computer makers were in a perpetual price war Before anyone knew how important the cards were to advanced game play, they had already evolved by two or three generations, so their circuits could not be easily incorporated into the design of microprocessor subsystems within computers There was also the issue of standards nVidia, 3dfx, and others all had proprietary technologies, which complicated matters significantly And while the graphics card makers were having fun competing with each other, they were leaving business users in the dust, since none of this new development trickled down to common applications as it used to do A chasm between users of standard applications and gaming applications had been created

POLAR OPPOSITES

Now we have two extremes present in the world of computing We see the brainless everyday machine that is "good enough for Web browsing" and—at the other extreme—the supersystem used by game players The latter machine has the fast processor, huge hard drive, Voodoo card, and 256 megabytes of main memory, minimum The users of the supersystem are the only ones pushing the envelope and are now in charge of driving progress The general user is getting none of the benefits of this progress, which is a shame

Unless something changes, we can expect to see a further widening of this chasm, with the gaming community and the computing community using standard applications losing communication with each other

MORE ON THE WEB *Read John C Dvorak's news, views, and snide asides every Monday at PC Magazine Online And don't miss Dvorak's "Silicon Spin" every day on techtv (formerly ZDTV) You can also view past shows at* **www zdtv com/siliconspin**