

Changing Technology

Before I kick off this month's newsletter, I would like to mention that as I write this, it's just barely after September 11th, the decade anniversary of the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington DC. It's been a curious time, looking back from the perspective of hindsight and ten years of changes in the world and life in general. It's almost hard to believe it all happened so long ago. Best wishes to those who lost someone in the attacks, or the military actions that followed. Hopefully nothing remotely as terrible will happen again.

Back to the world of technology and computers. You frequently hear from various sources how various technologies and gadgets are "dead," or soon will be. They don't even agree on exactly which gadgets are the dead ones. Most do seem to agree however that the central nexus — the thing that coldly murders a lot of other tech gadgets — is the "smartphone," along with its bigger brother, the tablet computer. It's not hard to see why, as most smartphones combine the function of cell-phones, music and media players, digital cameras, personal digital assistants, and many things that previously required a full-fledged computer or game console to achieve, all in a package that fits in your hand. A small device, no matter how capable, isn't ideal for all tasks by design, so the tablet is the next step up, supposedly set to usurp the low-end "netbook" computers — perhaps the higher-end laptop systems too, given

a generation or two of advancement. People have predicted the death of the desktop computer for quite a while now, as each descending level of system, from laptop to tablet or netbook to handheld device, gains in power and capability. Desktops haven't stood still either, however, and still commonly outperform more portable machines at a similar price-point. I know from experience that convenience has its value as well, and that's what portable computing provides, even if my laptop might be slower or have less storage than a system rooted to a desk. Perhaps the desktop and big-box systems will become the exclusive domain of professionals or server applications. It's hard to say for sure, but I doubt the boxes will die out anytime soon, even if they aren't likely to be found in homes in the future.

The biggest changes come when a hot new gadget or technology comes along and is adopted to a point where it causes a "paradigm shift," changing the way the general public works or plays or whatever, often killing the tech of "old thinking" in the process. To cite a recent example, Nintendo has pretty much dominated the field of hand-held gaming since they brought out the original Gameboy in the late eighties, even with stern competition from Atari, Sega, Sony, and others over the years. Their most recent hand-held game system, the 3DS, is said to be losing ground in the field however, despite spiffy tech to view 3D imagery without the need for glasses. Let's assume the decline in sales is not from splitting headaches from poorly adjusted screens. So what does that leave? The smartphones. Many consumers, including children, began to realize

their phones were playing games almost as well as any Gameboy descendant, and did much more besides (such as being a phone) without much more cost. Suddenly the 3DS didn't look like the must-have technology anymore, and between the iPhones and Androids, ground is gained in the portable gaming market. Before that, smartphones killed off the PDA, typified by the humble Palm Pilot. That was more an evolution than a murder however, for as much as companies like Apple tried to deny it, the smartphone was basically a PDA with a cellphone added.

The grand-daddy of all paradigm shifters (at least in the tech world over the last few decades) would be the Internet, which, over the 1990s, transformed home computers from devices that helped you do your work and play your games to a window to the world of near-infinite information, media, and (of course) pornography. Unfortunately, it also transformed most computers from devices that actually did something, to something that you farted around on for hours on end. Even so, it's quite the achievement, and changed the way pretty much everyone in the civilized world works and lives, to the point where people like me can barely recall how we got by before having use of the 'net, even though the majority of my life was spent without it, even though I probably got more actually done back then as well.

...by Eric Schwartz
from the AmiTech Gazette
September 2011

Spontaneous Human Combustion

Terrifying, isn't it? To imagine that you could be sitting in your favorite easy chair, happily reading UNIX in a Nutshell, and then your body just COMBUSTS — spontaneously — and you're a pile of ashes.

A coroner in Ireland ruled last week that's exactly what happened to Michael Faherty, 76, who burned to death last December while minding his own business and collecting his pension. In other words, this guy officially died from spontaneous combustion.

Except for the floor below and the ceiling above the body, the apartment and furnishings surrounding Faherty's body were left intact. The veteran coroner of 25 years couldn't find any other explanation besides spontaneous human combustion. If something external had caused the fire, wouldn't the rest of the house have gone up in flames as well?

It's frightening at first blush. But don't get too upset. Spontaneous human combustion is probably not real. Yes, approximately 200 reports of such have occurred in the past

300 years. But in 1998, scientists in U.K. came up with a more plausible explanation: the "wick effect."

Come to think of it, the idea that your body could emulate a candle wick is not really comforting, either. It still reduces your humanness to pile of charcoal in short order. And just to make it a little more gruesome, your arms and legs might be left intact. But at least there is some logic behind the wick effect.

On the BBC Television program Q.E.D. (quod erat demonstrandum, which means "that which was to be demonstrated"), Dr. John DeHaan demonstrated the wick effect with a dead pig. They wrapped the poor thing in a blanket, then used a small drop of gasoline and a spark. It took a while for the flame to catch, but eventually it did, and flames began burning intensely hot but with low flames. The pig burned completely — even its bones were incinerated. But the surroundings were mostly spared — only a nearby television, the floor below and the ceiling above the pig were affected by the fire. It's exactly what the result of most reported cases of spontaneous human combustion look like.

The theory behind the wick effect is that the spark (for a human, it might be a burning cigarette or a spark from a fireplace) burns

through clothing, then splits the skin enough to access subcutaneous fat. Most victims are alone and presumed to have fallen asleep so they don't immediately notice the spark. The fat is then absorbed into the clothing and behaves like a candle wick, fueling the flames until no fat is left.

You might think that a pig has a lot more fat than a human. We actually have a similar fat content to our porcine friends. So it makes sense that limbs would sometimes remain intact, since they contain less fat.

As for the recent case in Ireland, perhaps the coroner hadn't heard of the wick effect. But to this layperson's eye, Mr. Faherty seems like a prime candidate. He was found next to an open fireplace, which gives a potential source for a spark.

One other interesting note: Faherty was diabetic. According to this "Material Safety Data Sheet" from ScienceLab, a firm that supplies chemical and laboratory equipment, insulin may be combustible at high temperature. Just sayin'!

...<http://gizmodo.com/5843926/how-spontaneous-human-combustion-works>

October Calendar

October 3 — Amiga-By-The-Loop Chapter
7:30 PM — Main Grand Prairie Library
901 Conover Drive, Grand Prairie

October 3 — Board of Director's Meeting
Approximately 9:15 PM — Location TBD

October 29 — Newsletter Deadline — 7:00 AM

MCCC 4418 Sharpsburg Drive Grand Prairie, Texas 75052
<http://www.amigamccc.org>