Welcome

Andrew Charlesworth

PC developers might not wish to hear it, but the future of your living room lies in adding PC features to entertainment devices

Where is your PC? The chances are it lives in a spare bedroom or study and not in the living room. Traditionally the PC has been kept there because its focus has been work not entertainment. But now it wants to come out and play.

The PC has been knocking on the living room door for a decade, but there's always been a well-established group of other technologies occupying that space such as the stereo, TV and VCR. Microsoft is particularly keen that the PC should be let in and, in the shape of Media Center, claims the PC is now ready for prime-time viewing.

Adding entertainment features has become the major focus of PC development, to the point where there is now a bewildering array of hardware and software add-ons. But does that make the PC a natural entertainment device? No, I don't think it does. After all, you could turn a garden fork into a bicycle given enough add-ons, but the core product will still be better suited to digging holes than getting about town.
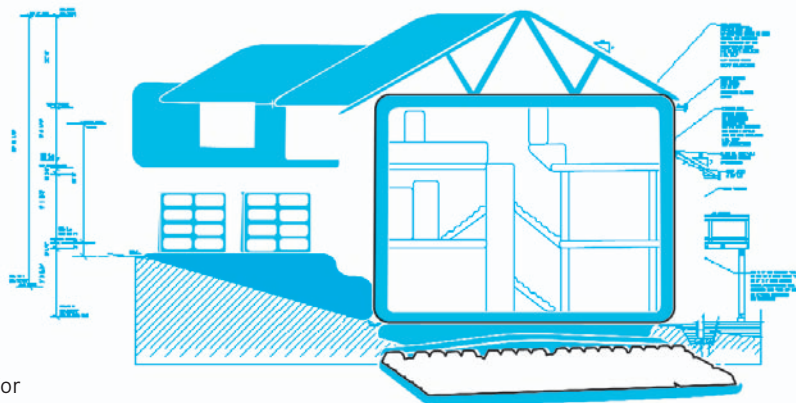
The essence of intent is embodied within a technology. The original 1981-model PC was intended as a business machine – a common-or-garden fork, if you like. No matter how many entertainment wheels are added later it still retains that purpose at core.

Does that mean the PC will never become a permanent fixture in the living room? Yes and no. Adding entertainment features to the PC will, I believe, prove much less successful than adding PC features to entertainment devices.

Take hard disks, for example, which are currently considered an esoteric feature in consumer electronics devices. But in 2004 hard disks will proliferate in set-top boxes alongside recordable DVD and traditional videotape. Most Sky+ customers won't even know they are recording to a hard disk. And why should they, as long as it works?

By 2005, there will be more hard disks sold to consumer electronics manufacturers than to PC makers. How long before stereos come with a hard disk for storing MP3s? The hard disk is just one of several PC technologies that will be adopted by consumer electronics devices in the near future.

The PC as we know it will remain in the study, but a whole network of PC-like devices will populate the living room.

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