y Karen Kaye

<p style="text-align:center; color:blue">The Shape of Things to Come</p>

This is a story that could easily turn into fairy tale about another "little box that could." This time around the box is even smaller than the original happy faced Mac, and one particular machine measures a mere five inches by nine inches by two inches. It is essentially a simple computer with a fast chip that runs a bare bones operating system with an integral Web browser. Designed as the antithesis of the "mega-tower" desktop computer with a price tag of several thousand dollars, these Internet PCs are expected to cost $500 or less.

Although other companies are also working on these designs, the foremost proponent of the concept is Oracle Corp. Chief Executive Lawrence Ellison postulates that the Internet PCs could one day be responsible for the replacing the personal computer as we know it today. The response from the key players in the PC market, such as Intel Corp., has been little more than outright ridicule.

If the upstart machines have been greeted with some derision, it may well be for a very good reason: precedent. The industry has seen several recent examples of highly touted technology breakthroughs stumble after a hurried development cycle. For starters, the Newton's handwriting recognition foibles suffered terribly under Garry Trudeau's pen. Even Windows 95's vaunted jingle "Start Me Up" began to sound like "I Can't Get No Satisfaction" to users who tried to run DOS programs. These and other similar incidents illustrate that few products can deliver the promise of the initial hype associated with their release.

Still, the advocates of Internet PC's quietly march on, and the first machines are nearly ready to be unveiled to the public. Apple is working on the Pippin and Sun Microsystems is about to introduce a prototype at the Demo '96 trade show. The maker of workstation computers is likely to gamble heavily on Internet PCs, especially since one of its units is responsible for the development of Java (a programming language that can be used to produce software that will run on any computer). The first Sun model will not fulfill all expectations, especially considering that it will cost in excess of $500. The company has not yet made a final decision on whether to bring it to market.

Internet PCs are likely to appeal to those who have been kept away by either the complexity

or the price of personal computers. These simple machines are aimed in part at consumers who are overwhelmed by the idea of setting up and operating a computer. Even more importantly, the Internet PCs make computing affordable not only by keeping the design features modest, but also by allowing a direct hook up to a television—thus saving the price of a monitor. Corporate customers will likewise benefit from the expected lower maintenance cost of the minimalist design.

Internet PCs could revolutionize the way we purchase and use software. Instead of buying a personal copy of the latest and greatest edition of Photoshop, users might instead rent it by connecting to an Adobe server over the Internet. On-Line companies may also jump on the bandwagon and offer services that go far beyond e-mail, chat rooms and airline reservations. Providing access to Web based encyclopedias and reference volumes, companies like America On-Line could replace stacks of CD-ROMs and walls of books. The computer entertainment industry would also be radically altered if a network game of your favorite first person adventure game was merely a local phone call away.

Whether or not the vision of a global network of households linked through their televisions sets by $500 black boxes ever becomes a reality depends on a number of largely unknown factors. Not the least of which is the possible resistance that some people may feel about inviting Big Brother into their homes. After all, once individuals see the offerings on the Internet, the temptations of the Home Shopping Network will pale in comparison.

Since Nostradamus does not mention the Internet PC in his prophecies, it is difficult to say if the machine will live up to its potential. The corporations who joke about Mr. Ellison's comments are undoubtedly secure in their position of dominance in the PC world. Yet they would do well to remember that at one point IBM's mainframe designers also laughed at the suggestion that the toy-like personal computer would push them to the edge of extinction.

Karen Kaye's occasionally irreverent column covers the Macintosh entertainment community with a focus on adventure gaming, strategy titles and whatever happens to cross her cross her mind at the time. She welcomes your comments at KarenKaye@eworld.com.