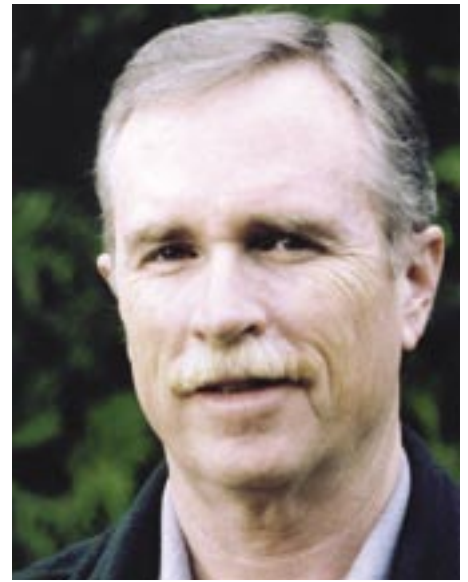


Timothy Perrin



For Computing Headaches, Take *a* Tablet

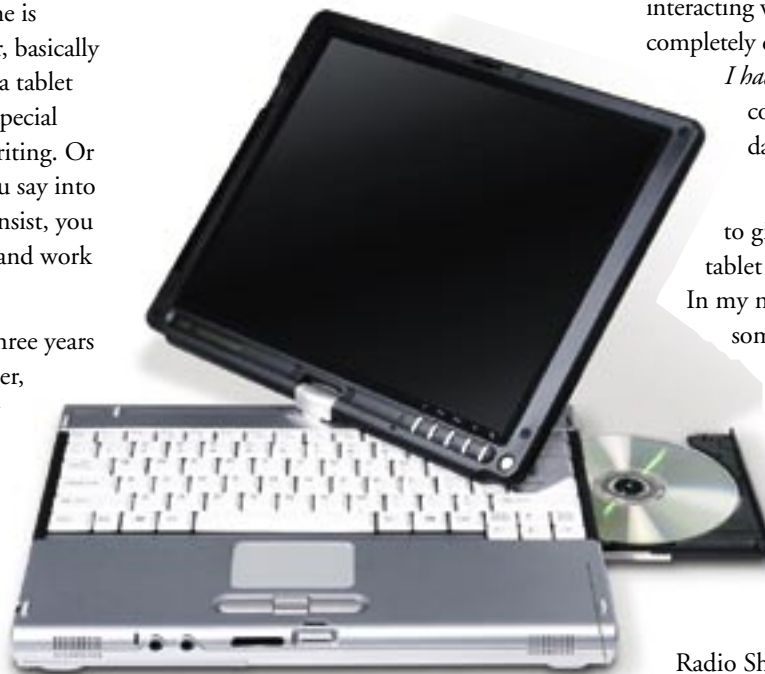
Three years ago in this space, I first wrote *about* tablet computers. Now I'm writing this column *on* a tablet computer.

If you're trying to envision what I mean by a tablet computer, think of any episode of *Star Trek* where someone is reading from a slate-like computer, basically a screen with no keyboard. That's a tablet computer. You write on it with a special pen and it recognizes your handwriting. Or you talk to it and it turns what you say into words on the screen. And, if you insist, you can still hook it up to a keyboard and work the old-fashioned way.

When I wrote that column three years ago, I hadn't seen a tablet computer, much less worked with one. They were brand new and I'd only read about them. Last winter, thanks to the kind folks at Fujitsu, I had my first opportunity to try one out.

They loaned me a Fujitsu Lifebook T4010 convertible PC for three weeks. (A convertible

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PC is the best of both worlds. It starts out looking like a conventional laptop, but you can twist the screen around and lay it down flat to turn it into a tablet.)

To put it quite simply, the tablet PC changed my relationship with the computer. I was quite surprised to find it created a paradigm shift for me. It was more than just a different way to input data. I was interacting with my computer system in a completely different way and *using it in ways I hadn't used it before*. I found my computer even more a part of my day-to-day life.

So in this column, I'm going to give you an introduction to tablet computing and the hardware. In my next column, I'll talk about some of the software available that takes advantage of the particular features of the tablet platform.

Tablet computers are, of course, an offshoot of notebooks and laptops that hark back to computers like the Radio Shack Model 100. The Model 100 had a full-sized keyboard but a tiny,

four-line, 65-character screen. It weighed only 4 pounds and had 64K of memory for everything—files, software, program execution, everything. But, for 1984, it was the top of the line.

Soon, laptops adopted the familiar clamshell design, got floppy drives, then hard drives, bigger screens, faster processors, more memory, and became basically smaller, slightly slower, and definitely more expensive versions of desktop computers.

Personal Digital Assistants (PDAs) are of course mini-tablet computers, but their small size and restricted software make them of limited use.

Several companies have tried to start a true tablet computer market over the years, but because they were, by definition, pioneers, their products never had widespread acceptance. Even when Microsoft released the Windows XP Tablet Edition three years ago and defined standards for tablet PCs, the market was very slow to start.

There are two primary reasons for this.

First, tablet PCs are more expensive than similar notebooks by \$500 or more, for a number of reasons having to do with the cost of the operating system, market economics, and engineering challenges.

Second, tablets have been slow to take off for the simple reason that people have had no compelling reason to adopt them. Up to now, no one has come up with the “killer application”—that program that runs *only* on a tablet PC but that everyone *really* wants to have.

For example, the spreadsheet VisiCalc really created the personal computer. You could type just fine on a typewriter. But there was nothing like VisiCalc anywhere but on a PC. It was the first “killer app.” Tablet PCs are still waiting for theirs.

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Now, those are two very valid reasons to stand pat. Not everyone has “geek” tattooed on his or her forehead like I do. The world functioned quite nicely until three years ago without the tablet PC and would have continued to do just fine without it.

So I’m not here to convert you.

But tablet computers offer significant advantages in certain applications, some of which apply to you, some of which don’t.

The primary market for the tablet computer was initially going to be mobile professionals who need to fill in paperwork a lot—doctors and nurses come to mind. Imagine a hospital where everyone pulls up virtual patient charts on their tablets as they go around from bed to bed, making notes on the screen. Surveyors are another target market.

You enter your data directly into the fields in the computer and do your calculations instantly. Realtors could prepare an offer on-screen, get their clients’ signatures, and email it to the vendors’ agent instantly.

But one of the top markets for tablets is turning out to be note-takers. Students love them. Lawyers and judges use them in court. Writers like me use them for research.

In fact, we’ve become a two-tablet family. After I was able to try out the Fujitsu

for three weeks, I knew I wanted to get a tablet for my next laptop; I had purchased a Toshiba tablet in March, not because I didn’t like the Fujitsu; I did. Simply because I wanted a larger (14”) screen and only Toshiba and Acer offered it.

The computer arrived on a Thursday, in the middle of a five-day workshop my wife and I were taking. The next day, I arrived at the workshop with the computer and started taking my notes right on the screen.

Around 11:00 o’clock, my wife said, “Let me try that.” After 40 minutes, she said, “I want one of these.” And of the 20 people in the class, virtually everyone asked for information on the computer and on tablet computers in general. Some were ready to buy. I wish I had been getting commissions on sales of Toshiba tablets that weekend.

But let me suggest to you that something much more important is going on here. Like I said, I have found that my *relationship* with my computer has changed.

I also find I am much more likely to sit around in the evening doing research on the Web or just catching up on my email as I sit comfortably on the couch. I may do a “pen-and-ink” edit of something I’ve written at the keyboard or written using voice software.

I’ve always found I need at least one “on-paper” edit. Now I do that “on-paper” edit on-screen, but it still engages that same part of my brain. It must be something about holding “the pen.”

Next time out, I’ll introduce you to some of the “ink-enabled” software that takes advantage of the tablet platform. There may not be a killer app yet, but there are a few that may wound you pretty badly. ▲

Timothy Perrin, a former lawyer, writes about technology and other topics. He is currently in Europe researching books on Hannibal and 21st century technology.

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