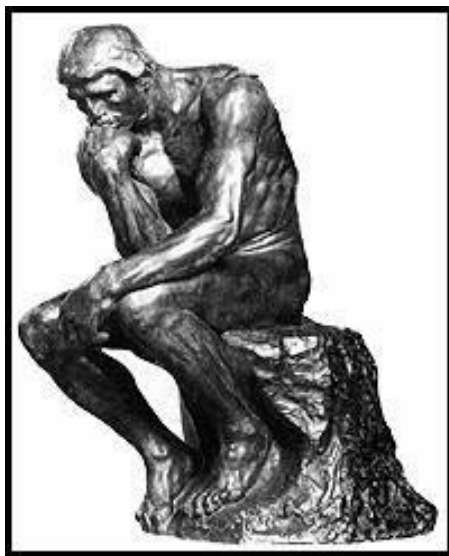


Morgan Muses More...

After years of musing in the wilderness, Stephen Morgan returns...



Nearly two years ago, I attended the Windows XP product launch in Cincinnati. This is no particularly noteworthy, save for one recollection from that event.

The first part of the "XPerience" (argh!) was to spend some time wandering around exhibitors' stands collecting "Microsoft Dollars" to redeem for XP-branded items, such as T-shirts, pens and Yo-yos. One of the exhibits I attended was the Compaq stand, where they were showing off the latest generation of spiffy IPAQ machines.

I would be lying if I said that I wasn't envious of these sleek and cool-looking pieces of kit; with one of

the optional "jackets" they were able to demonstrate surfing the web over a wireless Internet connection. I was also very impressed with the quality of the small but delightfully sharp colour screens.

Questions

I pulled out my ageing but trusty 5mx and started to take some notes, and that was when the trouble started. The gentleman next to me started asking the obvious questions...

"What's that?"

"It's a Psion 5mx"

"Psion? Never heard of them."

"They're a British company. They've been making small computers since the early 80s and PDAs for about ten years."

...at which point several others in the

throng chimed in.

"It's got a keyboard - and a nice one, too!"

"Does it have a word-processor?"

"Where can I get one?"

"Does it have a spreadsheet?"

"Can I synchronize it with my PC?"

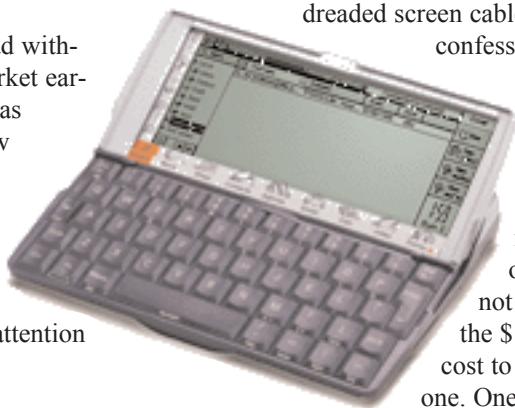
I answered their questions as best I could, but I felt some shame when I had to say that Psion had withdrawn from the market earlier that year and was not making any new machines. To make matters worse, the Compaq rep was getting miffed that the punters were paying more attention to my machine than his!

"Ciggie-pack" format

That's all water under the bridge now. Since then, PDAs have gotten faster and better, and new features such as wireless networking and Bluetooth have become almost commonplace. Some things are largely unchanged; the world is still in love with what I call the "ciggie-pack" format.

I am not criticizing the Palm-format machines - if you want a way to keep track of contacts and appointments while on the run, they are excellent

solutions, and for most people they do an admirable job. However, for other who need to do real work with word processors, spreadsheets, etc "on the run", a keyboard is needed - and the 5mx has one of the best out there. It is, however, slightly too bulky to fit into a pocket, and unlike the Revo/Mako it could hardly be viewed as a "fashion accessory". Having said all that, mine is happy enough nestling in its belt-mounted Covertec holster.



Last year, my machine fell prey to the dreaded screen cable fault. I must confess to having ogled various \$400 colour palm-format machines for a few days before finding a new 5mx for half of that amount - not much more than the \$150 it would have cost to repair the old one. One thirty-minute

restore later and I was back in business.

The Perfect PDA

Like many who read this magazine, I am sold on the usability of the Psion - while there are far more powerful machines out there, Psion got it right as far as usability is concerned. However, the Psion machines are not perfect, and I must confess that I find myself looking at other machines with a mixture of envy and dismay.

For me, the perfect PDA would include a

holographic display, artificial intelligence, voice-recognition security, voice-dictation... but those features will not be within our grasp for a few years yet! In the meantime I would settle for the following:

Wish List

A good keyboard, stable OS, a decent suite of built-in apps, voice recorder, well-designed clamshell case - in other words, a 5mx - but wait! We also need...

USB connectivity. Backing up a fully-loaded 5mx down a serial port takes over half an hour and that just isn't fast enough. Wireless (Fast IR, Bluetooth or Wi-Fi) would be nice, but I can live without it.

A decent colour screen. Yes I know it eats batteries, but that is what a large chunk of the market wants, and you ignore that chunk at your peril. I suspect that the lack of a colour screen has cost Psion more lost sales and market presence than any other single factor or feature.

A stable, working and modern web browser - an updated version of Opera would do.

Those are the "must-haves". A decent

Wireless networking, an improved backup/sync/comms package for PC support for Mac and Linux machines and a built-in rechargeable battery pack that could be removed and replaced with disposables if necessary would also be nice.

So there you have it. I would pay good money for a colour 5mx with USB connectivity and a few upgrades and tweaks. I think that you will agree that this is hardly cutting-edge. I believe that such a machine could compete in today's market.

Palm OS

I don't need - or want - a PDA that doubles as a phone, a pager, a coffee maker or a washing machine. I don't need a PDA that runs some derivative of Windows - EPOC/Symbian does the job

efficiently and with exceptional stability (hands up anyone who has more than two lockups a year). The Palm OS is not bad. My observation is that it is less

capable than EPOC, but the latest versions are closing the gap.

However, the PDA itself is only half the story. The other half is service and support. Nothing lasts forever, and this is nowhere more true than in technology, where rapid development and



short product cycles can mean that the shiny new toy you just bought home could be obsolete and unsupported before the warranty has run out.

Series 3

It seems that Psion has always been plagued with bad luck when it comes to build quality. To be fair, not all of this has been their fault - the extra moving parts in the clamshell design mean more physical stress and strain than the competition, which has hardly any moving parts. However, it seems that each generation of Psion's machines seems to have a weak point somewhere. The Series 3 was famous for the aforementioned battery cable problem and broken hinges, the 5mx had the infamous screen cable problem (why they did not make that cable detachable is beyond me), and the Revo/Mako was plagued with battery and charging problems that, in my opinion, ruined what could have been a spectacularly successful machine that could have given Palm and Microsoft a real run for their money.

Thermal Shock

I would not venture to call these "design problems" - only Psion has the statistical data that would prove or disprove that, and they're not telling - but they are doubtless weak points and sources of the most common repairs (out of the four 5mx problems I have had, three were screen cables that went bad. The fourth was a broken screen due to thermal shock). My point is that even in the best-designed hardware, things go wrong. However, even then, a manufacturer can turn that to its advantage.



Back in the days of the "three", Psion operated a repair centre in West London, a 45-minute train ride from the City on the good old Central Line. If your trusty silicon pal developed a problem it was possible to make an appointment, wander in and have it fixed in half an hour or so. More complex repairs took longer, of course, and you might have to send it in or leave it there for a week, but the walk-in repair service separated Psion from so many other companies and made Psion owners feel like they were members of an exclusive club.

Several Blunders

I do not blame Psion for their retreat from the market - they did not have much choice. With Palm on one side and Microsoft/Sony/HP/Compaq/Toshiba et al on the other, Psion was a shrimp caught in a battle of whales. However, it is also true that at one time Psion had

a near-monopoly on the British market, with substantial presence in Europe and an exceptionally loyal following. What went wrong? How did it come to this?

From where I sit, it looks like Psion made several blunders. In isolation they were harmless enough, but cumulatively they were enough to erode confidence in the company, turn it into a second-rate competitor, and eventually drive them from the market.

Psion has always been slow to react to changes in the market. When other manufacturers were touting colour screens and USB connectivity, Psion remained silent. As I mentioned before, I firmly believe that a colour USB uprated 5mx would have bolstered both their credibility and their sales figures.



* Psion's walk-in repair service was unique in the industry, and showed that they understood a basic PDA truth - that your PDA should be an integral part of your lifestyle and therefore a dead PDA (which represented a life "on hold") should be repaired as fast as possible. The discontinuation of this service must have damaged customer confidence.

* Support for developers would have helped in bringing out killer apps like AvantGo (which it seems everyone else can use except us) and a decent web browser.

* Better tools to allow Psion machines to interact with PCs and Macs. Psiwin was a start, but it was too clunky for casual day-to-day use. When Windows 2000 came out, it was suddenly impossible to get PC-to-Psion IR communications working. Rather than pointing the finger at Microsoft (quite correctly) for dropping support of virtual COM ports, Psion should have fixed PsiWin so that it was no longer COM port dependent. This was one area where Palm led the way.

* One area where Psion really lost out was on the marketing front. They could not afford to go coast-to-coast in the US. Instead they set upsales agreements with Radio Shack, CompUSA and others that resulted in hardware in the stores that none of the staff knew about! Many Psion users like myself would have been happy to do demonstrations, and I suggested this idea to their US marketing people - but to no avail.

* Having a company name that most people could not pronounce did not help much, either.

At present, Psion is sitting on the sidelines, quietly biding their time. The official story is that they are concentrating on their "core business" which they consider to be the corporate sector. Funny - I always thought that Psion's "core business" was making the best palmtop computers in the world, but it appears that I was mistaken. Personally I suspect that it is only a matter of time before newer and more capable competition erodes that "corporate" market and it disappears out from under them. You can only live on past glories for so long.

The future of Psion is a mystery to me. Perhaps they are contemplating a return to the market with a revolutionary new killer product that will wipe the floor with the competition and put them back in the winners' circle. I hope so - I really do, but looking at Psion's half-hearted performance over the past ten years I suspect that they are quietly milking their current products for all they are worth before disappearing into the night leaving behind memories of what might have been.

Time will tell.

