

Murgan Muses More...

Stephen Murgan ponders the pros and cons of convergence.

Does anyone reading these words remember the good old "music centre"? Back in the seventies and eighties these units - which usually consisted of a radio, amplifier, record player, tape deck and speakers - were very popular.

They were also generally viewed as somewhat cheesy, with the possible exception of the top-end models such as those made by Bang & Olufsen. The main problem with these things was that true audiophiles turned their noses up at them for the simple reason that they did not produce particularly good sound.

More often than not, this was because the manufacturer usually skimped on one or more of the parts of the system - usually the speakers, which were usually built to look



impressive - to keep prices down and profits up.

Fast-forward twenty years or so... a new buzzword "convergence" - has crept into our vocabulary. The word may be new, but the concept is old - the merging of technologies and functions. The music center was an example of convergence, and many more examples abound today, particularly in the technology marketplace.

Microsoft is heavily pushing the idea of a "Media PC", a computer that is part of the living room entertainment system - running a "Media Center" versions of Windows, naturally. Meanwhile, across the hall, you may find that fax machine, printer, copier and scanner have all been combined into a single "all-in-one" unit.

In some of these cases, the combining of functions is an advantage. For instance, the all-in-one printer/fax/scanner/copier is a useful piece of kit to have in the home, where space is at a premium. They also generally cost little more than an equivalent printer, translating into a significant cost saving.

However, one problem with multi-function devices is that they tend to be "Jack-of-all-trades-master-of-none", capable of doing many things, but doing none of them particularly well.

It is my opinion that the Palm and Handspring series of machines were a runaway success because they did one job, but did it exceedingly well. The Blackberry was also a hit, for a similar reason; it did one job - email - well and combined it with a slick form-factor and wireless mobile functionality.

Then the designers started adding features, getting themselves into a "me-too" race of one-upmanship until now we have devices that combine Cellphone, computer, pager, digital camera, MP3 player and PDA.

This is the point at which my philosophy diverges with the mainstream. You see, I don't want a device that does all of these things. I want a PDA and a cellphone that talk to

each other and are each easy and intuitive to use.

I am not against additional functionality as such, but I have a problem when such functionality compromises usability - such as not being able to use PDA and phone functions simultaneously. I don't want an MP3 player, but if I had one I would sooner have it integrated into my phone than my PDA for the simple reason that I am unlikely to need to use the phone and the MP3 player at the same time.

I suspect that most of us either have, or know someone who has, a PDA or a phone that has a built-in Digital Camera. How many use the camera functionality on a regular basis? Personally, I have never seen anyone use one, which makes me wonder why they put them there...

It seems to me that the electronics megacorps are selling devices on gadget value rather than usability. This is not a bad thing, but are we really giving the people what they want, or are we just giving them whiz-bang gadgets to please the eye, impress the friends and improve the status?

I have found that the more functionality you put into a device, the more difficult it gets to use. Going back to the music system example at the

beginning of this article, the true audiophile did not buy music centres - they generally built their systems from pieces that were individually auditioned and selected for their particular characteristics and qualities.

Psion came so close to getting it right with the 5mx and the Ericsson phones - an add-on or built-in IR modem was all that it took to send and receive e-mail through the cell-phone. Five years on, the latest generation of PDAs and cellphones are not quite talking to each other.

Perhaps we need a little less integration and a little more innovation