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Twenty Years... And Counting

Whil Hentzen

Somehow I got conned into helping out on the committee for my high school's 25th reunion. For my part of the gig, I set up a quick and dirty web site with Web Connection (no, I'm NOT going to give you the URL... I still have a bit of pride when it comes to my high school pic...) where classmates could enter in their current stats and other comments.

Many readers will silently nod along when I admit that high school was one long string of embarrassing, adolescent situations – why would anyone want to go down the reunion trail after all that? Two words: Morbid curiosity. And it's been interesting to see what has become of classmates – you know the characters as well as I do. Yeah, yeah, yeah – read the book, saw the movie, played myself in the made-for-TV special along with Richard Chamberlain and Jaclyn Smith.

I bring up this jaunt down Memory Lane because the reverse is even more interesting – watching the high school kids of today walking home holding hands – seeing my classmates as square old farts constantly jamming on our kids – what will the scene look like 25 years hence?

This is interesting because 2001 is the 20th anniversary of the IBM PC as well. I remember the early days like they were yesterday – or at least I think I remember them. In 1984, as president of the local PC users group and the proud owner of a brand new IBM PC-AT, I made a series of predictions for 2001.

I posited that there were three major limitations of the then-current batch of computers. These were input, output, and storage. Clearly a keyboard was going to be cumbersome for a small, omnipresent machine – I guessed that you'd be speaking into your hand-sized computer. Output was the flip side – a large enough physical display was not going to be portable. Thus, we'd need holographic displays, capable of beaming the screen into thin air 18 inches out, much like the image of Princess Leia emanating from R2D2 in Star Wars. And it was clear that we'd not be able to – or want to – be able to jam all the info or processing power we wanted into a cigarette pack-sized device. I supposed that there would some sort of omnipresent network of computers and satellites over which we'd be able to communicate and snarf any type of data we needed.

So how have we done over the past twenty years?

Voice recognition – we're making progress, despite the problems that L&H has been having. We still need more processing power, but one of these days, we'll see a breakthrough, and we'll all be chattering into our machines – and they'll understand us for a change. device

Output is close, too. The holographic display has been replaced by two other devices. The first is a miniature video screen that you can hook onto the temple of your eyeglasses, much like the little mirrors that bike riders use. And the second, in its infancy, but edging closer and closer to mainstream, is a mechanism that beams information directly into your eye, bypassing the cornea completely, and etching it onto your retina. Prototypes of this apparatus are already in use, giving sight to blind patients with damaged pupils or corneas.

And... some sort of worldwide network of computers and satellites – well, maybe THAT was a bit far-fetched, but you never know...

It's 2001, now, and we have all sorts of fun gadgets – 2 GHz notebook computers with 50 GB hard disks and a gigabyte of RAM, mobile phones that can access 10,000,000 web sites or call Mars, streaming video and music and interactive 3D gaming with people all over the world. How much better could it get?

A part time high school kid who used to work for me is now doing the dot-com thing in the Valley these days, furiously writing Java code while the sales guys try to scrape up customers who will buy his handiwork. He and I get together once a year and play “What's the World Going to Be Like in 20 years?” game.

And that's what we'll play in this space next time – stay tuned!