Developer on the Move
By Dr. Neil Roodyn

"So how will the next couple of years pan out?" This is such a common question that I am asked on a regular basis. I am not sure why I should have any better idea than anyone else, but apparently the questioners seem to think I do. This might be because I could be considered to be a very early adopter of technologies. I travel the world in search of unreleased technologies so I can find out about them and tell all you guys what is good, what is bad and what is ugly.

The mobile world

Last month I flew back to Australia for TechEd and to do a series of events on developing applications for the Tablet PC platform. I have also been working with some on Microsoft Smartphone software projects, so mobility is the keyword for this story.
I will answer this question now with some thoughts on the topic of mobility.

I guess I see the progress being made in different parts of the world, and it is very clear that different geographical areas adopt differing technologies at various speeds. Europe is huge as far as the mobile devices are concerned with Microsoft Smartphone having been available for just over a year now. Whereas the USA is slow to adopt the mobile phone but has a much larger range of Tablet PCs than anywhere else in the world. Japan has taken a very different route in terms of mobile technologies; this has let them move faster but in a 'non-standard' manner. So what of Australia, this wonderful continent, island nation, there is no doubt that the stranglehold of Telstra on the communication industry has had a big impact on the adoption of mobile technologies.
When in the USA, in San Francisco, Portland and Seattle wireless networks abound. Often when in the central areas of these towns I have a choice of two or three providers and there are a number of 'free' providers around. For example in a café the wireless is free for customers. It is just a case of being a customer, although I have to admit to once pulling up in the car park of one of these places, and connecting to the internet to find a map of where I was supposed to be going next!
Europe is adopting the wireless standards at a slower rate but most big towns now have a number of hotspots and a good tip for any travelers is to find a big hotel that attracts American business tourists. These nearly all have wireless networks, with prepaid cards available at reception. TechEd in Brisbane this year had a wireless network for all attendees and this has started to become the standard at big conventions around the world.
I am writing this now at the Cadiz Worlds 2003, the Olympic World Sailing Championships, in Spain (I know it's a tough life!). I am using my Tablet PC and I am connected to the internet via wireless. On the way to the yacht club today I received a call from my friend and colleague in Denmark, Carsten. He wanted to know possible dates I could go and do some more work with his team in Copenhagen. I was talking to him on my Smartphone and could check my diary in pocket Outlook and give him an answer immediately. I am truly mobile.

So I am armed with a Tablet PC and a Smartphone, "Is this the ultimate mobile solution?" Another question I am often asked, along with "What about the PDA and Pocket PC?"

I don't see these going the way of the large prehistoric reptiles for a while. Although the convergence of devices is certainly happening at an accelerated pace now, and the software is helping to make that happen. An example is the use of voice over IP (VOIP), when my Tablet is connected to the internet with the aid of some software, I can use it as a phone. I can use IM software on my phone (although it is slow and painful to use without a proper keyboard). Many PDA devices now have phone capabilities. So why should they all exist in the market place?

I think the answer to this is the diversity of taste and needs. The local supermarket sells lots of different types of cheese, they all vary in taste and texture. Will there only be one cheese in two years time, because it is superior? I very much doubt it!

As it is with mobile devices, I had one of the first Windows CE PDA devices but it never quite suited my needs. I used to leave it on my desk the whole time and so missed appointments, didn't have it when I needed to make a note etc… I tend not to leave my phone on my desk, it usually stays in my pocket and so it better suits my needs to have my calendar and notes on my phone. Likewise with the Tablet, most of the work I do involves writing (articles such as this), building PowerPoint slide decks or prototyping technology. I don't need my mobile computer to compile 500,000 lines of code and so the fact it is lower powered doesn't bother me. (The fact that the letters are being worn off the keyboard does, however, bother me!)

"You still haven't answered the question!" I can hear you shouting. I know, so let's get to the point. I think the next couple of years will present more choice, and greater diversity. I think that mobile devices will become the norm. I imagine in two or three years nearly every device will have wireless capability, I really hope this will start to include home entertainment devices, with technologies like Smart Display (http://www.microsoft.com/windows/smartdisplay/) this is a very real possibility.

I also think that our mobile phones will become far more integrated with our daily activities. Right now the telecommunications companies are holding all the control. This will change. Software can help make this happen. If your phone is connected to the internet then why not use VOIP on your phone? Why not send SMS messages through another transport? I believe the developer community has a strong role to play in the answer to this question and as the hardware becomes more capable this will be truer than ever before. The software we, the developer community, create now can have an impact in the next couple of years. So to answer the question "It's up to you!"

Dr. Neil travels the world working with software companies. He loves Australia, where he spends half of his year enjoying the Sydney lifestyle and helping software development teams get more productive. Neil brings his business and technical skills to the companies he works with to ensure he has happy customers. Dr. Neil can be contacted on Neil@Roodyn.com