

Let's see more of these technological innovations in '09

January 7 2009, By Etan Horowitz

As we begin 2009, let's take a look back at what 2008 brought us in technology. Here are four positive trends that I hope will continue.

1. Phone as a computing platform

This was the year that the cell phone truly started to resemble, and even challenge, the computer as a powerful device for communication, information, productivity and entertainment. Although we've been able to surf the Web and send e-mails from phones for years, it was the emergence of downloadable applications for phones such as the iPhone and the T-Mobile G1 that really changed what a phone could do. These applications mean you don't need to run to a computer every time you need to check in for a flight, access important documents or move funds from one bank account to another.

Apple's introduction of the "App Store" for the iPhone and iPod touch allowed consumers to download thousands of applications (many of them free) that instantly made their devices more useful. Some examples: an app that uses the phone's GPS to remember where you parked so you can easily find your way back; an app that lets you listen to thousands of live radio stations from around the country; and applications that help you find the cheapest gas or the best-reviewed restaurant nearby.

The launch of the T-Mobile G1, the first phone to feature Google's Android operating system, took the concept even further. Because the

G1 has a better camera than the iPhone, you can download applications that let you scan a bar code on a product you see in a store to compare the price to local and online retailers. Android is particularly promising because unlike the iPhone, it is an open-source operating system, which means it will come installed on phones from multiple wireless carriers and it's easier for developers to build applications for it.

2. Cloud computing

Do you use Gmail, Flickr, Snapfish, Google Docs or Facebook? Instead of having your e-mails, photos, address book and documents stored only on your computer's hard drive, they are stored online, or in "the cloud."

Gone are the days of e-mailing yourself documents or carrying around a flash drive to be able to access important files wherever you go. Now, these (mostly) free programs make it possible to view and edit documents, browse your photo collection and do a lot more from any computer (and some cell phones) with an Internet connection. Cloud computing also means it's no longer necessary to shell out hundreds of dollars for Microsoft Office because with free offerings like Google Docs and Zoho, you can create documents, spreadsheets and PowerPoint-like presentations for free that are compatible with Microsoft Office.

Certainly, storing all this information online comes with risks - namely privacy concerns and not being able to access your information when the cloud is down. But the benefits far outweigh the risks.

3. More TV shows on Internet

We got lots of new options for watching TV shows online. Network Web sites such as ABC.com and NBC.com have streamed full episodes for years, but the quality and selection weren't always stellar. Hulu.com, a joint venture between NBC Universal and Fox, changed everything. The

site is easy to use and offers thousands of full episodes of popular shows. You can even watch shows in high definition.

The success of Hulu caused other sites and TV networks, even cable channels such as ABC Family, to step up their game by offering more shows, including many in high definition.

(Etan Horowitz is the technology columnist for the Orlando Sentinel. He can be reached at ehorowitz at orlandosentinel.com.)

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