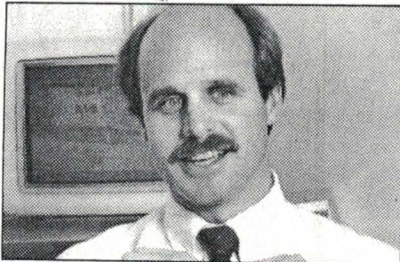


# Farewell, PC — What's Next?



Steve Castillo

By PAUL SAFFO

**T**HE personal computer died this month. Its passing was marked by the alliance announced by Apple and International Business Machines in San Francisco, just north of the suburbs where the PC revolution began a little over a decade ago. The announcement amounted to belated admission by the two industry giants that the future of computing lies in the development of new systems as radically different from today's offerings as the original PC's differed from their predecessors.

The personal computer may turn out to be like the horseless carriage, whose effect on our expectations was greater than its impact on our lives. PC users daydreamed of electronic cottages and global villages but settled for word processors and spreadsheets instead.

Like horseless carriages, PC's proved to be less than ubiquitous. Two out of three white-collar workers do not have a PC at the office and PC's are in less than a fifth of American homes. For every worker whose job was changed by spread-

*Paul Saffo is a research fellow at the Institute for the Future, Menlo Park, Calif.*

sheets or desktop publishing, a handful of others work much as they did in 1980. It cannot even be convincingly demonstrated that PC's deliver bottom-line benefits at an organization-wide level.

But just as it took a new generation of vehicles — automobiles — to deliver on a future envisioned by horseless carriage tinkers, it will take new classes of machines to make extravagant PC-era visions come true. The next revolution will be shaped by new communications-rich work stations on our desk tops and "information appliances" — inexpensive, portable high-performance information tools that will emerge from the collision of the computer and consumer electronics industries.

Unlike PC's, these devices will be specialized tools for everyday tasks from calendar-keeping to communications. None will look remotely like a PC and all will be cheap to the point of near-disposability. In a few years, we will carry all kinds of information appliances in our pockets, purses, briefcases and cars. Others will turn up at home as entertainment and education appliances. Most will communicate with other devices.

Today's personal computers are headed for technological oblivion because they are fundamentally standalone devices designed to accommodate a wide range of tasks at the expense of doing any one particularly well. PC's will still be around, but relegated to an obscurity similar to that reserved for typewriters today.

I.B.M. and Apple hope their alliance will give both companies the resources to lead in the new workstation and information-appliance markets. But can they outlive the demise of the machine put on the business map by their 1980's rivalry? At moments, the alliance resembles nothing so much as two former rivals huddling together for comfort as their world breaks up around them.

Indeed, the alliance coalesced from equal measures of desperation and vision. But the visions are new and powerful and backed by the companies' unmatched resources.

A question remains: Is the future simply arriving too quickly for the alliance? The very size of



the organizations and the historical baggage they tote may make timely responses impossible. And other more agile computer companies are already working to create new workstation tools while the consumer electronics industry holds a lead in building information appliances.

The demise of the PC ultimately marks the birth of something new, a greater revolution in which visions dreamed a decade ago could finally become reality. The two old giants will remain around long enough to see it, but the players most likely to shape this future will be the ones who shaped it a decade ago — small upstarts able to see the world in entirely new ways. ■