

Forty years of the IBM PC

Hugh Macdonald

The twelfth of August 2021 marks forty years since the IBM Personal Computer was first released onto the market. It is widely regarded as a seminal moment in computing history because it spurred on many other companies to make IBM compatible personal computers and very quickly became the dominant computing platform, with close to 90 percent market share. And it continues today largely unchanged, as far as the desktop computer market goes.

It was the impetus for the formation of Melbourne PC User Group, and other similar organisations around Australia and around the world. People needed and wanted to learn how to use their new computers, and so computer user groups provided support for that, as they continue to do so.

From a personal point of view, I wasn't born until nearly two years after the introduction of the IBM PC. My father brought one home in about 1987 and I was definitely extremely interested in the collection of grey boxes (monitor, computer, keyboard and printer) that made up his computer. I enjoyed using a program to make greeting cards on the dot matrix printer and playing various games that taught maths and spelling. A few years later when we got our first mouse and the version of Paint that accompanied it, that quickly became a favourite program.

But the IBM PC was just the first computer I knew, and I knew of nothing that came before it, so I couldn't judge how it advanced the industry like I later could with things like the iPhone and the iPad.

So I turned again to the good members of Melbourne PC User Group on Yammer, to provide me with their recollections of the introduction of the IBM PC and what they think have been the most momentous piece of technology introduced in the last twenty years.

Recollections of the introduction of the IBM PC

John Hall

My earliest knowledge of the IBM PC was when I became the Manager of the Myer Stores Information Centre in 1983. I had a small staff of seven people who used the latest Mainframe Operating System - VM - (yes, IBM had "Virtual Machines" back that long ago) to produce management reports for the Head Office Buyers and Stores Operation Managers. We had started to use the IBM PC. in some larger stores for staff rostering using spreadsheets (Visicalc, Multimate and the like) and I could see the capabilities of the IBM PC long before many of my mainframe based colleagues.

To cut a long story short - I started my own business in 1989 - "Advanced Software Engineering" - which used PC-based software (Micro Focus Cobol) to offload the software development compiling and testing etc. from the mainframe (thereby reducing the need to keep upgrading the capacity of the mainframe).

This technology really came into its own when "Rapid Application Development" methodologies started being adopted by large corporations such as the banks, insurance companies, and telcos in order to deal with the Y2K coding problems (which were real by the way - as calculations of anniversary dates for renewal statements etc. were giving wrong results).

By this time, the PC had evolved to be able to run complete mainframe environments such as IMS-DB/DC and CICS/DB2 on a reasonably affordable PC and as a result the company that I founded in 1983 is still in business today selling PC-based software for mainframe development (albeit under a different name and owner).

Peter Shute

I think the first time I'd heard of an IBM PC was at a presentation about the forthcoming machine at Melbourne Uni, probably around the time of the announcement, maybe 1981. There was great interest because something from a mainframe company was going to be cheap enough for us to own ourselves.

But they weren't cheap, and I don't think I saw one till about 1987, when my boss asked me to find something to replace our dying Unix system. I think it was in Dick Smith in the city, and it was running Windows 1.0 (that's 1.0, not 10). We bought some PCs, but didn't bother with Windows 1.0.

I don't think I actually owned one for about another 10 years. I took that dying Unix system home and kept it alive for myself instead.

Dennis Parsons

The first time I came across an IBM compatible PC was at work in 1990. All my previous dealings with computers had been VAX/VMS & Unix based mainframes, glorified calculators & assorted non-PC microcomputers. I bought a 286 in 1991 from memory.

Russell Cooper

I was on my second PC when the IBM PC was released. About a year later one turned up at work, provided by our head office, twin floppies and no hard drive. The boss wasn't interested and parked it away in a corner where we were allowed to 'play' with it at lunchtimes. I bought my first IBM compatible in September 1986 for \$1350.

Dave Simpson

From memory I bought an XT turbo (8088) to interface with my Telex interface and an AT (80286) for my desk (both IBM Clones) from Bluechip Computers in the late 1980s. Both were running DOS 3.0. I put Powermenu on both so I didn't have to remember the different batch files I'd written to start the various programs I used, like: Crosstalk, Wordstar etc.

Bill Metzenthien

I can recall reading about the IBM PC in magazines when it was announced. Then the IBM PCjr. And of course the clones, until finally in 1986 I decided that I could afford to buy one of these clones (640k, twin diskettes) for \$1350 (about \$3,456 in today's money, yikes!).

Kevin Martin

I have here an old Electronics Australia magazine for 1986 October.

Rod Irving was advertising a 'Baby AT' compatible computer from \$2,295. It came with all the normal features, such as.

- Final assembly & testing in Australia
- 1 M/byte main board
- switchable 8/10/12Mhz
- 1.2 Mbyte Floppy Drive
- 80286 CPU
- colour graphics display card
- 8 slots
- Floppy & Hard Disc Controller
- Printer Card & RS232
- Keyboard
- 200Watt Power Supply
- Manual
- 6 Months Warranty Short Baby AT*512K RAM Standard Baby AT*640K RAM, Hard Disc Drive& 20M HDD \$3295& 40M HDD \$3795& 80M HDD \$4695 That people explains why I hadn't bought a PC yet!

Greg Eden

I bought a RIE XT for \$1175 and it came with one floppy drive and 256kb of RAM. They had failed to configure it properly and strange things were happening because the switches on the motherboard were set for two drives. I was going to take it back but had a look to see what was wrong and quickly worked it out. I then added a second floppy drive and increased the RAM

to 512, then 640kb. Once I started tinkering I did all sorts of things. I replaced the CPU with a NEC V20 and a faster serial port chip. Swap meets came along. Woo hoo! I then went on an overseas holiday in 1987 and purchased a 20MB Seagate hard drive duty free from the Funan Centre in Singapore. My original green screen composite monitor was replaced with a Hercules card and much sharper green screen (hmm, might have been amber). The next step was a VGA monitor and a 386sx move to the world of the AT.

You could say my current desktop is the same computer, it has just had a dozen or so new cases and motherboards and drives!!

David Stonier-Gibson

I developed a security alarm base station for the department of education on an original IBM BC in GW BASIC. It must have been very, very early in the PC piece because I left that company I worked for (SEPAC in Frankston) in 1981 or 1982.

Jan Whitaker

I recollect IBM PCs being grey and expensive. We had them at work, but I couldn't afford one of the 'real' IBMs for myself. So I bought a TRS-80, a Commodore 64 (all built into the keyboard and connected to my TV) and a Kaypro luggable (which was stolen – I was so angry! Was working on a book on that machine).

The most momentous piece of technology to be introduced in the last twenty years

Greg Eden

The answer is the mobile smartphone.

The knowledge of the world in your hand. GPS and real time directions. Instant banking and payments. Instant communications wherever you are for both voice and data. And a camera in every pocket, not just for happy snaps but photos on the news taken by passers by so wrongdoers have a struggle to hide. Phones are used by most of the population all the time. Boarding Pass? In your phone. Covid check in? Phone. Covid Vaccination Passport? In your phone. Myki? In your phone (Android). Answering machine? Phone.

Modern phone plans have unlimited calls and SMS, even the cheapest plans. And the data requirements for apps has massively reduced over time. Remember people getting \$1000 bills for using Google maps? History. A couple of gigs is plenty for general usage but even the heavy user can thrive on a \$25 plan.

A smartphone is just a computer and a perfectly fine area for Melbourne PC to cover as an area of interest.

Most other members agreed with Greg Eden that the most momentous piece of technology to be introduced in the last twenty years has been the mobile smartphone. However a few members did have some other nominations.

Peter Shute

Most momentous piece of technology? There are so many, but Covid vaccines might turn out pretty important for most of us.

Not as much fun as mobile phones, but internet viruses are a fairly momentous development. They could be seen as a continuation of floppy viruses, but for the first time our computers could be in danger while they were just sitting there. How much have they cost us since then in lost time protecting, disinfecting, and battling incompatibilities?

A few more developments from the last 20 years:

Wi-Fi – we probably underestimate the usability this adds to devices around the home.

Flash drives – computers don't even come with a CD/DVD drive now, let alone a floppy drive. It's easy to forget how painful it was to move files from computer to computer until relatively recently.

USB – remember serial and parallel ports?

USB charging – after USB Mini and then Micro, we’re at last heading towards a standard type of charger with USB C that can do everything from phones to laptops. Apple’s Lightning is a horrible variation, but at least it can go in either way up.

Open source software – it’s given us free OSs and a large proportion of the software most people need.