MASAHIKO YAMADA

ABOUT HOW IT ALL STARTED

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Wacom's President & CEO

Back in 1983 we were just a very small company. The IT industry was at an embryotic stage and within a year or so the PC came to be a potential platform for the future, but no one knew what it could do. So we started with the micro processor as the basis for pen/tablets to work on. Then we began to realise that eventually people would see pen/tablets as an expressive device like traditional pen and paper. This was a very far out vision, but we already saw the pen as a very important element. Looking at it in those days the only interface devices were the keyboard and the mouse, which was still only just about to be announced. We thought that these devices were probably not good enough for people to express themselves with, so that's how we started with the computer pen from a very early stage.

So the idea of using a computer as if it's not just a computing device was very fundamental to our thinking. If technology is presented as only just hardware that forces people to learn how to use it then that defeats the real purpose, because a tool is just a tool and shouldn't limit or over-shadow the creativity of people. That's why we basically focused everything on developing the pen.

We had started producing the first cordless pen/tablet but with a battery powered pen in 1984. It hit a performance limit pretty soon due to its technology limitations. This brings us up to the 1987/88 time frame. Two or three years after we had started the company, we realised that our EMR® (Electro-Magnetic Resonance) technology enabled higher performance, battery free pens and multiple levels of pressure reporting. We put that into a product and announced it in 1987. Right after that Quantel saw it and they approached us to see if we could provide them with an OEM product. Quantel was our first corporate customer and soon after that or almost at the same time in parallel Shimaseiki a company in Japan known for textile design systems also wanted to use our pen/tablet technology. Those two companies were large customers for us in the early days.

ARTIST JEREMY SUTTON WORKING ON A PORTRAIT FOR WACOM'S PRESIDENT AND CEO, MASAHIKO YAMADA

In 1987 we started to see if we could use pressure technology in 'off the shelf' PC based computer graphics applications. In 1988 we took the product to the US and showed our technology in a very small trade show booth. We also saw that there was no one actually writing any applications for pen pressure input technology and we decided to do something to promote the idea. We found a very small Macintosh based black and white application called Pressure Paint which was probably the first one of its type ever sold. The pressure capability worked 100% for us and we took it around to various US software companies.

That's when we met Mark Zimmer right after he had finished working at Letraset on ColorStudio. He got the idea very quickly and began to use our first pen/tablet as a basis for writing Fractal Design Painter. So what he brought to the market was revolutionary and very much in line with the notion of simulating natural media. People could now work in a way that was natural and intuitive for them. And so Painter became a big hit, also the packaging was great, being an actual paint can and because it was very simple and said what it did. Everyone enjoyed using it and so it was a great success.

Now the market had split into a vertical market for the high end professional, with systems like Quantel and then there was a horizontal market for products like Photoshop and Painter and all the follow up products since. Between the early to mid 90s those two products really drove the market and were the launching pad for our business.

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In the mid to late 90s as well as 2D graphics applications, more and more 3D applications were introduced into the market and this is when Bill Buxton at Alias began to really show his muscle. Bill was at Alias for a long time as chief scientist and interface researcher whose concepts had begun to impact the industry. I think it started from Maya in a real sense. Before that Bill had done a lot of study papers and presented at many conferences, and really is a guru in new interface concepts and products, but until Maya came about all those concepts in my opinion were a little bit like a dream. This is when Alias started to understand his ideas and began to put them into their applications.

Alias Studio Paint came before Maya and is really a very powerful engine itself and the interface was very nicely done, so Maya I think took some part of that heritage. Of course Maya itself is not used for the auto design industry but some of the concepts behind it made a very interesting link between 3D and simple 2D painting. That's what I believe was another breakthrough for our market.

It takes a long time to really incorporate new user interface concepts and improvements into software products because they have already covered the market and have to provide many features for the industry such as ease of use and intuitiveness, combined with powerful computing capabilities and all nicely packed into a seamless product. Probably there is another generation of product line that Autodesk now have to develop. So today they have their legacy human interface, but in the future who knows what they're going to come up with for the next generation human interface experience in their product lines.

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From the mid 90s the internet began to change the way people did business and that's how we have expanded beyond the professional high end market to design agencies and professionals at home such as freelance artists and web designers. From 2000 we began to see the internet changing into broadband so that it's now almost free to send high resolution images and collaborate remotely. Also the digital camera appeared and that expanded vastly the way people do imaging work. Digital printers became available for low cost and with very fine resolution output.

Those things also began to impact the way people do computing at home, so when you are riding that type of trend, starting from very high end industrialised niche into the wider agencies, freelance and individual user markets of today, you have to look at the entire user base. While we are providing for the professional users, at the same time we are addressing the huge end user demand and expansion coming from the general end user community. And that also impacts the way people see computing, people don't care about what technology is inside the product anymore. Instead they want to see things done simply and more intuitively and that's where they see our value. So Wacom is now taking the challenge of how to get out of this 'technology only' type of company culture to move into more of a 'user interface solutions' culture.

That means we have to understand people first and what they need. No matter if it's for professionals or just general end users, you need to understand people first. We want to assemble or develop technology elements for any situation so our value will shift from a technology provider to a solution provider. That's where we see pen, touch and display products and technologies including optics and colours becoming much more important in coming years than what we have seen before. Wacom we believe will continue to provide very advanced solutions to the professional artist and designer communities, however also in addition to that we want to expand the business base, solution base and technology base to a broader market so that eventually people don't even notice what they're using is a computer. We want to make it so intuitive that people carry it around as if they are carrying pen and paper.

This is the direction we are taking now and we will see how that plays out in the way the computer industry does business in the future. I'm really quite happy that we had a very lucky situation in the past and what we provided as products changed the way people do their work. So if we continue to provide innovative solutions for our customers in professional and general markets, then our company will have been worthy of doing business for 25 years and worthy to continue doing business for yet another 25 years.

Looking 25 years out into the future I think computer products and computer technology will become really just like air conditioners and general appliances of today and so people won't notice the information flowing. All communication will be in real time anywhere you go, whatever you do you can be connected at all times and not disrupt your privacy or efficiency. Computers and technology will become real life supporting tools, but not in a way to control or disrupt the way people live and enjoy life. So we don't know if we are making pens in 25 years and we don't even know if there will be any big name companies still out there at that time when hardware has become just navigation devices or interactive tools and software has becomes just services. So we are seeing huge changes in the industry coming and it will continue on through. Eventually people wouldn't talk about computers anymore. I don't really know what lies up ahead, who knows, but I do know it's likely to be very exciting for all of us.

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