

Visionaries Don't Use Desktops

Daniel F. Keefe
Associate Professor
Department of Computer Science & Engineering
University of Minnesota, USA

Desktops will survive the next 25 years, but visionaries won't use them.

Although I long to be as controversial as possible in this statement, my view on the "Death of the Desktop" is, unfortunately, that desktops will survive through the next 25 years. I can't argue with the idea that there will always be routine tasks for which it's most convenient to sit at a desk, and [gasp!] perhaps even most efficient to use a keyboard and a mouse.

However, I'm not interested in routine tasks!

I'm interested in: creative design, finding a needle in a haystack, explaining a complex medical treatment to a worried patient, delivering healthcare, helping different cultures understand each other, helping families stay connected, making scientific discoveries, art. For these, and for the visionaries who work on these tasks, the desktop is already on life support.

So, what will the post-desktop future look like? Searching through images that might help to illustrate the future, most from research papers on virtual reality, multi-touch, or other "post-desktop" user interfaces, I found it difficult to find something timeless. Today, even in the research community, we are still so limited by the display and interface technologies that it is very difficult to find examples of tasks that are so much better with the current generation post-desktop computing that they make the desktop obsolete.

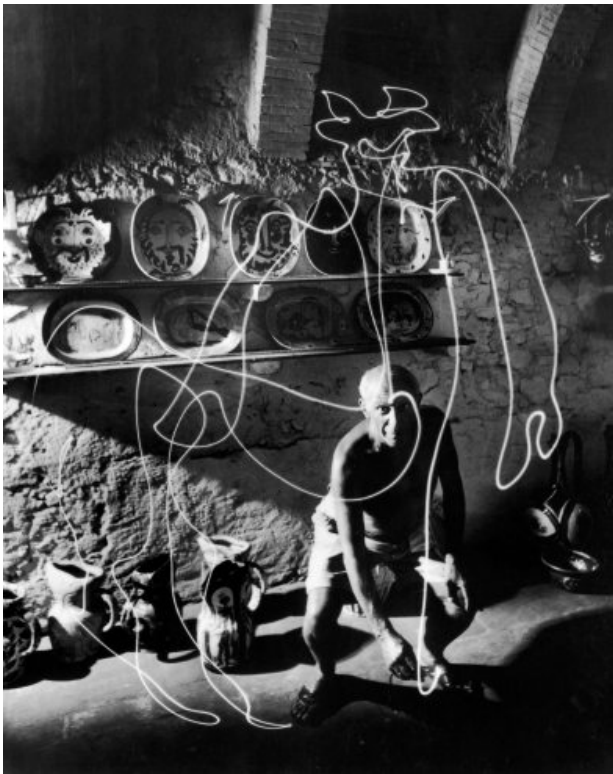
What I did find was an old image, one of the most inspirational to me that I have ever come across – the 1949 photograph by Gjon Mili of Pablo Picasso drawing a centaur in the air with a light pen. Of course, the drawing only exists as captured by the photograph, but imagine if this scene were real (as enabled by the next 25 years of advances in computing). Imagine that Picasso could reach out and draw his 3D centaur floating in the air without the use of any glasses or other obtrusive display techniques, and that all this could happen in his house or studio or other creative space (in this photograph, it looks like a old, beautiful, rustic, stone building).

This would be a real spatial interaction. *This* would be magic (making something invisible visible). *This* is what we will do daily with computers in 25 years when our physical space will merge completely with digital space. As researchers and technologists, we need to get over this one barrier – we need to solve the problems

of good, portable 3D displays and accurate 3D tracking – we’re almost there, and within the next 25 years, we’ll have it.

When this happens – I go back to the tasks that interest me: creative design, finding a needle in a haystack, etc. – I can’t imagine a single non-routine computer-aided task that would not be radically improved by a future where spatial interaction replaces desktops.

Desktops might live on for routine tasks, but let’s be visionaries – nobody is going to do anything *interesting* with a desktop in 25 years.



Gjon Mili—Time & Life Pictures/Getty Images
Pablo Picasso "draws" a centaur in the air with light, 1949.

Read more: [Pablo Picasso Draws With Light: The Story Behind an Iconic Photo | LIFE.com](http://life.time.com/culture/pablo-picasso-draws-with-light-1949/#ixzz3G2aKImol) <http://life.time.com/culture/pablo-picasso-draws-with-light-1949/#ixzz3G2aKImol>