

A rule-breaking vision of future

Microsoft is embracing a fragmented view of the future, in which no single device, or even single category of devices, reigns supreme, says Farhad Manjoo



Close your eyes and imagine it's five years from now. Now, check your pockets and your desk. Which devices are you using? It's very likely you have a smartphone. But is your second device an iPad-like tablet or a more traditional PC? Or perhaps you have a laptop-tablet hybrid, like Microsoft's Surface? Or maybe you don't own a second device, because your phone is powerful enough. Or you might have everything, because that's how you roll in our hypothetical future.

OK, open your eyes and get back to the present. If you had any trouble choosing, you have a taste of the dilemmas facing Apple, Google and Microsoft, the three players waging an epic battle for the future of computing.

Technology now allows for lots of powerful, compelling computing devices in a wide range of sizes and shapes. Just about everyone in the industry believes the smartphone will remain the dominant computing device for the foreseeable future. But second place looks entirely up for grabs, and the giants are jockeying to make that one other device that we'll all use along with our phones.

Apple has the iPad and the Mac, while Google has Android tablets and its Chromebook line of Web-centric laptops.

But the most interesting new addition to the game is Microsoft, suddenly re-energized after suffering a long decline in the personal computer business.

Under Satya Nadella, who became Microsoft's chief executive early last year, Microsoft is embracing a fragmented vision of the future, in which no single device, or even a single category of devices, reigns supreme. The plan is a bit crazy and rife with internal and external tensions. That doesn't mean it can't work. The future is unpredictable, so why not try a bunch of good stuff and see what sticks?

At a recent news conference that electrified not just Twitter but even some people in the real world, Microsoft wowed its loyalists (yes, there are Microsoft fanatics) with a number of new products that exemplify this idea. I've been using two of them—the Surface Pro 4, a tablet-PC hybrid that starts at about \$4,000 (Rs 67,331) if you include a keyboard cover, and the Surface Book, a \$1,500 (Rs

98,054) laptop with a screen that can be jettisoned to become a tablet—for the better part of a week.

On the whole, I found them to be very nice. But is either one good enough to be that one other thing that most of us will want in a smartphone-dominated future?

Well, that's the twist. The more I used Microsoft's new machines, the more I thought that perhaps no single kind of device is destined to win the war for second place to the smartphone. Perhaps the very idea that there will be a second-place winner is a mistake.

What if the future of computing is chaos? We'll have smartphones and then a dizzying array of desktops, laptops, tablets and hybrid devices—and different people, for different reasons, will choose different sets of each.

Microsoft's devices—and in a larger sense, Nadella's strategy—anticipate such chaos. For much of its history, Microsoft was mainly a software company. It made Windows, the operating system that became the lingua franca of the PC era, and it made Office, the software that made those Windows machines useful to businesses.

Microsoft's new plan is to still make Windows and software for Windows, which it licenses to other hardware makers for their machines—but now it also makes its own phones and Surface devices, and it makes applications for iOS, Apple's mobile operating system.

No other company in the industry operates quite this expansively. Apple makes hardware and software, but just about all of its products are integrated; Apple's software works on Apple's hardware, and in most cases nowhere else.

Google makes the Android and Chrome OS operating systems that it gives away free to other companies, and it also makes a handful of Nexus phones and tablets. But because it doesn't sell its devices for a profit and barely markets them, Google's hardware partners don't seem to mind its device business.

The modern Microsoft breaks all these rules: Its Surface devices compete with PCs made by other Windows hardware makers. Its non-Windows applications,

like the iOS version of Office, improve the Apple devices that compete with Microsoft and its Windows hardware makers.

You could say Nadella is fostering competition between all of Microsoft's divisions. You could also say he's setting up the company as a circular firing squad. Another, perhaps deeper problem is the mixed messages Microsoft is sending to customers. Jan Dawson, an industry analyst, pointed out that when Microsoft released the Surface Pro 3 last year, it sold the device as a "no-compromise" tablet that doubled as a skinny, MacBook Air-like laptop. But with the Surface Book,

used like a PC.

These improvements came as the sales of the iPad hit a wall. Perhaps the ultimate endorsement of Microsoft's strategy came this summer, when Apple unveiled the iPad Pro—a large-screen tablet with a keyboard and a stylus, just like the Surface.

The Surface Book, Microsoft's new laptop, could prove similarly influential. For one thing, it should spur Windows PC makers to do something they've long neglected—make good products for a change.

For years, most PC makers have chased low prices by forgetting about user experience; they've loaded their machines with preinstalled adware, failed tests of basic functionality (Windows trackpads were difficult to use) and abandoned customer service. That's why Apple dominates the high end of the PC business, and why Mac sales have grown as the rest of the PC business has declined.

The Surface Book, by contrast, is a genuinely fantastic machine—a light, fast, solid laptop with a dazzling display that, on the whole, feels every bit as thoughtfully crafted as anything bearing the bitten-Apple logo. Its trackpad is a pleasure to use, not a trudge.

And while I'm not sure that I need a laptop that can double as a tablet, the fact this one can do so effortlessly is a bonus. It is, at the least, a demonstration of Microsoft's hardware engineering prowess.

This suggests the ultimate goal of Microsoft's new devices: They spark excitement for Microsoft more generally. My wife, who trusts the Apple brand blindly, picked up the Surface Book the other day and was amazed at how good it was.

The path from such excitement to dominance is hardly guaranteed. Microsoft still lacks a compelling presence on mobile devices, and the best it can hope for is that excitement for devices like the Surface Book and Office on iOS gets people to take a second look at Windows Phone.

Today, that sounds like a stretch. But the future is wide open. Microsoft is taking the first necessary step to tackle that future: Making really great devices.

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