

WAP's flop is key to the future

THE much heralded WAP (wireless application protocol) phones have been the most disappointing technology innovation in recent years.

They were sold on the pretence that they would provide mobile Internet access to your phone. It's turned out that the Internet connection on a WAP phone is like the toothpick on a Swiss Army Knife; useless and never used.

Interminably slow connections, a screen no bigger than a watch and with insufficient capacity for anything meaningful. Millions were sold, when actually they should have been supplied by an elderly eccentric gentleman called Q, working out of a

submarine in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean.

However, they did serve one very important purpose — to vastly expand the usage of mobile telephony on which the Internet will depend if it is to realise its true potential.

WAP's limitations only prove to highlight the possibilities around the much-heralded third generation (3G) mobile technology. 3G mobile promises to deliver valuable Internet information, including video and music, to specially designed handsets quickly.

In Japan, the success of this technology (called I-mode) and the use of sophisticated car navigation systems has also lead to dashboard screens in cars offering Internet access, sports results, live road-cams of

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Five years ago, I bought a navigation system for my car. My wife was

absolutely correct; I didn't need one, it was excessive, but it was the latest boy's toy and it had saved Bond's life in *The World Was Not Enough*, and that was more than enough for me.

Her argument that a man called Blofeld wasn't after me fell on deaf ears, and much to her disgust, it was fitted at vast expense. Its first test was to get us to a wedding anniversary in a little village called Ufton Nervet, near Reading.

Religiously, I obeyed my new online navigator, although its instructions were contrary to my own directional instincts, my wife's map reading skills and the tried and tested navigational aids called road signs. The navigator failed hopelessly and we ended up in Windsor some 20 miles away.

Navigation systems

have since vastly improved, but we are still a long way off taking advantage of the kinds of technology currently deployed in Japan.

Europe has only just finished issuing 3G licences, with a staggering £22.5 billion raised through next-generation auctions in the UK alone.

This huge payout has left many telecoms companies strapped for cash with plenty more needed still to spend on infrastructure and value-added services. With doubts about when 3G handsets will be available and uncertainty over standards, it is clear that a widely available and commercially viable European 3G service is a lot further off than the initial hype indicated.

So, until then, it looks like text messaging will

reign supreme, but when 3G does arrive "texting" will be relegated to the same status as the abacus or computer tennis.

But like everything, technological possibilities are ahead of themselves and waiting for everything else to catch up. Last year I ran out of petrol just outside Florence and my brand new onboard navigation system told me where the nearest garage with petrol was and precisely how we could get there. Of course this was useless information to me with an empty gas tank. So, as I wouldn't be driving any more that day, I wiled away the hours with some duty free goods; vodka martinis, of course, shaken, not stirred.

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