

Some of you may be wondering where I've been during the last few issues of ATPM. Rumors have surfaced about motorcycling and I can't completely refute them. I logged over 7500 miles on my trusty Suzuki Intruder 800 between May and November.

Motorcycling is an important part of my life. It's hard to describe to those who don't ride. I think Mac users can empathize if they think about times when they try to describe what it's like to use a Mac to someone who's never used one.

It's funny. I get a rush of "home sweet home" when I get on my motorcycle after having to travel by car for any length of time. I get the same feeling when I "come home" to my Mac after "driving" a Win95, WinNT or UNIX box.

One of my personal goals is to combine motorcycling and Macintosh computing. However, the raw power and performance of my PowerBook 3400c seems to dwarf the capabilities of my trusty Intruder. Never fear, trusty ATPM readers! I will soon be the proud owner of Morticia, a 1996 BMW R1100RT. Maybe I should name the PowerBook Gomez?

Actually, I've been preparing for R1100RT ownership since before they were available for purchase! I read a pre-release review of the bike more than 2 years ago. I quickly poured over the specifications and found the one most important to me — seat height. Eureka! The lowest setting on the adjustable driver's portion of the seat was 30.5 inches, my limit. Unabated lust ensued.

For those of you that don't ride (or those bikers over 5'11" tall who never had to worry about it), seat height is terribly important to a vast majority of women motorcyclists. We tend to be shorter, on average, than men. That's why cruiser models are popular among women bikers; they're low to the ground.

Actually, seat height means nothing as long as the bike is moving. It only becomes important when you're starting the bike or coming to a stop. In order for any two-wheeled vehicle to remain upright when motionless, it needs support. If your bike is too tall for at least one leg to touch the ground, you spend a lot of time hoisting it back to vertical and usually a lot of money on repairing fairings, windshields, mirrors, foot pegs, saddlebags, etc.

The Intruder is my first bike. It has a seat height of 27 inches, which means I can flat foot that bike under almost any conditions. It survived being ridden around a parking lot, mostly in first gear, for more than 60 miles. Then I passed the MSF course, received my motorcycle

endorsement on my driver's license, and began a spiritual trek which continues to this day (much like the cyber-journeys I take with my Mac).

OK, enough about motorcycling. In future installments, I'll relate some of my more interesting biking experiences. By the way, if any of you are thinking of joining the ranks of motorcycling enthusiasts, let me take a moment to plug the MSF courses:

I strenuously, strongly, most emphatically recommend that you take at least the beginner's course before you ever hit the road. If you consider yourself an experienced rider (more than 3000 miles in the last six months) without benefit of even one MSF course, sign up for their ERC course — ASAP! To find the nearest offering, visit your local motorcycle dealership (any brand will do) and ask them for the MSF course schedule. They're usually given in conjunction with the state's community college system.

Even if you don't own a bike yet — take the beginner's course (they give you a bike and the experience will help you know what to shop for when you do decide to buy one). If you ride as a passenger on a bike — take the course (it will help you judge whether you really want to entrust your life to the driver or maneuver the bike yourself in some emergency situations). Personally, that course has saved my life at least eight times. During three of those incidents, my daughter was a passenger. It's impossible for me to recommend taking the MSF course too strongly.

End of plug.

Actually, motorcycling isn't the only thing "eating" time I might otherwise devote to writing MacAdemia columns. In addition to my heroic efforts in reviewing Palimpsest (see ATPM 3.11), I've been involved in a major project at work whose goal is to totally revamp the way medical students are taught. It involves laptops and unfortunately, they're not PowerBooks, they're ThinkPads.

An increasingly popular marketing ploy (or recruiting tool, depending on your preferred choice of phraseology) at institutions of higher education is to hand each incoming student a laptop computer (usually accompanied by a hefty increase in tuition). Several universities (including our parent institution, Wake Forest University), have embarked on this path toward a brave new world of networked education. The basic idea is that the laptop will serve as a nexus for self-directed learning and continuous, interactive discussion among and between students and teachers.

The key to success is not merely offering a light, powerful laptop pre-loaded with lots of great software for writing, researching and managing information at a competitive price. If that were the case, Apple computers could easily garner a good chunk of market share among colleges and graduate schools by offering competitive pricing on PowerBooks. The key is interactivity.

One leader in the market of "laptop learning" is IBM. Yes, "Big Blue" is beginning to make a dent in the education market traditionally dominated by Apple products. Their ammunition is a one-two punch of hardware and software. The hardware is a ThinkPad. The software is a server/client groupware application pairing known as Domino/Lotus Notes. Domino is the server software and Notes is the client application.

On the hardware side, Apple could easily sway some opinions. I have a ThinkPad to use in conjunction with my work on committees assigned the task of choosing software to be loaded onto the machines given to the class of 2002. I also have a PowerBook 3400c.

Personally, I prefer the PowerBook. It's processing power beats any PC clone laptop hands down. It's noticeably lighter (an important consideration to the student who will be required to tote their laptop to every class and study section). Plus, it's a Mac.

The software solution is where an Apple solution falls short. Some of our readers may protest, saying, "Wait just a minute here! Lotus Notes comes in a MacOS version!" This is true. The Notes client software is designed to be cross-platform compatible. Ancillary products important for integrating laptop computers into higher educational curriculums, such as Lotus Mail and Organizer, also come in MacOS versions. "So," you may ask, "What's the problem?"

The problem is that "Big Blue" is still "Big Blue." IBM is a huge corporate conglomerate that is still very conservative and traditional in its organizational structure and philosophy. Sure, their marketing departments may talk a good game, but look closely at their products.

My philosophy in science and education is one that delves into the intimate relationship between structure and function. Define an ideal function and you've gone a long way toward designing the structure and vice versa. Scratch the surface of IBM's software line and you'll discover an infrastructure that functions best in environments where personnel relationships can be rendered into a top-down organization chart.

So why would freewheeling environments like college campuses choose an IBM solution over Apple? The sheer power of Notes makes it the hands down choice for groupware to facilitate interactive learning and develop a new paradigm for student/teacher relationships. Its power also renders Notes daunting to the new user.

When campuses switch from traditional pen/paper learning to laptop/server solutions, it is important to consider the comfort levels of both faculty and students. When Wake Forest was preparing to integrate laptops into campus life, they began (in conjunction with IBM software designers) to develop a "template" that would sit over top of the client software whose look and feel would mimic with the natural flow and organization of campus life.

At some point, the Wake Forest designers and IBM people parted company. Each had their own ideas about how the template should "look." Two products have resulted. The IBM offering is LearningSpace. Wake Forest's template is their own proprietary product.

LearningSpace comes in a MacOS version that sits over top of the Macintosh Lotus Notes application. However, LearningSpace, in my opinion, is woefully inadequate to support essential structure-function aspects of an interactive, self-directed, learning environment. It perpetuates a traditional structure of learning where teachers deliver and students consume content. The structure imposed by LearningSpace feels too confining to me as an academic. It is often said that managing academics is like trying to herd cats. LearningSpace feels more like a yoke used to harness oxen.

The Wake Forest template is a far superior product whose structure supports the dynamic relationships between students and teachers. Its simplicity and ease of use encourages teachers to creatively integrate the template with laptop, intranet, and internet technologies for design and delivery of truly interactive, problem-based curriculum content. Unfortunately, because it was custom-designed for Wake Forest's Thinkpad project, their template is a Windows 95 application. Cross-platform compatibility is only achieved by accessing Notes databases mounted on the Domino server via a web browser application. However, some template features are only available via the Notes client, so Mac users are left out in the cold.

What I would like to see is a closer partnership between Apple and IBM to enhance the competitiveness of Apple hardware and MacOS in laptop learning. Apple, with its greater understanding of how the structure of its operating system enhances the functions of learning and teaching, could write “templates” for various educational environments: elementary/middle schools, high schools, colleges, professional and graduate schools. If the Apple/IBM educational partnership created a cross-platform compatible product, students could choose the hardware and operating system with which they were most productive and comfortable.

A logo that combines the beauty of a Lotus flower and an Apple blossom would be exquisitely beautiful. Maybe I’ll design one on my Mac. It’s my way of hoping.

Happy New Year, ATPM readers! Until next time, keep the rubber down and ride safe!

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