

few weeks ago at a well hyped 'event' in Cupertino, Steve Jobs introduced the iMac, in a way reminiscent of the original Macintosh introduction in 1984.

The crowd were wowed, the press were hit squarely between the eyes, and once again, Apple has broken with computer norms and produced a machine which is completely and utterly unique.

I'm a lucky guy who has been able to have a look at this revolutionary consumer machine, and to put it through its paces. It may have a cool case, a smooth little mouse, and clever hardware design, you'll be glad to know it's still a Mac. And a very good one at that.

I want one. You'll want one. Hopefully, everyone will want one.

On the Outside.

When the iMac is first lifted out of its box, its design really is striking. That curvy greeny/blue half-case, with a clear case base starts to get noticed immediately. The handle on top of the case reverts back to the classic Mac's luggability, and is a good idea for a family machine.

This iMac had a variety of ports, which included a 10/100 BaseT RJ45 port, an audio out port (with a mini-jack for speakers), 2 USB ports, and a phone jack port for the internal modem. These ports are not, however, on the outer casing of the machine, instead they are hidden behind a flap which contains a hole for wires to enter/exit from. Another good idea which will prevent plugs being knocked around by little kids. The flap itself wasn't very sturdy, and also a slightly different colour from the rest of the clear case - both of these things I would imagine are due to this being a prototype and will be fixed in the finished machine.

The keyboard reminds me of the old keyboards which used to ship with the LCs and such. OK, it's got black keys, greeny/blue trimmings and a fold-away clear plastic stand underneath, but do you remember how the ADB ports were indented at each end so you couldn't knock them around.

Well, this keyboard has the same, except that the ADB ports are switched with USB ports. And the way it's set up, the keyboard has a wire which runs to one of the iMac's USB ports, the (beautiful) mouse connects to one USB port, and this means there's a free USB port on the

keyboard. Joystick, anyone?

The front of the iMac looks a lot like a TV - the screen seemingly really huge in comparison to the all-in-one Performa I've got at home. The speakers (encased in that greeny/blue colour) are of decent quality, although a bit small. And similarly to the new US-only all-in-one educational G3, the iMac has 2 headphone sockets in the front, presumably to allow Bill and Bob to play Tomb Raider without annoying their parents (too much).

These 2 sockets are next to the right hand speaker. Next to the left hand speaker there's an IR panel, similar to the Performa's which have a TV card. It's unclear what the idea of this IR panel is? Is it for a remote control (the Apple Video Player Extension is in the System Folder)? Is it for IR networking, to say a portable eMac (the IRTalk Control Panel is in the System Folder)? Some things, we will just have to wait a bit longer for the answers.

Software

The iMac which I had to test just shipped with System software, 8.1. However, this had a couple of interesting points to note. Firstly, it shipped with an enabler (Ok not that interesting), called MIB, which seems to function perfectly and not cause any conflicts with existing software (however hard I tried). Secondly, and more interestingly, there was a file called the MacOS ROM. What this is I think is pretty obvious, and whether this will be a separate file in the shipping iMac is something we will have to wait and see for. Whatever, I think the words 'Network Computer' aren't far behind the iMac.

Being a G3 (at 233MHz) the machine felt very snappy indeed, opening Photoshop in seconds and running Quake in full screen, hi-res mode at a good speed. This power will be plenty for most consumers, and coupled with the 32 Mb of RAM and 24x CDRW, most people won't be able to complain.

Floppy!, what floppy?

The big fuss after the iMac was announced was the lack of floppy drive, and having used the iMac for a while, I can say that this wasn't a major problem. In fact I forgot there wasn't a floppy drive. Admittedly I was on an Ethernet network with a permanent Internet connection - these things can only be useful. But all the software I used came on CDs, and I emailed files to my home machine when I wanted to transfer them.

It's time to move on. The days when 1.4Mb was enough has passed, and ZIP and EZ drives seem to be the way to go, and I for one won't be sad to see the end of floppy disks.

So, what we have here, in the form of the iMac, is a great computer, at a (hopefully) great price

(it must be under £1000). It is a consumer machine, and will clearly sell well to Mac families - this will be its first market. Apple must also push hard into the home PC market, because with the iMac, the sky's the limit.

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