

Networking" And Dealing With I.T.

[from AppleTalk to String Theory]

By David Knopfler

One

Let me lay my network cards candidly on the table here: I know almost nothing at all about Networking. Indeed, until a couple of years ago, I thought Networking was your production assistant nicking your filofax behind your back and using it to network all your contacts, clambering the slippery slope to faustian fame ... with your face showing requisite rubber boot tread, to evidence a hurried rite of passage.

However, because my son was desperate to play the then new Marathon Two demo with me, simultaneously, on two computers, I invested in a piece of cable, for ten quid, and connected our LCII with our Quadra, via the modem ports. Lo and behold, with AppleTalk and File Sharing turned on, we were now a network. Joy! Church bells. No more messing about with floppies for us. If I wanted to copy a file from one computer to the other ? - no worries - AppleTalk at over 2k per second was the thing. I felt pretty smart.

Then along came my new PowerMac, costing more money than I make in several wretched months of laboured writing (now worth about £500 if I can find a victim to buy it). We had moved up the food chain. No more piffling AppleTalk connections for us - we were getting serious - an ethernet connection would prove a cinch. I had to spend almost twenty quid, this time at Apple Expo' - Those ethernet connectors didn't half look fancy though, with their splendid little green lights to tell the blank wall behind my CPU, if it was working or not. We decided to get brave and move the computers to separate rooms ... and still the network held! : "Are you on yet?" ... muffled reply ..."Hang on a sec" ... Happy days. And that, despite the fact, that one was a PowerMac and the other a 68k model and that both were running different versions of the MacOS [7.5 and 7.1 respectively ...not recommended]. WarCraft Two was soon to arrive. Figuring out how to undo the string on the wrapper was a puzzle [you didn't really think I was going to write about string theory did you? Give me a break]

Two

It was round about this time, that my son started coming home with frightening words like "hubs". Pleased to discover these weren't the things that cover car wheels and that it was something he wanted to rope his mother into doing, I gave the matter some deep consideration...

...Five minutes later, after scanning several indexes for the word "cheap", I discovered you could link three Macs without any hubs, in a so called daisy chain and, with wallet-easing relief, without having to spend more than a small round down the pub, a third ethernet connector. I can't say I was too sorry to have to tell my son however that the ethernet socket, in the back of his Mum's Performer, wasn't there, so he'd have to content himself with a "two player" game. It was at this point I ruefully discovered that he had learned the true meaning of disdain. While I'd been blinking, he had become proficient in eight player games via modem, online, so the thrill of thrashing Dad with thirty griffins and fire bombs, had become a "bored to tears on Sunday afternoon" option of last resort, down there with the chess board and scrabble. I was free to go back to worrying about the leaks in the shed roof and my son was free to worry about his online Myth rating, two swords and a shield as we go to press, in the sense of pressing "send".

Three

(... more than two anyway)

Let me tell you the little I've subsequently gleaned about networking. It's apparently something you can do Mac to Mac in great numbers and it works a treat - better in fact than UNIX to UNIX or Windows to Windows. Apple it seems, on the face of it, have a winner in this regard with the little iMac (Aren't you just sick of hearing about them? And thick and fast they came at last and more and more and more cheap little critters and you can link them up until the overdraft reaches millions and in a nightmare of turquoise, they'll still work fine. Where the happy ending falls apart, unfortunately, is when you start to cross pollinate - put Uncle Bill's operating system into the pot and, to badly mix a metaphor, everyone catches a cold. This is when I pull out the big guns (a veritable Gorgon of a mixed metaphor) and quote one of Oxford Universities resident networking gurus Moray McConnachie "...the networking of Macintoshes causes more support headaches than any other Macintosh issue."

Impressed by the largesse of this remark, I dropped Moray an email - The reply was frighteningly precise in it's elaboration:

It may not be the Mac's fault in all cases, but integrating it into wider networks (wider than local AppleTalk ones) is nightmarish.

- 1) OS 8.0's built-in Ethernet extension is buggy - fixed in 8.1, it's true.
- 2) AppleTalk is not being supported as a protocol by many routers, for budgetary reasons, particularly in departments and colleges here.
- 3) Apple over TCP/IP is improving, but it's difficult or expensive to operate remote printers via TCP/IP/

4) NTFS and NFS share clients are lagging behind PC counterparts.

5) Many local IT staff are not competent or qualified to network Macs.

I hope and expect the demand for G3s and iMacs to drive some improvement in the networking market-place, and to drive down prices as competition increases, but we'll see.

We're not alone in experiencing these problems in Oxford, either. The academic-mac-lovers'-IT-support-list I belong to is full of complaints on this issue.

Yours,
Moray

The matter doesn't end there either. It would appear that other significant shortcomings of "out of the box" offerings from Apple are giving cause for concern too. More detailed, and frankly rather worrisome information on this subject, can be found by looking for comments made on 6th October Mac users under attack www.mailbase.ac.uk/lists/mac-supporters/1998-10/index.html by Cambridge University's Robin Walker or at this mirror page where an A/B chart for out of the box comparison with Windows has been assembled from Walker's information.

Inference

For one thing, there's more to this networking malarkey than meets the eye. Apple could do a lot worse than to take these issues on board and elevate them to their A list of "To Dos". They would appear to need to pick up the ball and run with it, while there's still a pitch that allows Apple into the educational and business arena. Hands up anyone who really believes they will. On the other hand, since Dixons are offering free Internet access, phonecall costs tumble, and Internet access, long term, will get significantly faster, some might say, with some justification, things have never been more integrated. Whatever changes come, we can confidently predict one constant - that where Internet Technology is concerned, any observations are likely to be obsolete in the time lag between this writer conceiving his article and you reading it. Indeed just as I wrote this last sentence I note that the release of MacOS version 8.5 is likely to make significant differences - Apple's press release of 14th October 1998 makes the following claims:

"Performing tasks in a network environment has been greatly improved with Mac OS 8.5 and copy performance is faster than Windows NT and twice as fast as Mac OS 8.1 when copying files across 100 megabit Ethernet networks. In addition, Mac OS 8.5 provides Direct Printing which allows PICT, PostScript, EPS and JPEG files to be dragged to a desktop printer for immediate printing without having to launch an application. User productivity is improved in Mac OS 8.5 with the new network browser which provides easy navigation of network zones, servers and volumes using a Finder-like interface. AppleScript is PowerPC native in Mac OS 8.5 and is now up to five times faster than previous versions."

Whether this will be enough to turn matters around, or make improvements to cross platform issues, I'll leave to others wiser about such matters, especially as I'm still happily using version 7.5.5 :)

Article and graphic ©David Knopfler 1998

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With special thanks to Moray McConnachie

Disclaimer: Moray was speaking here in a personal capacity to me not as a representative of Oxford University. The same should be inferred vis a vis the comments of Robin Walker and Cambridge University.

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