

heavy UPGRADE.....

By Mark Tennent

"Tennent! Get in here", the editor shouted at me from his office. I got in.

"Write me a piece about why you use a Macintosh" he growled at me. The smoke from his cigar curling up to hover between his grizzled forehead and green eye-shade. "Make it a good one because this is the Christmas & New Year issue."

"And don't make it more than 50 words, no babbling!" he shouted after my rapidly receding back as he kicked his door shut behind me. No more than 50 words? How can one sum up so many disparate issues in so few words?

As a first attempt, how about...

'I want a reliable computer system where I can understand the hardware, with an OS that is easy to use and software that achieves the results I need. It must be fast, powerful and hassle-free. Windows and Unix are none of these (yet).'

That is less than 50 words and partly sums up 'Why a Macintosh' but it doesn't exactly make your blood race.

Perhaps a more succinct...

'I buy a computer system for the potential it gives me to achieve not the potential to make me grieve.'

Alliteration and much less than 50 words but doesn't mention any of Apple's good points. Besides, once the editor gets his blue pencil on it he'll reduce it to the one word - potential.

What is it that makes people buy Macintoshes over other systems? Are people buying the operating system or the appliance it runs on? What makes them choose Apple instead of one of the bundled deals on sale? It used to be that us Mac users were the elite, people wanted a Mac but couldn't justify the expense. Nowadays you can suggest that a computer user considers a Mac and get a distinctively negative reply.

Apple's latest baby, the iMac is definitely a product that people buy because it looks 'better' than

the other plastic boxes of silicone chippery on sale. It has a certain je ne sais quois that has made journalists drool into their keyboards, personally I'd prefer not to see the inner workings though this is the current fad in things from watches to telephones. But what about the other desktop Macs? We have all seen advertisements in catalogues and magazines - five hundred smackeroodles of hard-earned dosherooney gets you a computer, monitor, scanner, modem, stereo speakers and a handful of games. Seems like a good deal when the nearest Mac is half as much again and doesn't even have a floppy drive. Yet Apple are selling them like hotcakes.

When you examine exactly what you get for your money the bundled deals start to look like the proverbial pig confined to a poke - whatever a poke is. Scanners start at less than a hundred quid, low quality monitors from about fifty, a modem and speakers for the same. If the games are worth another fifty, that leaves two hundred and fifty pounds to buy the computer. Look at them in the shops and you'll see they are made from the thinnest of plastic, the nastiest clackety keyboards, the tackiest of mice and the games date from the days that Jetset Willy occupied the hours better spent on other pursuits.

Although Apple has produced some pretty iffy hardware in the past, nowadays they have a world-beating industrial design team headed by a Brit who used to design bathroom ceramic items. Does this mean that in the unlikely event of Apple going down the pan he will have the distinction of designing it?

Apple's current range of desktop and mintower cases are absolutely brilliant. Some extra-heavy users complain they need more expansion slots than the current three on offer although this is not a real problem because there are external expansion buses and besides, the vast majority of Mac users don't ever look inside their computers let alone add anything to them.

It is only Apple who are able to supply a monitor that is linked intimately to the operating system as in the current ColorSync range. With MacOS, colour control is at System level - something not due to appear in the Windows world until Windows 2000... now commonly known as Windows oh-oh. This means that all Mac programs can be written to use this feature so what you see in Photoshop is what you see in Freehand is what you see in XPress. If one feature of the Mac wows my Windows-using clients more it is the colour consistency across applications.

So maybe the first big reason to buy Apple is the hardware. You get what you pay for - well designed and thought-out, robust equipment on a par with the likes of Sony or Mercedes. Some Mac users have complained to me that they cannot update the motherboard or that the power supplies are expensive because they are specific to Apple. The reply to that is that Apple build to last - how many power supplies are they imagining they will need? As far as replacing motherboards, I would much rather replace the whole system every three years or so and get a brand new, faster, neater, system.

This is not so in the PC world. Go to a party, listen into the conversations and you can guarantee you'll hear tales of woe about the recurring need to replace the Pentium's cooling fan every month or so. This is not the computer's cooling fan but the chip's own special little fan. The Pentium, as it gets faster, runs hotter and hotter, unlike the PowerPC chip which runs on less power from generation to generation. The current 300MHz PPCs are streets ahead of the Pentium

for raw speed, even these chips are getting out of date as the 400MHz ones start to appear. Remember the feature we used to rag Pentium users about? That it couldn't add up? Check the VAT receipt if your supplier uses Sage for accounts - it will have inevitably made a rounding-up error in calculating the VAT element!

The MacOS is getting rather creaky nowadays, even OS8.5 owes much to the days of System 6, albeit running on PPC chips only. Windows does have features that are very attractive so some of us have been waiting anxiously to see what sort of job Apple make of their new operating system. Copeland seems now, from the parts of it that have appeared, little more than an updating of what was already there. Nice features but nothing new. MacOSX has got to be a hit for many of us or we will inevitably move on to Linux or Unix or (shudder) Windows. We want power-user features offered by the likes of Unix, without the pain. Windows doesn't address this issue, rather makes it worse. Luckily Linux not only runs on the Mac but goes like a train!

In my limited experience it is easier to install and run software and equipment in SoftWindows on a Mac than it is on many real PC systems and the G3 makes Windows run fast enough for any modern business application. When you run Windows you immediately run head-long into the Microsoft mindset. Try to install a modem, for example, and get onto the Internet means that you have to go through Microsoft's much vaunted plug-and pray features of Wizards. These can leave you high and dry, separated from the operating system in exactly the same way the old command-line DOS users used to moan that Apple did. Instead of having a simple set of dialogue boxes where you can manually fill in the IP address, if the Wizard won't let you, there is little you can do about it. For this reason, companies who have extensive Windows computers also have extensive computer-support departments.

Many have slated Apple because their systems are "closed". That is, only Apple make the operating system and the hardware. The cloning issue is now past and maybe if Apple had opened up in years gone by, they would be the ones appearing before the DoJ for underhand and shady dealing. But how "open" is the world of Windows and PC's? It seems from the evidence emerging from Microsoft's trial that they dictate to Intel what chips they can design and what software they cannot be involved in; they tell software and computer manufacturers the areas that only Microsoft will 'be allowed' to address at pain of being forever locked out of Windows. Is this what "open" means? Could it be that every company and every buyer who chooses Windows is really putting money into the coffers of the world's biggest crook who makes the worst Russian Maffia or Columbian drug czar look like amateurs?

I think so, and so...

'I use Apple computers because I don't want ugly, troublesome, bodedged-up, incomprehensible, expensive to maintain, beholden to Microsoft, slow, computers.'

There, Mr Editor, do your worst with that.

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