

he new Apple is a confusing mix of cautiousness and risk-taking. The blue-and-white G3's, like the iMac before them, have an eye-catching style that's sure to turn off more than a few people. They have no Mac serial ports, no built-in SCSI, no built-in floppy drive, and a single ADB port that apparently isn't suitable for use with keyboards or mice. With the iMac, the lack of standard Mac I/O could easily be written off by saying "The people we're targeting with iMac have no legacy peripherals." That is certainly not the case with the professional market that the blue-and-white G3's target. A year ago, everyone agreed that Apple must make bold moves to survive. Now, with its survival all but assured, when Apple will stop making these controversial decisions remains an open question.

Which brings us to Apple's conservatism. Current Macs come in one of only three shapes: PowerBook, iMac, and blue-and-white tower. There are no pro-level desktops, dockable subnotebooks, palmtops, or big Quadra 950-style towers. The new iMacs have new colors, but the other enhancements—a 33 Mhz faster processor and 2 GB bigger disk—are small improvements indeed. It hardly seems a coincidence that the new iMac's disk matches that of the "Good" level blue-and-white Power Macintosh; Apple does not have to stock any extra parts. Further, the iMac's price is still holding steady above \$1000, keeping Apple's margins high. And to eliminate inventory problems, Apple is requiring dealers to buy each color of the new iMacs in equal numbers.

While the I/O ports on the new Power Macs are FireWire and USB, the internal drives are connected with yesteryear's ATA, and the standard internal hard disk is the IDE we've grown to know and hate. And with three free PCI slots, the new machines are far from the most expandable Apple has made. Sure, FireWire will begin to obviate the need for more slots, but the current FireWire is only 400mbps, slower than today's state-of-the-art SCSI. FireWire storage peripherals are certainly the future, but for the coming months they are likely to be scarce and overpriced. Frankly, I'm glad Apple is finally moving away from the nightmare that is SCSI, but I wish they had made the transition smoother.

The new G3's have a nice-looking case, but how elegant will it look when it has a USB floppy drive, a USB to Mac serial adaptor, a FireWire to audio-visual adaptor, and a USB to ADB adaptor (to attach a full-sized keyboard and mouse) dangling from its back? Those, plus a SCSI PCI card that apparently does not yet support booting, are what you'll have to add to a 1999 Power Mac G3 to make it I/O compatible with the 1998 Power Macs. If Apple is not going to include legacy I/O on its machines, it should at least make the adapters available as build-to-order options. There is a fine line between a revolution and a disaster.

It's good to see that Apple continues to improve the usability of its hardware. The "door" on

the new G3's is a great idea, but I wonder how long it will take for Apple to make adding internal drives as easy as adding internal memory and PCI cards. With full control over Mac hardware and software, they are in a unique position among computer vendors to add hot-swappable bays to towers, just as they have with the PowerBooks.

I think Steve Jobs hit the nail right on the head when he said that most people don't care about megahertz or gigabytes. They just want to be able to trust that Apple will sell them a good computer. And be able to pick its color. Maybe that's why the fruity iMacs seemed to steal the show from, what I think were three more important announcements: the new Power Macintoshes, Mac OS X Server, and FireWire. Or, maybe, the reason the new iMacs were such a hit is that no one saw them coming. The rumors sites had plenty of news about the "Yosemite" Macs, and how Apple had a NetBoot ace up its sleeve. We knew practically everything about the new Power Mac G3's except their case design, well in advance of Macworld San Francisco, yet there were no rumors of multi-colored iMacs reported. It seems that this is just the sort of secrecy the new Apple needs in order to wow audiences.

Last year Apple made the mistake of announcing the iMac and its new line of "Wallstreet" PowerBook G3's at the same time. iMac, the unexpected announcement, stole the show. Instead of thinking about buying high-margin PowerBooks, everyone was thinking about buying lower-margin iMacs. That's why, with a new line of higher-margin Power Macs to be announced at the January Macworld, I couldn't believe that anyone (let alone the non-Mac press) actually expected Steve Jobs to talk about the upcoming consumer portable. It doesn't make sense.

Mac OS X

Will Steve Jobs wait until January 2000 to unveil Mac OS X at the San Francisco Macworld? I certainly hope it won't be that long, but after hesitating for a second in his keynote, the iCEO did say that it was still a year away. While it is frustrating that despite the moniker, Apple's modern OS is always about a year away, I think with Mac OS X the company finally has a plan that makes sense and that they can deliver on, roughly on-time.

The Naming Game

Apple seems to think that buying a Mac is like buying a car. There are the iMac line and the Power Macintosh line, the PowerBook line and the Consumer Portable line. The model names don't even have years in them, but, like automobiles, each new year brings a new style of casing, and a slightly different fashion statement. Thus, while from the consumer point of view Apple seems to have an enormously simplified product line, the actual picture is quite complicated. Things aren't as confusing as the days of the obscurely numbered Performas, but then how helpful is it when the front of your computer's case says "Power Macintosh G3," sans year, model, and processor speed? And while many probably don't care about the details of the iMac's specifications, I have to wonder how many people think Apple has not changed its innards since the introduction last May.

Choice After All

I've lamented several times in the past the dearth of high-powered Macintosh word-processors, so I was pleased to learn that Akimbo <<http://www.akimbo.com>>, maker of the Globetrotter Web publishing system, has released its once-dominant word-processor, FullWrite, as freeware. FullWrite 2.0.6 is powerful, intuitive, and the only Mac word-processor I know besides Microsoft Word that has a true integrated outliner. It also has a nice change bars feature and an integrated table editor, as well as good find and replace and support for long documents. The catch? Well, FullWrite hasn't exactly been updated recently.

Finally, shortly after my "Whither Competition?" column went to press last month, I was pleased to find that StuffIt now has competition, after all. Mind Vision Software, makers of the excellent Installer VISE and Developer VISE products, has created a replacement for StuffIt Expander called Mind Expander. <<http://www.mindvision.com>> I have my fingers crossed that a Mind Deluxe compression product is on the way.

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