

elcome to Macintalk, my series of monthly interviews with people who make a difference in the Mac world and beyond.

his month I sat down with Cabel Sasser co-founder of Panic Software. He revealed to us, among other things, a totally new MP3 player called Audion.

Please mail me your ideas, comments, critiques, and suggestions for future interviews. I can always be reached at robert@applewizards.net .

Interview conducted: 13 August 1999

Robert Zimmermann: How did you first become involved with computing and Macs?

Cabel Sasser: I've been involved with computers longer than I can remember. In fact, growing up, it's a classic family tale that when asked what my interests were as a child, I would invariably answer "buttons and switches." Things haven't changed much. My first computer was a TI 99/4A, and I wrote a lot of games in BASIC and saved them to tape. Then I got a Commodore 64, which got me interested in computer music. Then an Amiga. Finally, a stubborn Amiga.

he Mac was a super breath of fresh air. It was very easy to transfer my love and fanaticism for the Amiga to the Mac — they were both the "underdogs", and they both did things "right". Now I'm about as die-hard of a Mac user as you can find.

RZ: I read on your site that you have a Mac and a PC. Which computer do you use more often and why?

CS: I have to admit... I use a PC for two things: doing QA on our website with PC browsers, and for playing games. I'm sure as the Macintosh gaming market improves (and it sure seems to be! All hail Halo!) that need will reduce greatly! But my PC only seems to fire up when it's really early in the morning, and the siren song of Half Life starts to fill my mind. (I'm not sure what Half Life's siren song sounds like, but I think it'd be a lot of explosions.)

RZ: What would you wish to improve on the Mac considering games?

CS: The challenge in my eyes with Mac gaming is the incredible lag before a Mac version hits the shelves. There's a huge contingent of gamers who salivate over screenshots a year before the release, put down their pre-order money and get an embarrassing t-shirt, and line up the morning of the release to snag the game. For these people, the Mac isn't a good solution: it's hard to have your friends talking about a game for over a year before you can play.

Quake II! By the time the Mac version comes out, the game is so very 1998. So, as developers catch on, and Mac titles are developed simultaneously with PC titles, it'll really energize the market. Look at Quake III! What a great tormenting surprise for PC owners, eh?

RZ: Bungie sure improves things for Macs and PCs with cross platform development a lot.

CS: Agreed. Bungie is high on my "cool people" list. =)

RZ: We are completely off topic. I wanted to ask you about Panic. Can you describe the company? Why is it "Panic?"

CS: Panic was co-founded by myself and my long-time friend and collaborator, Steven Frank. I come from a creative background — web design, art direction, interface design. Steve comes from a strong engineering background, he wrote some of the first Internet tools for the Amiga.

One day, I was living in LA, and while visiting up in Portland, we both realized that the two of us could accomplish a whole lot by combining our talents. And it would get us out of our day jobs, which were starting to

induce Panic (a ha!) in our lives. I moved back up there, and put simply, we got to work.

RZ: Can you give me a brief summary of your products?

CS: Right now our flagship product is Transmit. As a web designer, I was very frustrated by the lack of FTP options on the Mac — all of them seemed very archaic, and none of them really made my job easier. So we built Transmit, which really shook up the FTP client market and become a bit of a trend-setter! Mac OS look and feel, drag and drop, a really simple but powerful interface. It turned out to be a huge seller, and has allowed us to really grow.

I still see little bits and pieces of Transmit start showing up in the other programs, which really makes me smile. It's nice to inspire!

RZ: What about LinkPad?

CS: LinkPad was a really quick product that Steve came up with to solve the hassle of forgetting good links during the "morning news run." It's a handy drag and drop "storage area" for links you intend to check out soon. It's not a full-featured bookmarker. For people who are always telling themselves "I have to remember to check that out," it's a godsend!

And LinkPad is going to get quite an overhaul sometime soon...

RZ: Our top secret sources tell you have a totally new product on the way. What can you say about it?

CS: Your top secret sources are correct. The grander plan is a product called the PanicPack, a collection of four really great Macintosh tools. But I have to keep tight-lipped about that. One part of the Pack, though, is going to be unleashed next week... and it's called Audion...

It plays CDs. It plays MP3s. It plays Network Streams (Shoutcast, Icecast). And it does it all with grace, style, and that good ol' intangible Mac-ness that we always try to capture! We're very excited, and we think people are going to love it. It's got some surprise features that no-one else has. And some incredible interfaces by the very talented Jeremy Bailey. Like Transmit, it's truly the next evolutionary step that'll set the trends!

Would you like to see a screenshot?

Z: Will there be customization like in MacAMP with skins and plugins?

CS: Yes indeed. We call them "faces" instead of "skins," because they don't take over the entire interface, just the control window, like a car faceplate. Plus, "skins" sounds barbaric. They're very easy to make: a copy of Photoshop and a copy of ResEdit, and it's all spelled out in plain English. Plus, you can do all sorts of incredible things, which will all be revealed shortly.

Our interfaces are the first on the Mac — or any platform, we think — that support alpha channels in a real working window. What does this mean? Gorgeous interfaces that can cast shadows over any color background, or be slightly transparent... it's pretty wonderful, and is just one more thing to taunt your WinAMP-using PC friends about.

There's a slight flicker when you move a window that uses Alpha Channels, but it's hardly noticeable on faster machines, and is well worth it!

I can also reveal something about the network (Shoutcast, Icecast) streams: we're the first (and currently only) player that has a built-in list of the top servers. You don't need to touch a browser — just open the Stream Guide window and double click on a server that you want to listen to. The list is updated every five minutes, and you can reload it at any time as long as you're connected to the Internet.

RZ: Nice feature. How did you do that? Do you have support from the

servers, whenever there is a new channel and such?

CS: Yes. We've partnered with a big stream provider to gather the data necessary to build the list. There is a combined list of all Shoutcast and Icecast streams. You can choose to view the Top 15, Top 30, etc.

RZ: How do you want to compete with MacAMP or SoundJam? Will it be shareware and how much will it cost?

CS: We're really committed to being quite affordable. We haven't fleshed out the details yet, however. We have about three days to figure it out. I can guarantee you we'll be leagues cheaper than SoundJam (and much prettier!).

And of course, when the PanicPack is released, you can get Audion (and three other cool applications!) for a really impressive price. It'll be a great bundle.

RZ: And will there be plugins? Let's say as a kind of screensaver?

CS: That is the one thing we decided to leave out. We focused more on the music: a quality, Mac-only, hyper-smooth playback engine that's very processor friendly. Spectrum graphs, scrolling starfields, melting faces, and all: they're nice once but not very useful, and they really bog down the system. Maybe if people demand it, we'll add them, but we'd rather be smooth!

RZ: Why did you choose to develop this project together with Proteron, the original makers of GoMac?

CS: Our relationship with Proteron works well — we're making a player, and they're making an encoder. I can't spill their beans quite yet, but the two products are designed to work very tightly together, and we plan on working with each other to market and promote both products. Their encoder is amazing. We're the underdogs, really — we hope to be the hipper guys who can move a lot faster than the bigger folks and can truly (I know it's a cliché, but bear with me) think different.

Our two products were just bundled together in Japan, actually. The demand is absolutely stunning. At the press show, even the president of Rio Japan gave an opening speech committing support and praise for our products! They will hit the stores in September over there.

RZ: Shifting gears a little, tell us... what is your family life like? Do you have one? Oh, and by the way happy birthday. (Cabel's birthday was a few days before this interview.)

CS: Thanks for the belated happy birthday!

I work so much that I often forget to eat, let alone remember to start a family. Seriously, I'm currently single, and striking the balance of work and fun time is probably the hardest part of my job right now. The thrill of running Panic — which might seem strange to some — is very addictive, and I certainly have to remember to breathe every now and then. I've got a lot I want to do and see, and I will. Eventually.

RZ: One last question: Will there be Transmit 2.0? (Erik wanted to know that.)

CS: Indeed, Transmit 2.0 is under development! We've got a lot of great ideas, and right now it's an engineering crunch, but we fully intend to keep Transmit the king of the FTP hill for as long as we can. Surprisingly, a lot of people are very content with Transmit 1.5, but we're not!

would like to thank Cabel Sasser very much for spending his free time with me, rather than testing Audion. It's appreciated!

If there is someone in the Mac community that you are dying to learn more about, please let me know. I would love to hear your suggestions and your comments about my column.

URLs From this Article:

<http://www.panic.com/>

<http://www.proteron.com/>

<http://www.shoutcast.com/>

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