Intuitive, schmintuitive

Computers are easier to use today than when they first came to our desks. But that still doesn't mean they're easy to use. Neither is the Internet. A lot of people are spending an enormous amount of time attempting to make these things easier to use, but don't hold your breath.

Users of Apple computers like to boast that their computers are easier to use than PCs. *Macs are more intuitive*, they tell us.

Not true. What's intuitive about having to press "Delete" to backspace and erase a character but "Fn+Delete" to erase a character to the right of the cursor? What's so intuitive about a cursor, for that matter?

So the PC is easier than the Mac?

Absolutely not. I'm not going to make the case for the PC being easier to use than the Mac, though, because it isn't. I'd rank them about equal. No computer is intuitive. In fact, very few things are intuitive.

Side note: I believe "intuitive" is misused when computer folks talk about hardware or software. People are intuitive. Hardware and software may be obvious, but they are not intuitive unless they are able to think and reason. "Instinctive" or "obvious" would seem to be better choices. But, no matter. I'll use the word the way computer folks use it.

In the past 25 years or so, I've used desktop computers running DOS and Windows (and before that DEC computers running RS/TS, and before that IBM 360 systems running who knows what). I've used an Atari computer. I've even used Unix and Linux computers. I've spent more time with Windows than with any other operating system.

Because of that, I'm able to intuit how a new program will work. When a new program comes along, I usually read enough to understand what it's supposed to do. Then I install it and try to use it without reading the instructions. In most cases, I can guess how the functions work.

The frustrations of "easy"

This summer, I bought a Mac because I was curious about the operating system. Several months (and two huge books) later, I have a general understanding of the Mac OS. I'm still lost occasionally when it come to figuring out how to do something that would be obvious to me on a PC.

This is the same problem that people who are more familiar with Macs face when they're confronted by a PC. Some of what they learned about how a computer should function no longer applies. They feel lost. They feel that the operating system is hard to use.

And they're right.

No computer is easy to use. That's one of the primary problems people face when they start using a computer, PC or Mac. It's not "intuitive" how the thing should work.

Who would intuitively know that Alt-F4 would shut down a program on a PC? And why would anyone think that a program would have to be shut down anyway?

- You don't have to *shut down* your desk when you go home at night.
- You don't have to *save* the words you're writing on a legal pad.
- You don't have to *reboot* the wall calendar.
- Your chess game doesn't *crash* unless you knock it off the table.

"Obviously intuitive" is impossible

Who says even "obviously intuitive" objects are so obviously intuitive? We grow up watching people write with pencils on paper, yet we still have to be taught how to hold the pencil and form letters with it. We have to learn how to sharpen the pencil. Would someone who had never seen a pencil intuitively know that it should be used to make marks on paper? Would it be obvious that one end is for writing and the other end is for erasing?

Remember the Star Trek movie in which the crew of the Enterprise found themselves back in our time? They tried to communicate with a computer (an Apple, I believe) by talking to the mouse. We thought it was silly. *You can't talk to a computer!*

But if there is an "obvious" interface, that's probably it: Talk to the computer and tell it what you want it to do. Let the machine work out the details of how to accomplish the task.

There is nothing intuitive about "desktops" with the Mac, Windows, or Linux/Unix. Files and directories are a puzzle to most new computer users, and even to those who have used the things for a decade or more. Until we have computers that simply do what we tell them to do, we won't have "intuitive" computers. No, wait. Even that is wrong. Until we have

computers that do what we want them to do, which may not necessarily be what we tell them to do, we won't have "intuitive" computers.

So if you want to argue with me about which operating system is "easier to use" or "more intuitive", beware. My position on that question is NONE OF THE ABOVE.

This is "intuitive"?

Let's go back a few years. Pretend this is 1990. You're using WordPerfect 5.1 for DOS and you want to make a word bold. What do you do? You select the word (move cursor to beginning of the word, press Alt-F4 to turn "block mode" on, and move to end of word) then press F6 to apply the bold attribute. Want underline? Repeat the process and press F8.

Is this obvious? Not to me, it isn't. It's been a few years since I've used WordPerfect 5.1 and I couldn't remember those keystrokes. I had to install the program and tinker with it to re-learn how to make a word bold. Yet there are those who say (with a straight face) that WordPerfect 5.1 is the easiest and most intuitive word processor ever written.

In fact, that was my opinion at the time. My fingers knew all the magic keystrokes. It wasn't so much that WordPerfect 5.1 was easy or intuitive, but that once a process is learned, it seems obvious, easy, and intuitive.

THIS is "intuitive"?

Take WordStar users. They thought the "diamond" system of cursor movement and the strange key sequences used to apply formatting were obvious. To me, WordPerfect seemed easier and better, so WordStar seemed obtuse and difficult.

To bold a word in nearly any of today's word processor programs, I double-click the word (this is intuitive?) and press Ctrl-B (or, on the Mac, Command-B). Once the user learns that, it's a short mental leap to understand that Ctrl-I makes text italic and Ctrl-U underlines it.

This is "INTUITIVE"?

On the PC, I close a file listing in Explorer with Alt-F4. I also close a program with Alt-F4. This seems intuitive because both the file listing and the program appear in a Window. On the Mac side, there's a difference between a "program" (like Word) and a listing of files in a window. They look similar, but closing the "window" requires Command-W while closing the program is Command-Q. Command-W closes a program's window, making it look like the program is closed — but it's still running. How logical is that?

Oh — and there are some programs that can be closed with Command-W or Command-Q. These seem generally to be applications that were written for the PC and ported to the Mac.

One of the most common complaints I hear from Windows users is "I downloaded a file and now I can't find it!" That's because disks, directories (folders), and files are not an "obvious" concept to new computer users.

Mac vs. Windows? Nonsense!

Mac users complain "I just installed a new program and can't figure out how to run it!" The Mac's operating system tends to obscure the disk structure, so a program can be installed where you might not think to look for it.

An inexperienced Mac user might think that's what the "Finder" is for. Forget it. The Finder is for switching between programs that are already running. To find a program that's not running, you need "Sherlock". And once you've found the program, you need to figure out how to make the application file a "favorite" or how to create an "alias" and how to place the alias where you can find it again. If you don't, you have to find it again every time you want to run it!

None of this is even close to intuitive if you've never used a Mac before, but to those who have used Macs, the process is completely clear. Understandable. Easy.

It's absurd for Mac users or PC users to claim that their operating system is "intuitive" or easy to use. Watch any new user with any kind of computer and you'll see a lot of frustration. Until the operating systems get a lot smarter, this isn't going to change. ß

OmniPage Pro for OCR

Not everybody needs optical character recognition software, but if you do, ScanSoft's OmniPage Pro 11 is the right choice.

Until version 8, I could recommend OCR programs only with a number of warnings. The results would be acceptable if you had a good, clean original and if the original used a fixed-width typeface. Versions 9 and 10 increased accuracy and added some features, but version 11 is simply amazing.

Accuracy is now expected. And it's delivered. But OmniPage Pro is helpful even if you don't have a scanner. If you'd like to convert an Adobe PDF (portable document format) file to editable text, you could use the Adobe Acrobat utility or you could use OmniPage Pro 11. You'll be a lot happier if you use OmniPage Pro 11.

Accuracy demanded & assured

The key to an OCR program is accuracy. Without accuracy, you're better off manually typing the information. That's where version 11 shines. ScanSoft claims a 40% improvement in accuracy. While I consider that number a bit suspect (version 10 was pretty darn accurate, after all), I'm surprised by the text that version 11 "gets". Even if it's a bad copy.

And it's not just in English. OmniPage Pro 10 recognized 13 languages. OmniPage Pro 11 recognizes 114 languages and up to 3 alphabets — including Greek, Latin, and Cyrillic. The new version handles scans in black and white or grayscale or color. It can use the extra pixel depth information in grayscale images to internally generate black-and-white images optimized for best OCR performance. This allows OmniPage Pro to create acceptable results on pages so degraded or faded they would have previously been described as unsuitable as sources for OCR processing.

This version not only meets my expectations for an OCR application, but it handily exceeds them. ß