Computer geeks start looking at Macs

I've noticed something odd lately. People are saying good things about Macs. In itself, that's not odd; Mac owners have been defending their computers for years even though Apple had fallen far behind Microsoft. But now the people hurling compliments are writers and editors for publications that cater to owners of Windows PCs.

What's going on here? Could the new G5 Macs, coupled with OS X 10.3 (Panther), attract a following of people who have, for the past 20 years, said little or nothing good about Apple? People like me, for example?

This is something I hinted at several months ago on my *Technology Corner* radio program. I bought a Mac a little more than two years ago. The operating system that was installed as the primary boot system on my G3 notebook computer was called System 9 and it quickly confirmed my opinion of the Mac's OS: Over-rated, hard to use, and crash prone. It reminded me of a cross between Windows 3.0 and Windows 95. The OS couldn't begin to compete with even Windows NT, to say nothing of XP.

This is 'easy'?

If that was the best Apple had, I thought, *it was clear why Apple couldn't get more than about a 5% market share.* But the machine came with OS X 10.0 and that was what I really wanted to see. OS X is built on Unix, a solid, stable operating system. I wondered what Apple had been able to do with Unix. How would Apple users, some of whom have never even seen a command line be able to deal with the terse and cryptic Unix command line?

OS X users who don't want to see a command line will never have to see it. The graphical interface takes care of most users' needs. But OS X 10.0 was disappointing. I found gaping holes where pieces of the operating system should have been.

Version 10.1 was an improvement and I could see where Apple was headed with its new operating system. I began to give the Mac some respect. I found things to like, although I have never bought the *ease-of-use* claims from Cupertino.

Apple's next step was OS X 10.2 and it was a quantum leap from 10.1. Some Apple users grumbled about having to shell out $100+ for a "0.1" upgrade.

About that time, interest began to build among the geek community. I started writing this report at Port Columbus on an iBook running OS X 10.2.6; by the end of the month, 10.3 (Panther) will be shipping. It sells for $129 (single license) upgrade or $199 ("family pack" of 5 licenses.)

Apple will probably catch more criticism for pricing another "0.1" upgrade at $130. I was in that chorus last time, but won't be this time. The previous "0.1" upgrade added more than 100 features to the operating system. This upgrade adds another 150 (by Apple's count) and the improvements justify the cost.

Some long-time Apple users suggest that Apple made a mistake in demanding that OS X be pronounced "OS Ten". Pronouncing X as the letter X would make sense because of the underlying Unix base. Pronouncing the X as "ten" means that eventually Apple will have an operating system called OS Ten 11.0 unless they come up with something else to call the OS.

For a clever company with a lot of foresight, using X as Ten is just plain dumb. Now Apple is stuck with *version creep* as they try to stretch out "Ten" as long as they can. Apple would have avoided criticism last time if they'd called the upgrade 10.5 and they could easily name the new version 11.0.

Except for that "X" thing

I don't have a copy of Panther yet because I'm not on Apple's short list of beloved reporters (and I don't plan to find myself there anytime soon) but I do know that the Panther's Finder is "completely new". That would be like Microsoft replacing the Windows Explorer. Apple has also added a feature called Exposé to tile open windows and let you find running applications. *As much as I like OS X, desktop management to date has been far behind what I'm used to on a Windows XP machine.* The iChat (yawn) feature now offers (yawn) video. If I want to chat with someone, I'll use the phone. It's faster and easier than typing.

Fast user switching will allow more than one person to use a Mac. Granted, that's possible now, but one user must log off so the other can log on. It's a time-waster and Windows has allowed fast switching since the advent of XP Pro. *But I hope Apple's implementation of this feature is better than Microsoft's.*

For Windows users, there's still no "must have" feature compelling enough for them to trash their machines and rush to the Apple store, but the features should be sufficiently enticing that most OS X owners will upgrade. And when computer

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Random Thoughts or Dead Trees?

Dead Trees seemed to be a somewhat negative name for this publication. Starting with this issue, the new name is *Random Thoughts*, suggesting – if not deep analytical articles – that at least minimal thought during development of the articles. Please note that I still bear no particular animosity toward trees.

replacement time rolls around, maybe a few more PC owners will become Mac owners.

For geeks, there's more! The new G5 computers are high-performance machines. They are among the first few 64-bit personal computer CPUs. Generally speaking, more bits mean faster processing. Early personal computers used 8-bit processors. Then came 16-bit processors and now today's 32-bit processors. There have been other 64-bit processors on the market, but not for computers you'll find in someone's home or office. AMD has a 64-bit processor now. So does Intel.

Add a powerhouse operating system to remarkably fast hardware and the result is a line of geeks who want to take a look and who, having taken a look, may well take a Mac home with them. As much as I like my PC and as much as I feel that Apple cannot fill all my needs, higher sales of Macs would be a good thing.

Play nice in the sandbox!

An ancient quotation for which I cannot find proper attribution suggests that corporate successes have embedded in them the seeds of their own destruction. *Information Week* editor in chief Bob Evans recently wrote a column in which he reminded Microsoft that their chief goal should be to make life easier for their customers. "[I]n the battle to marginalize, isolate, stigmatize, and perhaps even cripple Linux, it's not going to be just Linux that bears the brunt of your assaults. It will be thousands of your customers."

Information Week surveyed 400 business-technology executives and nearly 90% (352) said that they want help making Windows and Linux work together. Evans notes that companies will install both operating systems, which is simply common sense. Linux and Windows are complementary.

Companies may deploy more Apple computers than in the past, too, and in locations outside the advertising and graphics departments. Now that Apple has a real operating system, Macintosh computers can fit easily into the corporate environment. So now Unix, Linux, and Windows need to cooperate with each other.

Linux and Apple's OS X work just fine together. Maybe I should say that again and say it loud enough for some of the folks in Redmond to hear it: Linux and Apple's OS X work just fine together. An office full of Mac G4 and G5 systems with either one of Apple's servers or a Linux server could render Windows irrelevant. I don't see that happening anytime soon because no reasonable business owner or manager would toss out a building full of functioning Windows PC; but a reasonable business owner or manager might look at Microsoft's security record and begin to think that the company might be served better by a mix of Windows computers, Macs, and (yes) Linux machines.

This is no big deal because Mac users have been creating websites from the beginning of the Web, but it is a big deal for me: I wrote and prepared this week's entire program synopsis entirely on an iBook. Before uploading the file, I moved it to my primary Windows machine for final formatting – but that's only because the Dreamweaver template and cascading style sheet files aren't (yet) present on the Mac.

The desktop is still Microsoft's home turf today. That might not be the case in 10 years. ß

Microsoft: Threat to national security?

Windows has

been criticized as buggy, crash-prone and confusing to use. This is the first time, though, that it has been called a security threat.

The reason is its complex design and Microsoft's essential monopoly position. The claim is made in a 24-page report by 7 security specialists.

The **Computer and Communications Industry Association** published the report and it's important to note that the CCIA is known for its anti-Microsoft position. This criticism of Windows in light of the recent security problems that have affected millions of users is at least somewhat "political". **But that doesn't make it wrong**.

CCIA is one of several organizations that are appealing the government's antitrust settlement with Microsoft, and several months ago, it filed an antitrust complaint against Microsoft with the European Commission, so these are not "friendly criticisms". But there are truths here.

At the heart of the problem is Microsoft's size and success. Windows is ubiquitous. Many companies run "mission-critical" operations on Windows computers. Even if Microsoft had a stellar record on security, the ubiquity of the operating system should raise your concern level.

Because so many computers run on a single operating system, the threat is multiplied. "Most of the world's computers run Microsoft's operating systems, thus most of the world's computers are vulnerable to the same viruses and worms at the same time," the report says. "The only way to stop this is to avoid monoculture in computer operating systems. Microsoft exacerbates this problem via a wide range of practices that lock users to its platform. The impact on security of this lock-in is real and endangers society."

I have previously noted that Unix is, by design, somewhat more secure than Windows. While that is true, a Windows-less world would not necessarily be a more secure world. Some of the report's authors noted that the real problem is not so much Microsoft's design as it is the size of the target. Security consultant Perry Metzger said, "If every machine on earth ran Mac OS X, it would be the same problem." So install or enable security features on your computer – and have a good, current backup! ß

on the market by A.J. Stinnett

CORNER

Organizing people, jobs, equipment, and so on is a bit like doing a crossword puzzle. Takes time. Can be difficult. But it must be done.