

What I Think of Macs

Recently I was asked what I thought of Macs and I replied that I thought they were made for retards. Besides being politically incorrect and a product born of frustration with working on Windows PCs all day, my comment was not strictly accurate. Apple products are supposedly made for people who don't WANT to think. Since I am a huge fan of the cognitive process I tend to disrespect those who don't; hence the harshness of my reply.

That being said, I can understand why people would like their computer to work like a toaster or a can opener. One just wants to accomplish the task at hand without having to read manuals or fire up a few extra synapses, and single task tools like toasters and can openers meet that need. Why would one want to have to learn an entire new language and procedures to accomplish a simple task like building a spreadsheet to monitor your monthly expenses?

Alright, I am trying to be funny here.

There's NOTHING SIMPLE about spreadsheets or word processors or email or surfing the web or getting pictures off of your incredibly ingenious digital camera. And what about video editing or installing your printer or building a web page or designing a brochure or using Skype with a webcam? How about networking, wired or wireless, sharing printers or files? Not simple either. To pretend that these tasks are simple is self-delusion and completely overlooks the vast complexity upon which it all rests. Moreover, the delusion of simplicity will not abide the chaos that naturally arises with the actual complexity that exists. People are astounded when bizarre things happen when they work with complexity, but they shouldn't be. Any complex system is naturally co-dependent with chaos, that's why the weather is never exactly the same two days in a row, and why cancer springs up in three year olds as well as octogenarians. In fact, complexity breeds chaos and chaos naturally leads to complexity.

The fine people at Apple try to cover up that chaos and complexity by removing OPTIONS. The thinking is that if they reduce the number of things you can actually do with your Mac, you are less likely to break it (Microsoft attempts the same in Windows 7). Given the unix-based



underpinnings of the Mac operating system (OSX) and the proprietary nature of the hardware, that's not necessarily a bad thing.

How do they do that? One way is that they maintain strict control over who builds and sells their hardware. They do; no one else. In the PC world, any joker with a Phillips screwdriver can build a rig (badly), but not in the Mac world, it's all proprietary, you can only get hardware from them or a few designated suppliers with deep pockets. As for upgrades, the desktop systems can take more ram and larger hard drives, as long as you are: A) willing to take apart your hermetically sealed iMac; B) reload your OS from scratch and C) void your warranty, if it is still applicable. If any other part has failed it is a trip to the service depot. You cannot just take it to your local nerd and get him to fix it; he has no access to replacement parts.

Another way Apple tries to cover up the complexity/chaos is in the operating system, it is only the very technical user that can gain direct access to the file system (or actually do anything with it), and even then it is all controlled by permissions. For most people it is just the icons they see in folders on the desktop or on the drive, the rest is of no concern and that is what is considered to be the killer feature of OSX. The apparent simplicity of the file system means that the user doesn't actually have to know anything about it.

Except that's not entirely true. One of my clients brought in his brand new \$2500 MacBook Pro because he could not get his printer to work with it. As directed by the instructions that came with the printer, he had installed the software for the printer and then plugged it when it told him to, but alas, no print function. The thing simply didn't work. As it turned out, his printer disk only had Mac OSX 10.4 (Tiger) drivers on it and it was not compatible with the OSX 10.6 (Snow Leopard) that he had gotten with the MacBook. So how to repair this? The only thing a user can do (which I classify myself as being when it comes to OSX) is to drag the printer driver to the Trash Bin and reboot. Unfortunately, that was not nearly enough to solve the problem. In the first place, a resident process was left running that would pop up every reboot saying that it couldn't connect to the printer. Worse yet, downloading an experimental driver from Apple proved to be of no use also, since it refused to install with portions of the other one still present.

Solution? Reload the Mac from restore disk. Yup, reload your system from scratch, that's all you can do. Any time you run into a problem that is



unsolvable by simply dragging icons you have to backup your data, if possible, put in the restore disk and reload your operating from scratch. Then you will have to reload your applications and setup your email and restore your bookmarks and data. Even their tech support will tell you that. As for my client, a new printer with OSX 10.6 drivers may have worked also, but he still would have had to put up with that error message every time the Mac booted up.

Clearly, the still water of apparent simplicity hides a thorny quagmire waiting to seize the hapless user and drag him down to a painful new realization: Macs can suck just as much as PCs.

Anyway, I am getting ahead of myself; I need to share more personal insight on the Mac phenomenon, particularly since I am a relatively new user of OSX. Three years ago I purchased a 21" iMac in protest of Microsoft's craptacular release of Vista. It wasn't so much Vista itself that offended me so much (though there was plenty to be offended about), it was that they immediately ceased shipping XP. They tried to remove the choice. Since Vista is three to four times larger in the computer's "head" than is XP, many machines were just not up to the task, a fact that anyone who purchased a \$599 Compaq from the center row at Walmart can attest to. With 256 Mb of ram there was no hope of that thing ever accomplishing anything, it was simply too slow. Even now, if you are running a PC with less than 2 Gb RAM, you should not be running Vista or Windows 7.

I placed the order online which is the best way to get one of these things. Just go to the apple.ca website, setup an account, spring the credit card and you're off and running in five days; it ships right to your house. But beware of "upgrades", that's where they really juice you. Just like on the dell.ca website you are best off purchasing the machine that really meets your needs without resorting to upgrades. I have seen people spend more on a slower machine with upgrades than just buying the faster machine in the first place.

The big day arrived. The whole unit was in one box, as expected. I unpacked the sleek and shiny device with childlike wonder, and to my tired of old PC eyes the thing was a work of art. There is no doubt that Apple puts a great deal of thought into making their products esthetically pleasing, the latest ones are even nicer to look at. I plugged it all in, struggled to find the on switch (surface stealth-mounted on the back left side) and was



rewarded with that heavenly chorus telling me that I had found Apple Nirvana.

Then I spent an hour and a half getting it auto-loaded according to language choice, connected to the network and registering it before it would let me do anything recreational. This is basically no different than any other boxed equipment you would pick up at Staples. When it comes to networking, there really is no difference between a Mac and a PC, wired is instant on and utterly reliable, wireless is messy to setup and still quits for no apparent reason, prompting frequent re-training of the connection. Even with a wireless router (three different ones tried) only six feet away, my iMac seems to lose its knack for wireless frequently, so it remains to this day tethered by wire. No patch has ever smartened this up. But it's really no different than a PC on wireless, they are not reliable either.

Macs ship with very little software beyond the basics and a couple of bling toys, leaving users to hunt down expensive applications to run for themselves. Amazingly, there aren't even any games (at least not when I got mine), though you can now download scads of them from the apple.ca website. Many retail programs you purchase now have Mac versions on disk, QuickTax comes to mind. But keep this in mind before you pop \$2k: Windows programs do not run natively on Macs. If you're thinking that you're going to run your Family Tree Maker that you've had for six years on this thing, forget it. The only way to run Windows apps is to procure some kind of virtual machine software (Parallels is the most popular consumer choice, \$100), install Windows in a VM, then switch to the VM and install your Family Tree Maker. Can anyone out there tell me how smart it is to spend thrice the amount necessary to run Windows, just so that it can be on a Mac? It boggles my mind that one would want to get away from Windows and go to a Mac so badly that they would be willing to 1) spend three times as much as necessary, and 2) load Windows anyway just so they could run the programs that they are used to using. It's not an experiment I have ever done because it is just too silly for me.

Apple mice only have one button; apparently they think that two is too complicated for you and me. Fortunately you can plug in a two button mouse and gain the other 50% functionality that it is supposed to have, but don't be surprised if Apple-written applications don't make use of it. I laughed the first time I directly compared Safari (Apple's browser that comes with MacOS) and Firefox (a popular third party browser) and noticed the



number of right click differences between the two. You can't even right-click close Safari from the dock, you have to open it and then close it manually (I think you can Command-Q it while hovering, if I recall correctly). That said, Safari is a reasonably competent browser. What frustrates me most using it is mousing on the address bar. I find it difficult to click-select text the way I am used to in Windows, but that's a niggling point. The mouse as a whole seems less responsive than it should be, even after tweaking the controls for it, but again, this is easily remedied with a USB PC mouse.

The keyboard is another enigma for me. Though I find it physically pleasing, it is difficult for me to use well. Perhaps more practice would help, though in my line of work I am quite used to switching between dozens of different keyboard configurations. It seems to be something to do with hand position. I tend to rest my left thumb on the table against the bottom side of the keyboard to maintain stability as I type, whereas I think the Mac keyboard encourages hand hovering over it. There is no resting area around the keyboard; it is straight up and down on the sides. This may have changed by now though.

I can't forget to mention the first time I went to burn something. I slid in the blank DVD, OSX mounted it up as a burning folder on the desktop and started up a burning wizard. Since I was not ready to do the burn, I cancelled it and dismounted the disk. Unfortunately, that does not eject the disk. There is no optical drive eject button on the iMac, so I spent 20 minutes online doing research only to find out that the eject button is on the keyboard, top rightish corner. I guess Apple gets to maintain propriety even on peripherals, because if I use any other keyboard I would lose that function.

Onto the operating system. Every copy of Windows gets fatter and slower over time, as you use it and change it. Every time you add a toolbar or a new program, or one more product registration reminder you add to the overhead of the system. **Overall system performance is a function of processor speed and ram available versus the number and size of processes being run.** If you never changed anything (never added new processes or changed their size), your system performance would remain exactly the same.



This is equally true of OSX, not surprisingly to me, but to many others a shock. The reason it seems to have less impact is because of the limited options one has with a Mac; most users “plateau” their usage on the Mac. They get the specific things working that they want to use repeatedly and then they change nothing more. In effect, they make it a toaster. Even Apple updates can (and frequently should) be disabled, just like on a PC.

I was recently having a fairly heated conversation about this topic with a friend who is far more technically competent than I am. I am not kidding when I say this. He is a Nascar engineer and I am a Canadian Tire mechanic when it comes to computing. He knows his Mac inside and out, top to bottom, and can make it do anything he wants. It is his preferred platform because it is fundamentally Unix underneath, which is his forte. That said, he knows little of the consumer experience and cannot empathize with their concerns. When I told him the story about the printer driver and the Macbook, he merely said that the client should have done more research. But that is not what the client bought into! We are all being told that Macs are supposed to just work, that they are simple and reliable. From his perspective they are, and I admit that for now anyways, they are more stable than equivalent PCs running Windows XP. My iMac has only locked solid two or three times in three years, though it does need to be rebooted every couple of weeks (the thing basically stops, you click on programs and nothing happens).

From his perspective, his colleagues have to run a System Restore on their windows every time they mess something up. From my perspective that's just silly. I have NEVER run a System Restore on one of the PCs I personally use, and if you treat your Windows right, you will never have to either. It's a tool of last resort only, but not nearly as catastrophic to use as having to reload your OSX from disk just because you didn't know your Mac printer drivers were wrong for your particular iMac.

What about spyware and viruses? First off, there are very few actual viruses these days, there's just no money in it. That said, OSX is not immune to viruses, as is commonly thought. Determined writers can infect any operating system, but there needs to be motivation to do so and sheer vandalism is just not cutting it these days.

The real money is in spyware and trojans. People (especially me) are sick and tired of getting infected by fake antivirus ads and spyware, there is no



doubt that something has got to change. OSX suffers very little from this kind of malware, but only because there isn't enough market share. The people who write this crud do it for money; the more PCs they infect, the more they make from people who stupidly type in their credit card info. But they don't bother writing it for a 10% user base: if and when OSX hits 50% market share be prepared for the onslaught of new malware designed specifically for it, and be prepared for reloading OSX yourself when it blows up.

I am getting three or four calls and visits per week now from Apple clients to repair OSX boot and software issues, driver issues or requests to replace hard and optical drives (or even just to get a DVD out!). I cannot help them. Their only options are to contact Apple directly, if under warranty, or go to FACT computers in Regina (the only authorized repair depot I am aware of) and spin the roulette wheel with them. I honestly have not heard any reviews of their service, good or bad, though I have heard that their store has very little stock. Apple products are very proprietary and as such they have maintained very proprietary access to their services.

One last story about the one time I tried to copy a picture from my wife's Canon EOS digital camera. My intention was to pull over the picture, edit it up a little, and set it as the wallpaper. Simple, right? I gave up in disgust 30 minutes later and went and did it on the PC in two minutes. Oh, and another one: I once tried to cue up a selection of songs in (cursed) iTunes by multi-selecting and then right-clicking to queue. No go after several different attempts, I could seemingly only queue up songs one at a time.

Clearly OSX requires a round mind that my square mind cannot fit into. I am not saying that it is impossible to accomplish these tasks, I am saying that 32 years of computing experience is more of a hindrance than a help. If OSX were all I used I would definitely be more adept. But OSX is different than other computing paradigms merely for the sake of being different. It is only simple if you don't know any better. In my case, I need to be PC lobotomized to accomplish "simple" tasks on my iMac because I EXPECT to be able to do powerful things. I still regularly plug away at it to see if I can figure out what gives but so far it is a mystery to me. My recent work with Windows 7 and even certain programs like Thunderbird is giving me a little more insight into what's up. The people who design operating systems and programs are attempting to limit the user's options to enhance



reliability overall, to hide the complexity so as to limit chaos. The problem is that it comes at the expense of versatility, ie. power.

Human beings like tools because they make them more powerful in a universe which has seen fit to short change them in other, more visceral ways. We have blunt teeth and no claws and we don't run very fast. It is our minds enabled by tools that make us so powerful, relative to the rest of the animal kingdom. Everyone knows that there are good tools and bad tools, whether hammers, paring knives or wrenches. But good versus bad is not really the right comparison for operating systems. It's really about function and a bad tool is better than no tool at all. To me, OSX is a beautiful ratchet multiwrench while Windows is a whole socket set. Sure, there is more chance of tool failure with the socket set, but it can do more jobs with more precision and versatility.

Finally, it doesn't matter how good the tool is, if you are not willing to put in the time necessary to wield it effectively you will never accomplish anything. Whether you are using a trowel or a bitmap editor, practice and knowledge are very real components necessary to a quality product. In the case of the trowel the knowledge is learned mostly in the arm and hand, while with bitmap editor the knowledge must be acquired in one way only: the brain. If you don't want to learn anything new, don't get a computer at all.

My apologies to everyone out there over my use of the word "retard". Unfortunately, my 48 year old mind is still a product of my teen years in the seventies, and it contains several different buttons with letters on them connected to red-hot circuits. Regrettably the R button gets pushed far too often. I am sorry.

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