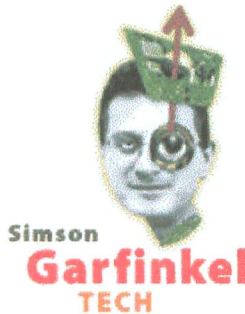


PACKET



Jonesing for MacJava

Apple implementation percolates at a painfully protracted pace

I've been getting some hate mail from readers who think I'm being paid by Microsoft to say bad things about their competition. But Microsoft doesn't need to pay me; the competition is doing a fine job self-destructing all by itself.

Consider Apple. I'm not down on Apple because the company can't sell enough computers and can't manufacture them cheaply enough. What's making me so anti-Mac of late is Apple's operating system technology, which frankly isn't up to the demands that the Internet makes. I should know: I'm a Mac user!

This summer, my lifeline to the Internet was a Duo 280c with 24 Mbytes of RAM and a PPP connection. I tried using MacPPP, originally developed by the Merit Network. Then I moved over to FreePPP, created by the FreePPP Group. Both of these packet drivers dropped my PPP connection on a regular basis - like every 30 to 45 minutes. On the same desk, I had a Windows 95 machine. Using the same modem and the same Internet service provider, my Windows 95 machine could keep a connection up for days. The difference? Microsoft built PPP into its operating system; Apple relied on outside volunteer efforts.

Java's OS-independent environment was supposed to be the Mac's salvation, but now it's becoming one more nail in Apple's coffin.

My second big gripe was frequent crashes. After downloading Navigator 3.0, I soon learned to steer away from pages containing complicated Java applets. Once again, my Windows 95 machine was rock solid, although occasionally Navigator would crash. But on the Mac, the entire computer went down. The reason: Windows 95 has memory protection for 32-bit applications; the Macintosh operating system doesn't.

Because the Mac doesn't have memory protection, the entire operating system is far more fragile. You constantly need to get upgrades, because every little bug can cause a systemwide crash. Unfortunately, getting those upgrades can be difficult, because Apple's FTP sites are oversaturated.



I called up Apple vice president [Larry Tesler](#), who is responsible for all things Internet at Apple. "Apple owes the Internet community a better story, in terms of products and our Internet presence," he told me. "And the top management of the company feels strongly about that and is committed to making that happen as fast as possible."

There was a time when MacOS was far better for accessing the Internet than the junk coming out of Redmond. The Mac shipped with a good implementation of TCP/IP, and there were many interesting clients and a vibrant developer community. But Microsoft showed us all that there is no

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problem that money can't fix. "We were frankly taken by surprise by the massive investment that Microsoft has made in Internet and the integration of Internet with the desktop," Tesler told me. "We were obviously working on it before they were but with a fraction of the investment. We were surprised they turned around so fast."

Unfortunately, Apple's management still seems to be working on a pre-Internet time schedule. And to make matters worse, they're losing Macintosh religion.

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When Java burst onto the scene a little more than a year ago, a lot of people thought that the multiplatform, OS-independent environment would be the salvation of the Macintosh. But now Java is becoming one more nail in Apple's coffin.

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Apple's problem isn't that Java hasn't lived up to its expectations - the language is great for writing both applets and full-blown applications. Nor is Java in danger of becoming just another Windows development environment, despite [Microsoft's efforts to do otherwise](#). No, the real problem with Java on the Mac is that the Java run-time is in a state of anarchy.

Right now there are actually four different implementations of Java for the Macintosh, from Sun, Metrowerks, Natural Intelligence, and Netscape. Unfortunately, they're all a little different. Develop your app under one of them, and there's no guarantee that it will work with another. All of them have debugging tools except for Netscape's. Unfortunately, it's the Java in Netscape Navigator that most users are running every time they download an App from the Internet. Netscape's Java is the buggiest of all. (I repeatedly asked Netscape for a comment on the problem, but they did not respond in time for this column.)

Apple's trying to bring justice to Java. Like Microsoft, Apple plans to build Java into its operating system. Apple will do it with a Java OpenDoc part which will let any OpenDoc-compliant application run Java applets. Netscape is working on an OpenDoc part which will make any OpenDoc application a Web browser. The downside: You'll have to wait until next year to try it out. A bigger downside: Microsoft won't be supporting OpenDoc in Word.

I called up Mike Zivkovic, Apple's product manager for Java, and asked him if he could give me a compelling reason why somebody would want to develop or run a Java applet on a Macintosh, rather than on a PC running Windows 95. "The reasons to develop for the Mac are obvious," he said. "A good and solid implementation of Java that can give you the things you would expect from a Macintosh application - such as the Mac look and feel."

But that's still not a compelling reason - it's the minimum that Apple should be providing. And Zivkovic's timeline is all wrong. He's predicting that Apple's Java will be shipping early next year. Microsoft's shipped this summer.

The good news is that there's now hope. On 23 September, Will Iverson will be leaving his job as editor of *MacTech* magazine to head up Java development at Apple. (Before MacTech, Iverson was in charge of developer relations for Symantec Cafe.) He's going to try to make Apple "the one grand unifying force" for Macintosh Java, taking the best parts that the four implementations have to offer and making all of Apple's developers play nice. "I would expect releases pretty soon and pretty aggressive," he said. "As a Mac person, I feel that it is a drag to have so much creative talent on the Mac being hampered by something as basic as a decent run-time."

As a Mac person myself, I'm pretty depressed that I had to write this column

on my Windows 95 box because my Mac kept crashing.

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Illustration by Dave Plunkert

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