

New laptop doesn't sit well

Smaller, lighter PowerBook fails to live up to hype, only highlights limits of OS 8 / **Simson L. Garfinkel**

ALITTLE MORE THAN a year ago, rumors started swirling in the Macintosh user groups about an ultrafast, ultralight Macintosh laptop, built by IBM and designed to be sold in Japan. The machine was supposed to be one of the many fruits of the partnership between International Business Machines Corp. and Apple Computer Inc. Unfortunately, if you wanted one of these wonders, the rumors went, you would have had to buy a plane ticket to Tokyo: The laptops were not going to be sold in the United States.

This summer we learned that though the rumors had been partly true, Apple and IBM had decided to team up and sell the machines here as well. Early copies of the computer, dubbed the Macintosh PowerBook 2400c, dotted the floor at the MacWorld Expo last month in Boston. A few weeks later, I got a call from Apple: They wanted me to test-drive one of the machines.

I had a lot of doubts about taking on the 2400c, as I had just sold my PowerBook Duo 2300c and abandoned the Macintosh platform for Windows NT. But at MacWorld, a lot of people told me I should give Apple another chance. They also said the 2400c, coupled with Apple's new Mac OS 8, would make me switch back.

Unfortunately, neither the

new machine nor Apple's new operating system can provide the value and performance common with PC laptops.

The 2400c's main selling point is its weight and size. At 4.5 pounds, the computer weighs a third less than most PC laptops, and its case is an inch shorter in both width and length. At the same time, the machine has a screen with 800x600 pixels, a 1.3 gigabyte hard drive, two PC card slots, external video, an infrared port, and a track pad. There are also connectors for Apple Desktop Bus (keyboard and mouse), a printer/modem serial port, and the external floppy disk drive. The machine comes with 16MB of RAM; you can buy another 32MB for about \$400.

The 2400c is fast enough for word processing, thanks to a PowerPC 603e microprocessor running at 180 mhz and a respectable 256K level II cache. But running standard applications such as Quicken, Microsoft Word 6.0, and Netscape Navigator, the machine is still noticeably slower than a 100 mhz Pentium computer running Windows NT. Although the PowerBook does have a faster CPU (central processing unit), much of that power is being spent emulating the instruction set of Apple's last-generation 68K microprocessors. This computer really won't fly until it is running Apple's next-generation Rhapsody

operating system, which is supposed to be released sometime next year.

My biggest complaint with this PowerBook is that IBM made it a little too small, and Apple didn't bother to make it bigger. The keyboard also has an annoying right-shift key. Instead of extending the length of the key to the "7" key as with a traditional keyboard, the right-shift key is cut in half and placed next to a false, unmovable button on which my right pinky naturally sits. There's no explanation for this except bad design.

Several Macintosh enthusiasts at MacWorld said I would get used to the smaller keyboard; I haven't.

The laptop's screen, meanwhile, is a squint-producing 10.4 inches diagonally; today's PC lap-

tops typically have screens that measure 12.1 inches.

The 2400c does not have built-in Ethernet, so I tried using my Dayna Communicard Ethernet adapter. At first, Dayna's driver was incompatible. After contacting the company, I got a beta version of the new driver. Although this card works, I have had numerous crashes on system start-up. I get around these by plugging the PowerBook into my network after it is booted up.

Apple sells the 2400c with Mac OS 7.6, but you can upgrade to OS 8 for less than \$10. The fact is, this new operating system has been another disappointment. Apple says OS 8 is its best-selling operating system ever, but I am hard-pressed to find ways that it is significantly better than 7.6. Although OS 8 has a bunch of glitzy new features, many of them were previously available to users of Now Software's Now Utilities. In fact, Mac OS 8 still fails to offer

the variety of bells and whistles that has been part of Now Utilities for years.

Mac OS 8 is a confused operating system, with not one, not two, but three mutually incompatible Web browsers (Netscape's Navigator, Microsoft's Internet Explorer, and Apple's very own Cyberdog). The OS does have a slicker user interface, improved file sharing, a built-in "personal" Web server, and numerous bug fixes. But most Apple users I have spoken with do not think OS 8 dramatically improved their overall Macintosh experience.

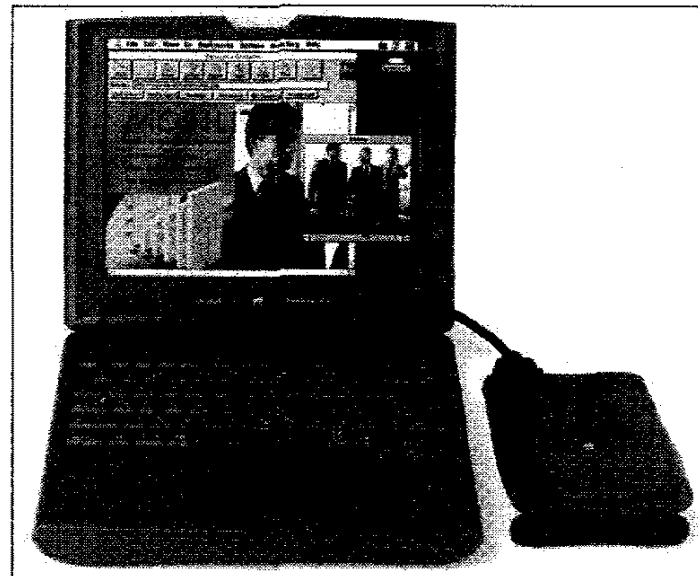
What's worse, Mac OS 8 still routinely crashes during my day-to-day use. Normally, these crashes come when I'm using Netscape Navigator. Mac fans say this is Netscape's fault, not Apple's. But the fact remains that the PowerBook 2400c crashes when I am trying to get work done, and my PC running Windows doesn't.

Priced at \$3,500, this Macintosh laptop is nearly a thousand dollars more expensive than a similarly outfitted PC laptop. That's because Apple insists on making Mac users pay for the privilege. Competition, which Apple seems determined to prevent, could have brought down the price of Mac laptops. For the foreseeable future, if you want a lightweight Mac portable, the 2400c is your only choice.

I hope you have small hands.

Apple PowerBook 2400c/180
16MB RAM, 1.3GB hard drive, external floppy: about \$3500
32MB of additional RAM: about \$400

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The Macintosh PowerBook 2400c's biggest selling point is its weight and size, but in fact it's too small, and the keyboard has drawbacks.