

Wooing Mac's mainstays

Digital pitches Alpha's speed to designers, but workstation is rough fit / **Simson L. Garfinkel**

DIGITAL EQUIPMENT Corp.'s Alpha-powered Super Station is a speed demon but a compatibility nightmare.

Graphic designers are among the world's most demanding computer users. Working with full-color images that can easily grow to 50 megabytes or more, they need machines with huge hard drives, fast transfer speeds, and incredibly fast central processors. But designers also need computers that are intuitive to use, since having to think like a geek hinders that essential creative mind-set.

For all these reasons the Macintosh has been the mainstay of the design profession for more than a decade. While businesses, schools, and many individuals have abandoned their Macs for the world of Microsoft and Intel, designers have remained true to Apple Computer, consistently buying the company's fastest machines. More than anybody else, it's the designers who have kept Apple in business.

Knowing all this, I was somewhat amused when I heard Digital had taken a bunch of its Alpha-powered Windows NT workstations — relabeled the Creation Studio — to MacWorld last January. Digital hopes to woo hardened Macintosh designers with something Apple can't begin to offer: a workstation powered by the

world's fastest desktop computer, Digital's 500 MHz Alpha 21164.

I learned from Maynard-based Digital that many tried-and-true Mac programs, such as Adobe Illustrator and Quark Xpress, have been ported to Windows. For the most part, these programs try to maintain their original Mac look and feel. For a designer who feels fenced in, Alpha workstations offer the promise of a computer that's two to five times faster than Apple's best, Digital told me.

Switching from a Mac to a monster Digital Alpha supposedly has another big advantage: compatibility. After all, there are many programs that are simply unavailable for the Mac.

The company sent me, for review purposes, a Creation Studio 500a with 256 megabytes of RAM and 12 gigabytes of hard-disk space. I lent the machine to my designer, Aaron.

The Creation Studio 500a looks a lot more like a PC than a typical workstation. It has standard PC connectors on the back for mouse, keyboard, and video. It has three shared PCI/ISA slots. It has six DIMM memory slots. It even comes with a CD-ROM and an Iomega Zip drive.

The only thing out of the ordinary is the Alpha microprocessor — which turns out to be both the machine's secret weapon and its Achilles' heel.

Unlike Intel's Pentium and

Advanced Micro Devices' K6, Digital's Alpha microprocessor doesn't speak the native x86 machine language, in which the vast majority of today's applications are written. Instead, these programs must be translated into the Alpha's machine code. The best way to do this translation is to have the software vendor recompile its program for the Alpha, letting it run "native." But since Alpha users are a tiny fraction of the Windows marketplace, few companies have created native applications. Instead, most Windows software needs to be translated by the end user, with a program called FX!32 that comes with the Creation Studio.

The Creation Studio really lives up to Digital's claims when it runs native software. Aaron was blown away by the performance of Fractal Painter. "With the Alpha," he said, "you can almost, almost work in real time."

I was similarly impressed with the speed of Quark, another native application. I created a 100-page document, selected all of the text, and then changed the fonts. Quark responded instantly. This operation would take half a minute or longer on a high-end Mac.

On the other hand, performance of the nonnative apps using FX!32 was downright disappointing. Adobe PhotoShop felt like it was running on a 180 MHz PowerPC 603. And FX!32 was hard to use: Nonnative programs had to be installed using a complicated procedure. Some programs, like SGI's Cosmo Player and Microsoft Project, wouldn't run at all. We could only get others working after a lot of technical

Title: Digital Creation Studio 500a

Features: pre-loaded with Windows NT, CorelDRAW, MetaCreations Fractal Painter, and Dragon Systems' Naturally Speaking, 64MB of RAM (expandable to 1.5GB)

Price: \$4,995, with 17" monitor

support from Digital. Worst of all, there was no way to know in advance whether a particular program would work with the system.

To be fair, it should be noted that Digital says it's not trying to sell the Creation Studio to small, one- and two-person shops, but rather to large firms that have dozens of designers. When the designers need to install new applications, Digital's vaunted field engineers will come help them.

Digital also says many of the problems I experienced will be solved when Microsoft builds FX!32 into Windows NT 5.0.

Maybe so, but it's unwise to buy a computer today based on software that won't be available until tomorrow. The Creation Studio is blindingly fast, but it's hard enough to persuade a Mac fanatic to run Windows. The added complexity of FX!32 is probably more than most of them will take. I suspect most Mac users will simply wait for Apple to ship the next generation of faster Macintoshes. Aaron has just spent \$6,000 on a new Mac.

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