

Apple-Picking Time in PC Land



MACS NETWORK BETTER WITH PCS THAN PCS DO!

That's my conclusion after junking my Windows laptop and getting an Apple PowerBook G4. ■ Don't get me wrong: I still have a PC on my desk at home so that I can

use all of that software that's not available for the Mac. But when it comes to Web browsing, reading e-mail, or jacking into an office network, the Mac is better. Apple always led the way in ease of use. Now something

different is happening in the world of the Macintosh, and the rest of the tech community should take careful note: Apple is reinventing the personal computer.

Recently, I was in a friend's office with my Mac laptop running OS X and needed to print something. I plugged into his network and typed command-P in Microsoft Word: the Mac automatically discovered a Hewlett-Packard color laser printer on the office network and gave me the option of printing to it right from the "Print" dialogue box—no configuration required. The document printed flawlessly. I then unplugged the computer from the network and typed command-P again: the color printer had been automatically removed from the list of options. Very smart. This kind of transparent networking just doesn't happen with most PCs: you need to manually add the printer using the "Add Printer Wizard," then delete the printer when you don't need it anymore. Windows XP has a system for automatically discovering printers, but it frequently doesn't work.

A few weeks later, I was at an apartment where another friend had a Verizon DSL connection. My friend was sure that my Mac couldn't use the DSL link, because his Windows laptop needed special drivers to understand the PPPoE protocol that Verizon uses. I unplugged his PC, plugged in my Mac, opened up the network control panel, and checked the box that says "Connect using PPPoE." A

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moment later, I was on the Internet.

But the real reason I love my PowerBook is the tight integration between the computer's hardware and software. When I open my computer's lid, it wakes up instantly; when I close the lid it suspends within two seconds. If I connect to a remote computer over the Internet and suspend my Mac, then wake it up a few minutes later, the connection is still there. Try that with a Windows or Linux machine and you'll lose your Net connection—if the machine goes to sleep at all.

I've had engineers from IBM stare at my Mac, and grumble that they wish their ThinkPads would act the same way—that is, as an instant-on, instant-off machine. That's unlikely to happen, though; such tight integration is difficult in the world of Windows, where more than 1,000 companies are developing hardware and software.

For many among the computer-using

elite, the Macintosh has become the Dream Machine. That's because the Mac is a Unix system that can read Microsoft Word, Excel, and PowerPoint files. For most people, the ability to work with these documents is essential; although the free alternatives like Open Office perform well, they are not good enough for high-priced managers and consultants. But tech fetish appeal won't be enough to save Apple. As the company made clear in a recent ad campaign, what it needs is for people to "switch"—or at least to buy Macs to co-exist with their PCs. And here's the second big thing that Apple is doing right.

Back in the old days, Apple argued that to produce a truly usable computer, it had to build a machine that wasn't compatible with, and hence encumbered by the flaws of, the dominant PC design; Apple's products were as a result less flexible and more expensive than PCs. Apple's computers still cost too much, but the company is now much better able to justify that price through improved usability and functionality.

For the past five years, the company's hardware designs have been unmatched in the computer industry. And now the programs running on the Macintosh screen look beautiful as well: they are clean and simple, providing useful features without all of those frills that litter the Windows landscape. For example, Apple's Safari Web browser has a menu item that you can select that says "Block Pop-Up Windows." Want some privacy? The last item in the browser's "History" menu says "Clear History." On Windows, clearing Internet Explorer's history requires cycling through a confusing set of menus and options.

So with all this on its side, why isn't Apple making bigger gains in market share? In a word, arrogance. Despite its recent advances in compatibility, Apple still has a go-it-alone philosophy. The company must do better at encouraging application developers to sell versions of their programs for the Mac. It needs to sell a version of OS X that runs on standard PC hardware. Apple could compete with Windows—if it would only try. ■

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