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Switch.

It's never as good as the first time.

<http://www.tekka.net/03/?EyeToy>

In my next life, I want to grow up on Windows.

I'll get my hardware from the supermarket. I'll leave the case open to upgrade components. I'll lose my print driver after test-installing a game from a free CD. I'll be able to choose among hundreds of laptops, all black, and I'll always end up in the warm and familiar arms of one of half a dozen, not-quite-compatible versions of Windows that all use the start button to shut down.

And then I want to make the SWITCH.

As it is, I worked my way up from an slow old Performa in the school lab through ever-improving evolutions of Macs. It's a bit like life without the first kiss, or being born with the knowledge that Santa doesn't exist. What I felt at the prospect of switching from OS9 on a G3 to MacOS X and a G4 was not so much excitement but a mild annoyance at a day's worth of software installations and data transfer.

But when I finally pulled the smooth black box out of its plain brown wrapper, it was like my first jar of Ben & Jerry's Wavy Gravy all over again. Only the regret that overindulgence induces is missing.

Apple sure know how to script a dramatic entrance. You open the black box to a brief shock -- the shop didn't send the wrong model, did they? -- at the sight of an iBook-white slab with off-grey lettering: "designed by Apple in California". Understatement and carefully timed tension combine on a piece of cardboard that lifts to reveal an assortment of individually gift-wrapped cables in a styrofoam tray. By the time you remove the tray, your mind has elevated what's underneath to an

inner sanctuary enfolding your new G4 PowerBook, silvery sliver wrapped in semi-opaque padded plastic.

Who needs Santa?

Perfection is Relative

No one would lavish this much care on the packaging of an inferior product, would they? OK, there's Zeffirelli's 1990 Hamlet. But everything about the packing carton speaks about feeling and caring.

The problems of the G4 portables are well known. The TiBook scratches easily. The cases sometimes flex, and often get terribly hot. Whose idea was it to put the power plug on the same side as the sizzling hard drive? Plus there's the over-eager power management that shuts down the sound system after seconds of inactivity; the sound system then ties up the computer for a couple of seconds on wake-up and reports in with a distracting little popping.



Macintosh icons used to be minimalist out of necessity: save pixels, save kilobytes. But scarcity also helped to focus on the essentials. The big new photorealistic icons of MacOS X often convey too much useless detail. The iCal icon is great because, when the application is active, the icon displays the current date. The Mail icon, on the other hand, has a fuzzy postmark that looks like a dirty sock. Why do I need to see a postmark? I can't even figure out what the Preview icon represents.

Apple also removed my favorite hardware feature: the tiny hole for the paper-clip that allowed one to unlatch stuck disk and CD-drives. And while we're talking hardware: whoever designed the chassis must be working on a desktop. The square design is pleasantly no-nonsense, but it comes with hard right angles. Compare the G3 Powerbook: to the left and right of the mousepad, where you're not supposed to rest your wrists but do anyway, the case slopes gently. I don't really have paws myself, but most of the time, the heels of my hands or the sensitive parts of my wrists still push against the front-edge of the laptop. And believe me, even without a white-hot metal case, this hurts. Though I'm sure I'll benefit from improving my typing posture in more ways than one.

Love It or Leave IT

On the other hand, the build of the book is sturdy in an elegant way. While the Pismo had enough voidage to scrunch when lifted by a corner, the G4, at least at 12", is incredibly compact. Grab it firmly and nothing gives. When you adjust the screen (which, by the way, might have been made to bend back just a little bit further, but at the cost of exposing the hinges), you won't see your fingerprints through the TFT any more. At first, I thought that, at 12", the screen was going to be uncomfortably small, but the proportions are really good. In addition, the window design with minimal frames and hard edges is rather sleek, suggesting that there's more screen space than you objectively have. At the moment, I see can 800+ words in a Tinderbox note, the Tinderbox document it belongs to, the control-panel, my stickies, iTunes and, of course, the dock.



So despite some ardent dislikes and initial worries about the popping sound, I've been happy with the little one from the first minute. I chose a 12" mainly for the price: the savings from the smaller PowerBook are sufficient to buy both a 15" flat-screen monitor and a couple of celebratory drinks with the loved ones. When stationary, the combined 12" and 15" give me more screen space than even the 17" PowerBook offers. Using two different screens also forces me to move my head a lot while working, which helps prevent neck cramps. And seriously: you don't want to travel with a 17". You don't put it on your little dinner tray on a plane, or balance it on your knees on the train -- not if you're 168cm (5'5")! (If you travel a lot, you'll love the fact that the network setting now remembers profiles for different modes of access, so you can switch from ethernet to the internal modem without having to type in 18-digit passwords every time you move.)

A popular joke called the Macintosh the socialist computer, because you didn't get to choose from many models and you never got enough access to the workings to customize the interface in a way that expresses individual freedom. But if you ask me, the choices offered by the PC world are not very different from the choices offered in Monty Python's infamous diner. As for the customizable interfaces, pre-Aqua interfaces seem indeed to gloss over the lack of programmability with a surfeit of desktops, sound-profiles, icons and mouse-pointers. In OS X, there are two desktop profiles, and no sound profile at all: seems like someone's grown up while we weren't looking. Today, "customizable" means multiple, redundant ways to navigate the interface, ways that cater for different habits and different situations. And with Unix under the hood and an Apache with PHP on board, there really is no need to chose because you get the best of both worlds in one box.

I'm off to learn a couple of Unix commands.

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