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MacBC Presents:

Lyons' Den

Palming Across Platforms: Crow tastes just like Chicken

By Daniel J. Lyons III

I'm afraid that I'm going to have to eat some of my words in this column. A short while back, due to the generosity of 3Com, I became the owner of a Palm Vx PDA and after a few months, I don't know what I'd do without it.

Long time readers (assuming that there are any) may remember a comment that I made in my January 20th column, "OSX: Thoughts, Analysis, Rambling," my exact words were:

My hope is that Apple will take the Newton handwriting recognition capabilities and make it Palm-compatible so that my last reservation about buying a palm would disappear. I refuse to learn a new language to use a PDA, despite the extra convenience that they offer.

While I still dislike having to use a different language to enter data into my Palm, I have found Graffiti to be surprisingly

intuitive. While it did take me several days to learn the basic alphabet, the learning curve was much shallower than I had anticipated. I do, however, still have problems with punctuation, but that should pass in time. And, of course, there are more misinterpretations by my Palm than I would like. [Note to Apple: still would love to see the Newton Handwriting recognition as an add-on to the Palm OS.]

My assimilation into the PDA community was not without its bumps and problems and, I hate to admit it, the vast majority of those problems were on the Mac side. Palm really needs to create an USB cradle that will work smoothly without an adapter if they are truly interested in maintaining their presence in the Mac community.

At work, I have a Dell OptiPlex GX110 PIII/533 system running Win 98SE which I use primarily to sync with Microsoft Outlook using Pocket Mirror. Although I was a little concerned by using a third party conduit to interface with Outlook, it worked without a problem.

The biggest PC-side problem that I encountered was with the Vindigo Boston software package (free from Vindigo.com) which keeps information on stores, restaurants and entertainment sites in the area of the city that you choose (in addition Boston they offer New York City, Washington DC, Chicago, and San Francisco). After the first sync, I began getting errors from Vindigo's server and the software would refuse to sync. Although I never heard back from their tech support department, I determined that the problem was due to the version of the software that I was using. Downloading a newer version solved the problem. Despite the problem, I love the Vindigo software package, which gives you shopping, eating, and entertainment destinations for your city including reviews and walking directions from almost any location. One suggestion for improvement, however, is to include museums and similar attractions. I was going to the New England Aquarium with a friend and thought I'd compare Vindigo's walking directions with my own to see how they did, unfortunately, the Aquarium was not listed.

On the topic of software, I must add my voice to the chorus of people praising the AvantGo software for the Palm. This package allows you to sync with any web page and view it

on your Palm - a poor man's Palm VII. Some recommended channels: Yahoo (free registration required at Yahoo to get your personalized info), the Sci-Fi Channel and MacBC.com (this one you will need to custom create with the Custom Channel Wizard but it's worth it - you can have all of my columns in the palm of your hand, and a few other columns, some help files and news, if those are important to you).

At home, I have a PowerMac G4/400 (Tokyo revision) running OS 9.0.4 which I use primarily for writing and finances which I sync with Documents To Go and Pocket Quicken. Contrary to most of my Mac experiences, working with a Palm is a challenge for the average Mac user.

To start off my Mac experience, I installed the Palm Desktop from my OS9 CD (3Com did not include the Mac Palm Desktop on the CD-ROM that came with my Vx). Then, to make the connection from the serial docking cradle to my USB Mac, I installed the software for my Keyspan PDA Adapter. And then, nothing happened. The Mac could see the serial adapter but Palm's Serial Monitor could not. After some trouble shooting, I discovered that the Apple-provided Palm Desktop installer had installed Palm's USB Connection kit by default. This is probably fine if you're using Palm's USB kit, but not with a third party solution such as I was using. (I would have tried Palm's own solution, but it was out of stock in my area at the time and even the Keyspan adapter was the last of its kind left on the shelf.) After disabling Palm's USB extensions in the Extensions Manager and rebooting, everything suddenly worked. My first sync was deceptively simple and did not prepare me for what was coming.

I hope that the "lot of work with these guys [Palm]" that Steve Jobs mentioned a short while back referred to the development of native USB syncing for the Palm series. Since Apple's dismissal of the rumors that they plan to build iPalms this looks more likely. Steve Jobs clearly recognizes the value of the handheld market since he made attempted to purchase Palm from 3Com a while back. His killing of the Newton, while a tragedy, was really more of a mercy killing since it hadn't adapted to the changing market that it created. I doubt that he would allow the Mac to be a second class citizen in the market if there was anything that he could do about it. Personally, I'm fond of the rumor that OSX

would allow a Palm to be mounted just like a hard drive and manipulated through the Finder.

The next problem that I encountered was that my Keyspan adapter would not always be recognized on my USB chain. The Keyspan driver would load but would not recognize the adapter until it was unplugged then plugged back in. While this worked, it was annoying. Eventually I discovered that it was my Asante USB hub that was causing the problem. Apparently the hub had problems with devices that require a constant signal such as the serial adapter or a mouse. Plugging the adapter into the built in hub in Apple's keyboard eliminated this particular problem. A side effect of this solution was to solve another problem that would freeze my Mac or "unexpectedly quit" the Serial manager during a sync. Presumably, these freezes were due to a signal drop from the serial adapter.

The last problem that I encountered still plagues me but is minor enough to ignore. At the end of a sync, while backing up larger database files (AvantGo and Vindigo are the two I've noticed) the sync seems to time out, quitting the sync on the Mac side and brining up an error on the palm. I suspect that this is a problem with the serial adapter similar to the one solved above but since I have a full backup at work, I haven't gotten around to fixing it yet.

For now, Windows users have the upper hand by far when it comes to interfacing with the Palm OS. I'm not trading in my G4 just yet, but do have to admit to syncing far more often at work than at home where I often put it off until I feel like dealing with it or need to update my finances. Even with the Mac-related problems, I am still glad that I have my Palm, even with a side dish of my own words. Now, if only they'd release the Vc...

Reader Feedback: My column on inexpensive Laser Printers generated quite a lot of feedback, a large portion of which chastised me for not including Lexmark's offerings in my comparison. This was purely a personal choice. In the past, I have had poor luck with Lexmark printers, granted this was a while ago, but without being able to personally test their current offerings, I eliminated them in the first round as not reliable enough. My column represented the final round of my search. I will make sure in future columns to

make this more clear and to list what printers were eliminated and why.

For printing the results of statistical analyses, I rely on a BJ-300 and continuous paper-again a forgotten need for many people.
Steve Samuels

I myself have run into the limiting assumption of letter size paper. I had trouble with a Minolta laser printer that, although it could print on paper as small as 8x5, it could not print on a 8.5x5.5 sheet (half of a letter sheet) because the printer didn't recognize it as an accepted paper size. A heads up to printer manufacturers-not everyone prints on the same sized paper, don't limit our options too much. And since dot matrix printers are now twice the price of higher-quality ink-jets, they're not really a viable option

I too am looking for a laser printer to use in a small home network of a Beige G3, iBook, and iMac DV SE. The iMac and iBook are networked with an airport base station and the G3 through a 10BaseT hub to the Airport base station. My present printer is an HP 970 CSe connected to the G3 with an HP JetDirect 300 Ethernet print server to the hub. For most of my printing, the inkjet is too slow. I have a couple of questions about the >Brother laser printer you >mentioned in your column. Can it be networked using Apple's new USB print sharing utility? I want to connect it to the iMac but be able to print from the other Macs. If not, do you have any other suggestions on how to do it?

Second question is how many pages did you get out of the toner cartridge? I am not familiar with the Brother, are the toner and fuser separate or one piece? I was thinking of the Brother copier/printer multifunction unit.

My last question is how important is postscript for a laser printer? At work, all the lasers are postscript printers and the HP is obviously not one. Does the Brother use its own printer drivers or use the Apple laser writer driver?
Bill Yamada

Bill, I hope this response reaches you in time to do some good.

Since moving a few months back I don't have a network set up to test USB Printer sharing, but it should work, although you may not need it. The HP jet direct print server works with "Virtually any HP or non-HP printer with a parallel port" (direct quote from hp.com's specifications for the 300x) and may be all you need to share. You may want to contact HP to make sure that it is compatible before purchasing the 1240, just to be safe.

The toner in the 1240 is a two-part system, with separate drum and toner cartridges. You do have the option of purchasing a High-Yield cartridge instead of the standard for higher output users. I have one of these printers that prints that prints about 200 pages per day and it gets about two months out of a toner cartridge (the standard-yield type) and four months out of a drum. At home, I have yet to finish of the single toner cartridge that the printer came with. And my 1240 at work is only on its second toner cartridge after six months of being bounced around and shared by various users.

In olden days, if you had a Mac and wanted a laser printer, you had to get a Postscript printer, it was the only language that the Macs would use to talk to a laser printer. The benefit to this was that a single driver, either Apple's LaserWriter or HP's LaserJet driver would run any laser printer you could buy. These days there are a few more options, and many more languages. Like ink-jet printers, we are now seeing a proliferation of non-postscript laser printers for Macs, all of which need their own special drivers. Postscript printers are unnecessary for most home use, but if you are doing any design work in Illustrator, Quark or InDesign, PostScript is the best option.

I have to disagree with your characterization of inkjet printers as noisy and slow. We have upgraded to an Epson 3300C (only available in Japan, full bleed A3 size inkjet). It is incredible. It is absolutely silent and it is fast. I have an HP laser printer on my desk which I have not used in months because I prefer the output from the inkjet printer.

Regarding color lasers, we have looked at some but I find the color rendition is quite poor compared to our Epson. The pages have a strange waxy feel. On the Epson, however, we can print short runs of full size brochures and give them

to customers.

I don't doubt that laser printers are useful for some people and they can be pretty fast if you spend enough money but the new crop of inkjets are really very good. I am especially impressed with the shading that can be produced. Laser printers seem good at solid black but only so-so at half tones or greys. The Epson produces shades of colors that are wonderfully smooth.
John Konopka

Not having easy access to Japan, I have never seen the 3300C and cannot make any claims to how it functions. I suspect that the 3300C starts at about $700(US) and goes up from there, and I admit, ink-jets in this price range are quieter than the $100 versions, but are a little too pricey for most home uses. The closest Epson that I have worked with is the Stylus Color 3000 which had great output but was extremely slow and whirred continuously during print jobs. All ink-jets must move the print head from one side of the printer to the other in order to lay down their ink and this adds an extra layer or noise and vibration above and beyond that of the paper rollers themselves. A laser printer eliminates this layer, leaving just the rollers. Not all laser printers are silent either, some aren't even quiet - I used to work with an HP 4MV tabloid printer which sounded like a supersonic jet taking off every time in received a print job.

In order to get a color laser that matches the color quality of a good quality ink-jet you have to spend a couple thousand dollars. I have, however, seen color lasers in this range that produce an output that can be given to customers with no hesitation or regrets.

Talkback

The Lyons' Den

Daniel J. Lyons started with the Mac back in 1989 laying out a High School newspaper on an SE and was immediately hooked.

Now, several computers later, he is hoping to share his thoughts and experiences and maybe even a few gripes

with anyone who will listen.

Daniel has worked in several computer labs and built and maintained numerous office networks over the past ten years. He is currently employed as a Technology Manager and has experience with both AppleShare and NT networks.