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Lyons' Den

First Tokyo, Now Boston: The New G4/400 Arrives

By Daniel J. Lyons

Timing is everything.

Since November, I have been considering an upgrade from my venerable PowerMac 7500 to a new model. I finally decided on the $1,599 low-end G4 model which comes with DVD, 64M of RAM and a 10GB hard drive. This decision was helped by the fact that most mail order catalogs are currently offering a free 64M upgrade with any new Mac system purchase bringing the RAM up to a more reasonable 128M for my uses. Out of sheer luck, I wasn't ready to order my new machine until after the keynote address for MacWorld Tokyo where the G4 line was speed bumped by 50MHz each. CDW informed me that they were expecting 20 in stock and could have it to me by the following Monday. It arrived at my office promptly at 10:00.

My first discovery after opening the box was that these new machines are running Mac OS 9.0.2, otherwise known as Minuet.

With the new G4, you receive three CD-ROMs; Smith Micro Software's FAXstf 5.1, an Apple Software Install disk and an Apple Software Restore disk. Most systems only include one of the two, either a full restore disk that requires you to reformat your hard drive and restore it to the original factory settings or an install disk that can install each individual piece of software as needed. It's nice to be given the option for a change, another example of Thinking Different.

After reading numerous articles on the easy access case that premiered with the Blue & White G3, I couldn't resist opening that door as soon as I got the computer out of the box. Since I was still at work, I didn't have anything to put inside it, but since every demo G3 and G4 that I've seen in person was locked shut, I had to do it.

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The first nonstandard addition that I made to my G4 was an internal Zip 250 drive which I purchased in December on sale in anticipation of this purchase. While installing this drive, I discovered the true design quality of the new Apple tower enclosure. The front panel which covers the DVD bay and the zip bay is a single unit which includes the DVD door and a pop out cover for the zip bay. This face plate releases on the door side of the tower and rotates off with ease. Inside the case, the DVD and zip bays are part of the same piece which, after undoing two screws and the cables connected to the drives, slides smoothly out the front of the case.

One concern that I had about installing the Zip drive was that I had not located an installation kit for it prior to the machine's arrival, fortunately this turned out to be a non-issue. The Zip bay is specifically designed for a 3.5" drive and includes screw points that allow you to connect any standard drive module without rails or the little plastic sled that's been required for most prior Apple cases. Nor do you really need the face plate, since the Zip bay is a perfect fit around the drive, not allowing the gaps that you would get in other case designs. I still plan on getting a face plate since it seems like a crime to have such a stylish machine with such a glaring scar right on the front for the world to see.

I also made an accidental discovery while installing my Zip 250; if you forget to remove the jumper that designates the drive as a Master instead of a Slave the system cannot tell it apart from your DVD drive which shares the same IDE controller. You know you've done something wrong whey you eject your zip disk (which mounts perfectly fine) and the DVD drive slides open as well. And to think that I'd never have discovered it if I hadn't put the drive back down after not finding the tweezers that I needed to remove the jumper.

The next nonstandard addition was to move my old Ultimate Rez video card into my new machine to run my second monitor. Again, the install went smoothly and the beauty of the fold out motherboard was reinforced, the install was even easier than in my 7500. Up until this point I'd always sworn by the 7500 case, it was so easy to access the system for upgrades. The unfortunate drawback to the 7500's desktop enclosure was that you have to remove the monitor every time that you want to work on it. This is not a problem with a tower enclosure like the G4.

This past weekend, while waiting for my G4 to arrive, I made a circuit of every store in the area that sells DVDs looking for something to "test" my new DVD drive with. I ended up getting the Director's Cut of Blade Runner, a version that improves on a movie that was already amazing. In fact, it's playing in the background as I type this column. While it would be nice to have the DVD playing in the background all the time, there are performance hits. I'm typing in SimpleText (I haven't decided whether to install Nisus Writer or Word Perfect yet) and I can see the system pausing as I type. The DVD playback is clear and sharp and I have yet to experience the sync problems that plagued the first version of Apple's software based decoder. You will see some pixilation and pauses when you switch applications but they clear quickly. Also, during long scrolls, the picture and sometimes the sound freeze until the scrolling is complete. Hopefully lags such as this will diminish or

disappear with the release of the more robust multitasking in OS X this summer.

I don't think I'd try watching a DVD while running a more demanding application but it's a great option while writing. Back in college, I used to watch television on my old Centris 660AV while typing out papers with no performance hits at all. I miss that, my 7500 was capable of video input, but unlike the 660 lacked a specialized Digital Signal Processor (DSP) which allowed the 660 to display external video smoothly in the background while my 7500 tended to skip while performing the same task. Once I actually get more than on DVD, I'll probably get back into the habit.

With the basics out of the way, it was time to test the true productivity of my new machine. A few levels of StarCraft later and my initial test was complete. After that I installed Quicken then transferred the data off of my 7500.

The first real performance test was booting up my copy of SoftWindows 95. The performance difference between the 233MHz 604e in my 7500 and the 400MHz G4 was quite a nice improvement. On my old system, it would take several agonizing minutes to launch SoftWindows then boot into Windows 95. On the G4, it took a much more reasonable period of time, faster than some true Win95 machines that I've used, but still slower than a current Pentium III model. More than adequate performance for Office or other productivity task. I may even give StarCraft or another game a try on the emulator just to see how well it does.

After two days with the new system, I'm finally getting used to the new keyboard. While the keys are all full sized and the feel is nice and solid, the function keys are too close to the top row of keys, to Delete in particular. Many times while starting this article, I would attempt to delete a character and get a rectangle from hitting F11 or F12. At this point, this rarely happens and I'm sure that after practice, I'll become fully accustomed to the more compact design. It is nice, after all, to reclaim some of my limited desk space.

I didn't even give the hockey puck mouse a real chance since I had already purchased a Kensington TurboBall which I had been using through a Belkin USB card in my 7500. I did use the bundled mouse the first time that I booted up and quickly discovered that all I had heard about it was true. Even with the indentation on the mouse button, I found myself spinning the mouse around and using it diagonally several times. While I probably could have adjusted to the mouse, I've always preferred trackballs anyways.

If you have any questions about the new G4, please email me or start up a new topic in MacBC's new Lyons' Den Forum.

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.

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