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Lyons' Den

OSX: Thoughts, Analysis, Rambling

By Daniel J. Lyons

I have to admit that I am looking forward to this summer's release of Mac OS X, in fact, I'll probably have it up and running the same day that it's released. Despite this enthusiasm, or perhaps because of it, I have a few thoughts and reservations about the upcoming release.

I have yet to hear the final fate of the Appearance Manager in OSX, but I would be surprised if it survives the transition. Considering the fact that Apple has never shipped any alternate Themes and that they have never distributed a tool to create new Themes it seems like the Appearance Manager is destined to become yet another abandoned technology rooming with OpenDoc, QuickDraw GX

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and the GeoPort. While the idea that this will keep the user experience consistent is understandable, it doesn't hold up to scrutiny.

Mac users have been altering their system appearance for as long as there have been Macs. I remember receiving utilities ten years ago that would change the start up screen or install a background picture onto your Mac. Kaleidoscope has been around for years too, offering similar features to the Appearance Manager. None of these options have ruined the Macintosh's elegance or ease of use nor have they confused those using the altered machines. Users that want to change the appearance of their Mac, will find a way to do it. It would be best for all users if this was done with the Appearance Manager, a consistent and predictable system that is running on every Mac. With the new Multi-User capabilities integrated into the OS, even machines with multiple users will be safe, allowing experienced users to alter their experience as they see

fit without changing things for everyone else.

Retaining the Appearance Manager would also allow Apple to include two themes with every Mac, Aqua and Platinum. While I like the new Aqua interface, it would be nice to have a choice between that and the, now classic, Apple Platinum appearance. This would also ease the transition to OSX for the thousands of new Mac users who just finished learning how to use their new iMac and don't want to relearn another way of doing things just to keep up with the OS race.

Steve Jobs' Mac World keynote announcement of OSX introduced the concept of a single OS strategy to the computer market, an approach vastly different from that of Microsoft with their Windows NT, CE, and 9x/2000 product lines. This approach simplifies the market, but precludes the option of the separate Consumer and Server versions that we have been expecting. Where does Mac OS X Server (OSXS) fit into this strategy? I imagine that Apple will release a

separate software package of Server Utilities as an add-on for Macs being used as servers. They could charge between $250 and $500 for it without much of a problem. This would be a benefit to Apple by giving them another viable software title to increase profits.

If I were in Apple's shoes, I would put the Server Utilities onto a locked partition on every OSX CD and require users to purchase a serial number and key code to access it. This would maximize profits on the product by eliminating the need to distribute a separate package and allow for registration over the Internet. It works for QuickTime Pro, why can't it work for OSX Server?

One thing that I have been anticipating since Apple acquired NeXT is a version of the Mac OS that will run on x86 systems. At the time, this was announced as one of the biggest benefits to the Mac OS X that was conceived during the merger. Over time, however, the logic of this plan became less certain, and plans for the x86 version were put on hold,

possibly never to return.

Since Apple is a hardware company and makes about 70% to 90% of their profits from hardware sales, it makes little sense for them to port the Mac OS to other platforms. To do so, would eviscerate the company and bring it back down to where it was during the Cloning Era or worse. After two years of struggling, Apple will never let this happen.

The only way that Apple could survive porting the Mac OS is for Steve Jobs' plan of making Apple the Sony of the computer industry to come to fruition. If the rumors of an Apple Branded Palm are true, then Apple is already taking the first step towards this goal. 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.

Once Apple makes the conversion to the Sony of the Computer industry,

multiple versions of OSX will not only be possible, but also profitable. I can see Apple doubling the installed base of Mac OS systems by allowing owners of Intel/AMD machines to install OSX. Some would install it beside Windows in a multiple boot situation, which would give them the best of both worlds. It would also allow techies to build their own systems to run OSX. While they're at it, Apple could take advantage of Trensmeta's new Crusoe chip as another alternate platform for OSX. The Crusoe was just announced as a new alternative for Wintel laptops and embedded devices. Transmeta's hope is to take some of the wind out of Intel and AMD's sails and widen the market a little more.

One last thing that strikes me as strange about the OSX rollout plan is the six-month gap between the release of OSX and its pre-installation onto Apple systems. I can't quite see the logic behind this decision. What is the benefit to someone buying an Apple system with an already obsolete operating system? By obsolete, I don't mean

unusable, there are still people using Version 6 and being quite productive. By obsolete, I refer to market conception. Just as a Pentium II, 604 processor, and Microsoft Word Version 6 are considered obsolete, so too will OS9 after the release of OSX, that's just how the computer industry works.

I can clearly see the benefit to Apple of this plan. An extra $20 for every system purchased between August and December on top of the usual upgrade sales would be a nice way to end fiscal year 2000 and start fiscal year 2001. However, I believe that the extra income from this plan would be so small in the greater scheme of things that it outweighs the extra hassle and confusion that it will cause consumers.

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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