

OS X Public Beta: Cool, but for hobbyists only

by Kirby Ferguson

The beta of OS X (pronounced “ten,” not “ex”) gives a great first impression: it’s smooth, it’s gorgeous, it’s stable. In short, it’s very, very cool.

Once you get down to actually working, however, OS X’s status as a work-in-progress becomes more apparent. This is to be expected from what is, after all, a beta, but it merits stating in response to the premature celebration that has greeted OS X elsewhere in the media. The Apple faithful have been waiting a long time for this, and many are eager to shelve OS 9 and get to work with a next generation OS. You’re flirting with disaster, though, if you intend to do serious work with OS X Public Beta.

Still, OS X is a very promising upgrade—indeed, it could one day power the ultimate graphics workstation. That day will not be soon, however: there’s plenty of work to be done here. In the meantime, OS X Public Beta is fun and fascinating for us nerds, but for those of you just interested in its real-world benefits, you’ll have to wait for OS X Final, or even OS 11 (or is that OS XI?).

INSTALLATION

OS X requires fairly hefty hardware: a G3 or G4 with 128 megs of RAM, though I’m running it with 96 and I’ve even heard of some people using just 64. It’s also worth noting that you must be running OS 9 to install X. OS X’s installation takes up about a gig of disk space, but there is currently no custom install; you can trash plenty of stuff afterwards (namely, a couple hundred megs of QuickTime movies).

I installed OS X beta alongside OS 9, without partitions, in about twenty minutes. I simply switched my start-up disk to boot into either OS. Your old system won’t be entirely unscathed afterwards, though—everything is moved into a directory called “OS 9,” which will confuse some of your apps, like font managers and browsers, as they look for support files.

When you boot into OS X, you’re met with a log-in screen. (In a nice interface touch, the log-in screen shakes back and forth, as if saying “no,” when you type in a wrong password.) Yes, true to its UNIX roots, OS X is a multi-user system through-and-through. This is a power user’s dream come true, but it’s odd that an advanced feature like this, which will impose unneeded complexity on so many users, is enabled by default. You can set the system to log-in automatically, but the multi-user motif still results in more complicated use of directories and passwords. I hope in the final version of OS X this will all be left where it belongs: to the power users.

AQUA

Aqua, the new Graphical User Interface (GUI) for OS X, features lots of embossing, transparency, drop shadows and animation. Menus are semi-transparent with drop shadows, minimized windows flow down into the Dock, default buttons throb blue.

All this is sure to wow the casual user, but many will want to disable these features, which you currently can’t do. Because everything is big and beautiful in OS X, you’ll want to bump up your monitor’s resolution higher than the standard 800 x 600.

After you’ve logged in, OS X greets you with an empty desktop. The Mac desktop is no longer the catch-all for your assorted files—that duty falls on the Dock, undoubtedly Aqua’s most controversial new feature.

With its smooth animation effects, the Dock is certainly neat, but it also seems to stretch itself thin, attempting to replace the varied likes of the Control Strip, Launcher, Application Switcher, desktop and the beloved Apple Menu; even the trash and the system clock have been tossed in. Aliases, open applications and minimized windows all bump around willy-nilly in the Dock. As if cleaning up a



OS X'S MULTI-COLUMN FINDER VIEW gives you fast access to where you've been, as well as thumbnails of graphics files. The buttons at the top of the window take you to common locations on your hard drive; unfortunately, these can't be customized. Yet.

messy room by throwing everything in the closet, Apple’s efforts to tidy the desktop have simply relocated the jumble. (And why not just move that centered blue Apple logo over to the left and make it the Apple Menu? Really, the Apple Menu worked—why not just make it better?)

The Dock aside, most of OS X’s user interface changes are more modest, and many are even for the better. Dialogue boxes, such as “Open” and “Save,” now attach to the documents they belong to. At long last, the Finder has a multi-column view, akin to Explorer mode in Windows. Users have previously depended on shareware programs like Greg’s Browser for this. The Finder’s various buttons, such as “Apps” and “Docs,” make navigating folders fast and simple, although they impose someone else’s filing methods on you.

UNDER THE HOOD

With Aqua demanding so much attention, it’s easy to forget about OS X’s under-the-hood benefits, which are really what we’ve been waiting for.

OS X is, as they now say, buzzword



The OS X CRASH DIALOG BOX AND FORCE QUIT will bring a smile to the face of any long-time Mac user: force-quitting an application has absolutely no effect on the rest of your system—and the OS is even kind enough to tell you so.



Control panels are gone! They've been replaced by this tidy window of SYSTEM PREFERENCES.

compliant. This essentially means we've now got true pre-emptive multitasking and memory protection. In English, multiple operations now utilize the processor more efficiently and when a program crashes, it doesn't take down the whole system. Indeed, what's most striking about OS X is its stability. But don't let this mislead you: while the system almost never crashes, applications do so constantly.

QuickTime, Quartz and OpenGL form the foundation of OS X's graphics ar-



PDF COMPOSITOR, a demo app included with OS X Public Beta, shows off Quartz's impressive display capabilities, rendering PDFs with shadows and transparency in real-time.

chitecture. QuickTime is integrated so deeply you can preview movies in the Finder; they even continue running while minimized in the Dock.

Quartz, a PDF-derived technology, has replaced QuickDraw as the OS X's display technology. Quartz's on-screen rendering is sharp and gorgeous—it's what I miss most when I step back into OS 9, which has never looked so old.

PDF forms a crucial part of the OS: a print preview actually generates a PDF and you can export PDFs from anywhere in the OS. This certainly sounds like a boon for print professionals, but the real implications of this are still unknown. I'm also curious how Quark, which has had a rocky past with PDF, will fit in.

OpenGL, which is used by high-end 3D applications like Alias|Wavefront and Maya, is supported at the system level and powers OS X's 3D rendering. Yes, QuickDraw 3D has finally been put out of its misery.

FONTS

If you love type, you'll love OS X. First and foremost, anti-aliasing is everywhere; which means fonts are smooth and clean. This is simply the most gorgeous on-



Though OS X's font features are impressive, this FONT PANEL will rub many the wrong way. Rather than simple submenus for font specifications, we get this giant window. Note the disabled "Buy Fonts" button.

screen type you'll find anywhere. PostScript font rendering is built into the system, so you'll be able to toss Adobe Type Manager. OS X registers fonts after you drop them in—no rebooting the application to recognize them. Professional type-

setting features like kerning and ligatures (which display as you type) are available in all apps. OS X supports Type 1, TrueType, and OpenType font formats. This is certainly an area where OS X seems poised to excel.

Next to the Dock, OS X's most controversial UI innovation might be its font panel, which requires plenty of clicking and takes up a lot of screen space. (And note the mysterious, disabled button called "Buy Fonts.")

Through the font panel, you can set up your own categories of typefaces, though this feature does not replace third-party utilities such as ATM Deluxe or Font Reserve since it only catalogues installed fonts, not all fonts on your hard drive.

APPLICATIONS

So what can you actually do with OS X? Well, for now, not much. OS X ships with a collection of apps to cover most basic needs, and there's a sparse but growing collection of shareware and betas available for download.

As a means of accessing the Internet, OS X is fairly proficient. Internet Explorer, OS X's default Web browser, is still clearly a beta, but it feels close to completion. You can also download a Carbonized build of Mozilla or a beta of the promising OmniWeb. OS X's built-in e-mail program, Mail, is capable, though not as powerful as Outlook Express or Eudora. An integrated address book holds your e-mail addresses and contacts, somewhat like Office 2001's new contact manager, Entourage.

TextEdit, which seems to be the replacement for SimpleText, is powerful enough that many users won't need a word processor. HTMLedit is a surprisingly full-featured graphical web authoring program which bears a strong resemblance to PageMill. OS X also includes a nicely tweaked version of QuickTime Player, which no longer features the channels drawer or separate play and pause buttons.

Third-party applications are still scarce,



STONE DESIGN'S CREATE is one of OS X's few serious graphics apps. You'll need to bump up you're monitor resolution beyond 800x600 to accommodate OS X's jumbo floating palettes.

and major developers have yet to release anything. Graphics nerds with time on their hands will definitely want to download Stone Design's suite of graphics applications, as well as TIFFFany, which is the closest thing OS X has to Photoshop.

CLASSIC

Until your favourite apps are Carbonized, you'll be using OS X's Classic environment a lot (or rebooting into OS 9). Classic is an emulated version of OS 9 that runs within OS X, kind of like Virtual PC

of January 2001 seems highly unlikely. And even after OS X ships, there will be a significant lag before applications become available. We can look forward to more shareware and betas in the coming months, but commercial software will not surface until OS X ships. And when it does, it may as well be OS 1.0—this is a young operating system and there will be growing pains.

As tantalizing as OS X may be, we'll all be using OS 9—at least sometimes—for another year, if not two. ■

or SoftWindows. Considering this is a beta, the compatibility of Classic is remarkable. While it's a technical marvel, though, Classic is just sluggish and awkward enough that you'll want to use it as little as possible.

THE BOTTOM LINE

OS X is definitely impressive stuff, but considering the gaps and quirks in this beta, the rumored shipping date



I got no idea what I'm doing here [intentional bad grammar]. TIFFFany is an **IMAGE EDITOR** so powerful I got completely lost immediately. Graphics nerds will love it.

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