

Special Report

Mac OS X: Public Beta??

by Kirby Ferguson

Here's my bite-sized assessment of Apple's Mac OS X. The good news: it's usable. The bad news: just barely. For elaboration, please read on.

Apple's next generation operating system has finally arrived. The redundantly dubbed Mac OS X 10 (?) is an alternately brilliant and blundering affair, and while the missteps are relatively few, they are towering in importance.

So if I give short shrift to OS X's considerable strengths in what follows, it's because they are overshadowed by a couple mammoth fundamental issues that must be resolved before OS X will see any kind of widespread adoption.

WASN'T THIS SUPPOSED TO BE ABOUT PERFORMANCE?

While some may point to OS X's inability to burn CDs or play DVDs as major shortcomings, its biggest problem is performance, believe it or not. Stability and virtual memory are dramatically improved, but when you launch a couple apps and open some Finder windows, you'll realize OS X is not the greyhound we've been led to think. Simply put, for all intents and purposes OS X is *much* slower than OS 9 (although not quite so noticeable on a G4).

This is particularly frustrating because most of OS X's sluggishness is, well, intended. Decisions were made, choices between speed and wizzy aesthetics, and Apple consistently opted for aesthetics. Somewhere along the line Aqua, OS X's "lickable" new user interface, stole the spotlight, and now we're left with a pretty, but ponderous, operating system. Resizing Finder windows, for instance, is outlandishly slow. The "Genie Effect," which

occurs when a window is minimized, often takes a couple seconds to kick in. The transparency effects are gratuitous. Throw in Classic, which can take a couple minutes to launch, and OS X can feel absolutely glacial. Too often, the system becomes entirely unresponsive and we're left staring at that odd spinning CD icon.

I know mundane performance issues don't make for eye-popping product demonstrations, but Apple's top priority must be improving the limp performance of OS X. The speed of OS X must be brought into OS 9's league, or all of its other benefits will be moot. For starters, I suggest adding an "Effects" preference panel that allows users to disable all the graphical niceties.

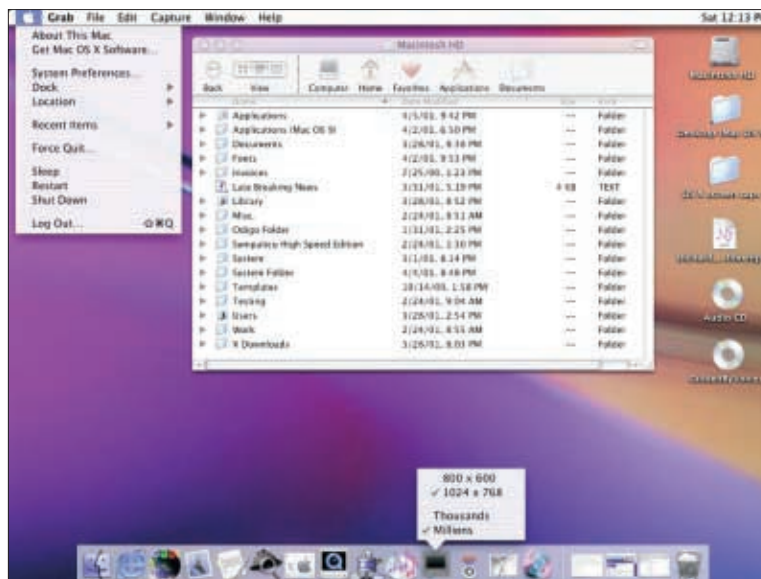
Slowness aside, Aqua is certainly lovely—unquestionably the most beautiful piece of software I've ever seen. Smooth, sharp, with a more tangible feel than OS 9, the attention to detail in Aqua is staggering, but it makes you wish similar scrutiny had been applied to OS X's performance.

THE DOCK: IMPROVED, BUT NOT NEARLY ENOUGH

Unfortunately, OS X's most troublesome user interface innovation, the much-maligned Dock, hasn't seen substantial

change in OS X. While some of the more senseless clutter (like the clock) has been removed and you can now control-click (or click-and-hold) icons to access a pop-up menu, the Dock remains an underpowered jack-of-all-trades. If it were simply a complementary GUI element—kind of a new, flashy Launcher—I wouldn't be complaining. However the Dock has ousted the Control Strip, Application Menu, Launcher and the original Apple Menu but hasn't replaced them with the same functionality.

Though the Dock may appear simple, its muddled nature often makes it frustrating and unintuitive. As a launcher, it's perfectly capable. As a means of handling open applications and documents, it's lacking because it's such an arbitrary collection of icons. As if the Dock weren't cluttered enough with icons for aliases, URLs, documents and open apps, this latest version now throws in Docklings, which offer access to Control Strip-like settings. They work great, but just further convolute the overstuffed Dock. A command-tab keyboard shortcut allows you to cycle through open apps, but there's so much stuff in the Dock, it takes close observation to keep track of what you're cycling through.



Welcome to your *NEW DESKTOP*. The clicked icon in the Dock is called a Dockling and offers Control Strip-like options. Note the entirely new items in the Apple Menu.



OS X gives high-end **FONT FEATURES** to all programs, but do all apps need them?



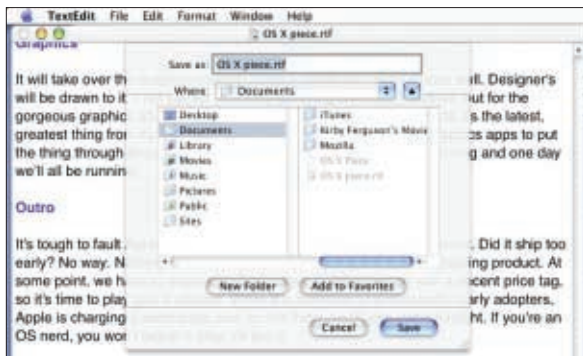
OS X needs more customization options like this. The new **TOOLBAR** in the Finder windows is another of OS X's handier GUI enhancements.

Another head-scratcher is how hidden windows are not the same as minimized windows in the Dock. Minimized windows show up in the right-hand side of the Dock; hidden windows are attached to the application and can be accessed either by clicking the apps Dock icon, or control clicking to go directly to the window.

Finally, because the Dock is centered, its icons are constantly moving. No part of it is stationary, meaning any interaction re-



What's up with this? OS X supports long **FILE NAMES** but you can't read 'em half the time. Wrap that text, Apple!



SHEETS and the new open/save dialog are among the best-executed new features in OS X.

quires a moment to assess where everything is currently resting. And the lack of text labels on icons sometimes requires you have to mouse-over icons to find out what they are.

Meanwhile, the beloved Apple Menu, which has been absent throughout most of OS X's development, has re-emerged in the final version, albeit in a radically modified form. The new Apple Menu seems watered down, and begs the question: who was complaining about it? It's a classic feature that every GUI out there has lifted. The Apple Menu could certainly use improvement, but paring it down to almost nothing is inexplicable. OS X's other menu rearrangements (such as application actions being under one menu) make more sense.

While some of OS X's other features may be flawed, the Dock is the only out-right failure. Unfortunately, its position within the user interface is central.

BUT IT'S NOT ALL BAD

While OS X isn't the refined, battle-tested piece of software that OS 9 is, it does leave the traditional Mac OS in the dust in many respects. Foremost, OS X's stability is certainly not hype. I have had applications crash, but have not once brought down the entire system. I also like the default single window behaviour and new Finder toolbar. OS X also lets you work the old way if you wish, by command-clicking to spawn a new window or simply hiding the toolbar, which makes windows behave in the traditional Mac OS fashion.

Undo in the Finder no longer just applies to changes in file names. For instance, if you have second thoughts about the file you just trashed, just hit command-z to restore it to its previous position.

Sheets and the Open/Save dialogue are improvements over the ways of old. Bundles combines support files into what appears to be one file, reducing system clutter. The Trash icon now turns into an eject symbol when you select a

WAYS TO SPEED UP OS X

See ya, Genie!

This is the best OS X hack I've found. Just type "ultra write com.apple.dock mineffect scale" (without quotation marks, of course) into Terminal (which is in "Utilities") and logout and back in. Windows will now scale down proportionally as they go into the Dock—no more funnel effect. It's not as quick as a simple outline treatment, but much quicker than the Genie. The graphical utility TinkerTool lets you perform this and other tweaks.

Update to 10.0.1

This first update moves OS X's performance closer to respectability, but it's not a miracle cure. Run "Software Update" in "System Preferences" to get the 10.0.1 update. (An older hack suggested installing the Developer's Tools or heading to the command line to "pre-bind" applications. The 10.0.1 update now performs this optimization, so don't bother.)

Switch to thousands of colors

It's not quite as pretty, but OS X seems a tad more peppy under thousands of colours. Click the "Displays" Dockling for quick access.

Launch OS 9 at startup

If you have the RAM, launch OS 9 at startup so you don't grind to a halt while working. Go to "Classic" in "System Preferences" and check "Start up Classic on login..."

Disable icon bouncing and the zoom effect

Both of these probably only have miniscule performance benefits, but they can't hurt. Go to "Dock" in "System Preferences" and uncheck "Animate opening applications" to turn off icon bouncing. The zoom effect is not enabled by default, but if you've turned it on, uncheck "Magnification" in the "Dock" panel to turn it off again.

Buy more RAM

If you hear lots of grinding while using OS X, that's virtual memory plugging away. While virtual memory performance is much better in OS X, it ain't like RAM. Hey, you could use the RAM anyway and prices are low—OS X is as good a reason as any.

The Shadow Knows

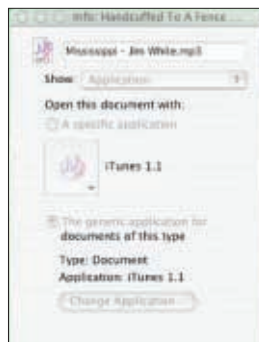


If 28 million U.S. Zip drive purchasers can win a class action suit against Iomega over the "click of death" defect that entitles them to a rebate of up to \$40, what about compensation for Canadians?...Say so long to the WWW's oldest live image -- Cambridge university is retiring the coffee pot in its computer lab, believed to be the first live Internet broadcast (dating back to 1993) and which has had a camera trained on it for the past eight years...Microsoft knows exactly how to stop viruses travelling through its Outlook e-mail software -- just block attachments, even ones that are harmless...This just in -- when Steve Jobs heard that Linus Torvald had called OS X "a piece of crap", he replied, "Haven't we fired that guy yet?..."Hats off to one of our favorite trade book editors: Earl Wilken, recently retired from Graphic Arts Monthly, just received the 3rd Annual Tom McMillan Award for Editorial Excellence...Darrald "Lucky" Mandrusiak from Agfa Canada, who bagged a bunch of goodies at the Seybold Game Show, made us promise to mention Apogee if he loaned us the Olympus digital camera, one of the prizes he won -- so there you go, Darrald...A while ago U.S. trade mag PrintMedia changed its name from Publishing & Production Executive--so what we want to know is why does the cover featured on its website still have the old title?...



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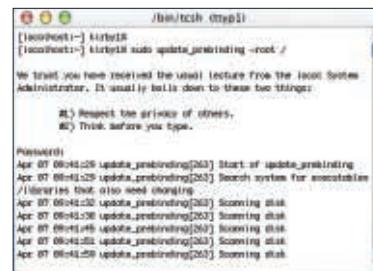
removable disk. iDisk is integrated into the OS, giving you access to online storage and back-up. System preferences are now an application (which must be quit when you're finished), except for the Finder stuff which is in pull-down menus, which I found odd.



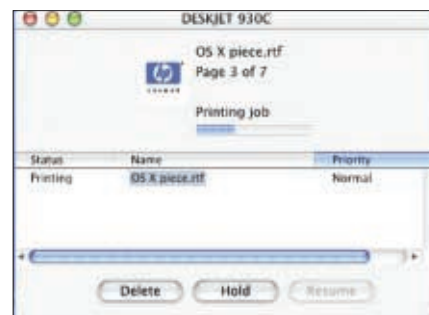
The **GET INFO WINDOW** now works like a floating palette—you can only open one, and if you click on another file, it displays the properties of that file. Type and creator information is now accessible here.



OS X does a better job of hiding its multi-user heritage than the Public Beta, but you still occasionally get confronted with **MESSAGES** like this.



Hopefully we won't be seeing much of this, but for those so inclined, a **UNIX COMMAND LINE** is available.



My **PRINTING** experience with OS X went like this: I plugged it in, it worked. Your mileage may vary.

FINAL ASSESSMENT, NO PUNCHES PULLED

It's tough to fault Apple for shipping OS X too early, since it will undoubtedly stimulate application development and ensure that the next major upgrade will have more substantial third party support. And I realize OS X is intended for early adopters and is essentially Public Beta 2, but Apple is charging a considerable sum for it, so I won't pull any punches in my summation. OS X feels like a late beta in need of some major optimization work. Laggardly performance and Dock disarray are high profile issues that must be addressed before OS X's charms can become apparent.

Based on its development thusfar, I have little doubt that OS X will ultimately eclipse all previous versions of the Mac OS; but for now, it still summons the dreaded term "promising," a back-handed compliment translatable as, "Some day it should be good". Here's hoping a series of solid updates makes OS X a more worthy successor to the original Mac OS. 🍏

Kirby Ferguson is a graphic designer and technology writer now living in Toronto. On the Web you can find him at www.KirbyFerguson.com.