

■ THE PUBLISHER'S VIEW

Is Apple Past the Point of No Return?

Chance for Being a Mainstream Alternative Appears to Have Slipped Away

I don't want to write this editorial. Apple doesn't need any more abuse than it has already received in the press, and I still believe that the industry needs a strong number-two player (see [1004ED.PDF](#)). But I no longer believe the industry is going to get one, and I owe it to our readers to explain why I've come to this conclusion.

Last year was a pivotal one for Apple, as Windows 95 dramatically narrowed the gap between the Mac and PC platforms. The Mac remains superior in some ways, but the differences are increasingly subtle and are insufficient, in most cases, to outweigh the greater availability of software and the huge number of system vendors for the PC.

Given this situation, Apple had to execute well to re-open the gap, and the company has failed to do so. A combination of product-availability problems, hardware-quality problems (such as in the PowerBooks), software-quality problems (such as in Open Transport), and lackluster notebook-computer designs has hampered Apple's hardware business. At the same time, slow progress in the licensing program has limited the growth of the Mac platform beyond Apple's own systems.

Delays in the evolution of the Mac operating system are making a bad situation worse. Microsoft appears well ahead in deeply integrating the Internet with Windows; Apple has picked up the lingo but seems to lack the products. Netscape is considerably faster on a PC than a comparable Mac, and many Internet applications are either unavailable on the Mac or a version behind.

System 8, also known by the code name Copland, seems to be forever a year or more away from shipment—a year ago, it was due in mid-1996, but now it seems unlikely to appear in full form until 1998.

Apple's recent disclosure that it would be releasing new OS technology in pieces, instead of as a "big bang," is bad news. No one wants to be upgrading their operating system all the time. The part of Copland that is most sorely needed is the new kernel, which will bring protected memory and preemptive multitasking to the Mac. This is not a change that can be made gradually; it eliminates the current model of software "inits" and will require all third-party software that gets anywhere close to the OS to be extensively modified. The "gradual release" strategy the company has now adopted was presumably chosen because the switch to the new kernel is being delayed once again; some of the user interface aspects of Copland will now be grafted onto the System 7 kernel.

This is a disaster for the Mac in business. Most corporations are expected to skip Windows 95 and move from

Windows 3.1 to Windows NT. Windows NT is forecast to grow from a few million units this year to tens of millions of units next year. A big part of the attraction of Windows NT is that it is an industrial strength, robust operating system—something that System 7 certainly is not and that the long-awaited Copland needs to be.

The pervasiveness of Windows in the overall market is going to create some tough going for Apple in the home as well. I realized just how bad this situation was when I discovered that my niece and nephew, ages 11 and 13, both have asked their parents to replace their home Macs with PCs because they can't get the software they want for the Mac.

Trouble is coming in another of Apple's markets as well—professional graphics. Intel's MMX extensions will give a big performance boost to image-processing applications such as Photoshop. We've heard that Intel has provided substantial help to Adobe in rewriting the Photoshop filters for MMX, increasing speed by as much as a factor of four. If this succeeds, it will make a modest PC with an MMX processor a better Photoshop system than even the fastest Mac.

I've been primarily a Mac user for about six years, and I'm writing this editorial on a Mac. Our business owns more than two dozen Macs. But I now have a PC as well, and I'll be surprised if, in time, it doesn't end up being my primary platform. Our business will still buy some Macs, but many new system purchases will be PCs.

One of the hazards of being viewed as a computer expert is that all your friends and neighbors want advice when they are ready to buy a computer. It used to be easy for me to recommend Macintosh. Now I find this difficult to do; I suggest that people buy a Mac if most of their friends have Macs, but otherwise they should buy a PC.

I don't expect Apple to collapse or the Mac platform to disappear, but I do think its chances for a significant increase in market share are gone. Apple's management appears focused on trimming expenses to bring the company to profitability; it is hard to invest in platform-share growth when you are concentrating on improving near-term financials.

It is sad to see a once-visionary company—and Microsoft's only real OS competitor—slipping toward obscurity. If Apple is to prosper, the company must give up fighting Microsoft across a broad front and focus on a few areas where Microsoft is weak. Unfortunately, such areas are hard to find, and downward spirals are hard to reverse. ■

