

A First Look at Mac OS X Public Beta

10/28/2000

Introduction

I've been using Mac OS X for some weeks now and I am now able to make my first assessment of Apple's new Operating System. Just so you know, I have about ten years of experience with the Mac as my home system and 15 or so using Unix (mostly SunOS, Solaris on Sun Hardware and Linux in crummy Intel hardware), I have installed dozens of Macs, Windows, Linux and even some LinuxPPC machines. I run a web server (on a Mac!) and my own Internet domain for mail and stuff. Mac OS X is the future of Apple Operating Systems. It is based on the Mach Kernel and BSD Unix. The graphical engine (Quartz, loosely based on Adobe's PDF) and interface (Aqua) are Apple's own.

There has been tons written about Mac OS X, but most of the criticism has been directed at the changed interface with respect to Mac OS and has been justified by saying "You know, it's beta" (as in "beta' than nothing". 'Beta' is greek for "it's not ready yet"). I will center my criticism on two topics. First, what the Mac can do that Mac OS X (or other Unices) can't and second, what other Unices can do but Mac OS X can't (or won't, because it's beta...You know).

I do understand that this is beta software, but my criticism is not directed at the moving target of a final Mac OS X version (I'll do that after I use it), but rather at the OS that I have in my hands now. It is an usable OS, with amazing good looks, and I am capable of doing most of the things I want to do with it. I am writing this on Mac OS X (in TeXShop) and I will transform it to HTML and PFD (TeXShop does this automatically). The stuff I am unable to do are mostly related to non-apple hardware (e.g., I can't print on my Epson 740i) and will probably solve themselves with time. I did expect some things to be weird. I am surprised by what has turn out to be weird and what not.

As a final introductory point, let me make perfectly clear that I *do* like Mac OS X. If I could print and use other peripherals I would use it as my main system. I love the stability and performance (even in the beta). I am concentrating on criticisms because I believe this points are either a big surprise or I think they can make or break the acceptance of Mac OS X by both the Mac users and the Unix/Linux user. The former will have to change OSs (Mac OS 9 will cease to exist). If they are not pleased with X they may decide to move more mainstream (Windows or Linux). The latter can choose from a variety of systems (from very cheap Intel with GNU/Linux, to expensive Suns or SGI Machines), I believe the number of applications, the amount of polish and the consistent interface of X will convince more than one from this crowd.

The Mac OS is better in that...

1) In X the disks don't mount on the desktop by default. I don't mean aliases, links or shortcuts (those you can put on the desktop), but *the disks themselves*. I know users of others systems don't see this as a big deal (they can put aliases and they do not understand the difference between the two), even I probably wouldn't mention it, except for the fact that CD-ROMs and Zips *do* mount on the desktop. It seems to me then that Apple is doing this to change our mind about *who* is the owner of the disks. In windows or Linux you own The Computer, but not the disks which are cluttered with stuff you are not supposed to look at. I hate this, it is *my* computer if you can't organize your system files, Do I have any hope or organizing my files? Put *my* disks on the desktop. I'll learn how to deal with them. If this is too much to ask, then, at least, put my home directory on the desktop (not an alias!)... After a friend read an earlier version of this he pointed me out to a web page that had a way to put the disk and trash on the Desktop, just fire up a terminal and type:

```
prompt%defaults write com.apple.finder Desktop.HasLocalVolumes 1
prompt%defaults write com.apple.finder Desktop.HasTrash 1
```

After restarting the new finder (logout and login works) your disks and trash will appear on the desktop. The fact that Apple doesn't do this by default, makes me think that I am right about why Apple is doing this.

2) The top level of the File Hierarchy of X is called "Computer". You can't change that name. This seems silly, but a Mac is given a name by its owner (for AppleTalk file sharing). This (or desktop) should be the top level. I feel this is connected with 1) and is Apple way of forcing our minds to change. I do not like it.

3) File and creator do not work as well in X. Most OSs recognize what kind of file they are dealing with by the stupid three (or four) letter extensions on the file name. The Mac has always been superior giving any file not only a "type" (eg, text, Word Document or application) independent of the file name, but also a "creator", a program that has priority opening the file when you double click in it. For a practical example think of HTML files. First of all they are text files and any text editor should be able to open them. If you get one thru e-mail, you probably want to open it with some kind of browser (within or without your e-mail program), but if you write it with (or export from) an application (Word or an HTML editor with viewer) you probably want to open it again with that same application. That's when the creator comes in. Some files in X do not have a type or a creator, making it difficult to know what you should open them with. Some applications are not able to create this creator and no default is given. This is likely to change in the final, but still...

4) You can't move files in X. If you open a file with an application and then close the application, move the file and reopen the application again, the application has no idea where the file is and can't find it. In this case you are making the user do a work that a computer can do better. In Mac OS each file has a unique number that identifies it independent of where it is. Aliases are just Unix links so if you move something you break the alias as in Windows.

Though they may not seem important, these four features are central to the way Mac

users organize their files and are part of the reason Mac users tend to be more productive than users of other OSs with relation to the creation of new files thru applications (another reason is consistency between the applications, but X got this hand down, which already makes it the best Unix out there for me).

5) X offers no location support. This is essential for Laptop users. I use my iBook in three different networks and I am able to pull down a menu and tell my machine to configure itself for the network I am using (I also select printers and other local services at the same time). I do not need to restart the machine (I can even put it to sleep when I move from one place to another). Nothing of the sort exists in X beta.

Another flavor of Unix is better in that...

I am very impressed with the level of polish of X beta. I was expecting something similar to GNU/Linux/GNOME. Instead it is closer to Solaris with a consistent (and beautiful) interface for all applications and tons of tools to configure it. There are things that surprised me, because other Unices do it much better. here there are:

i) In X, you have to restart the Network to make changes. This is amazing! You do not need to do this with other Unices (at least the ones I have used), though you need to be careful about how you change from one network to another.

ii) (perhaps related to i)?) In X, Network services get interrupted too easily. In some cases I have lost my DHCP info in others the machine has been unable to contact DNSs... Weird! and completely unexpected. On the plus side, this doesn't seem to happen if you connect thru a modem. I have not been able to pinpoint a way to make the machine loose its network services so I can't send feedback to Apple that would be meaningful. I suspected a hardware problem, but the machine works flawlessly with Mac OS 9.

iii) It only happened once, but I lost the master.password file in the middle of a session. This is a known bug. I include it here, because it is very unsettling (the terminal respond to your commands with "helpful" phrases like "who are you?" and "go away!"). Also, it may be security related and that is very worrisome. Finally, I do not understand why this happens in this version of BSD and not in other... Or does it happen in others?

I will improve this file as things go on (one reason for doing it in PDF). I will just post the file here, with a new date on it.

Thanks for reading,

AOV