

State Of The Art

Apple's Latest 0.1 Adds a Lot

By David Pogue

The reputation of the personal computer has taken a horrible hit this year. Viruses have made headlines week after week. Spam now exceeds 50 percent of all e-mail. Hackers and academics have uncovered one Windows security hole after another, turning Microsoft into a frantic little Dutch boy at the dike without enough fingers. If the computer industry were a celebrity, it would hire an image consultant.

Correction: The Windows computer industry would hire one. Macintosh fans, on the other hand, have watched the tribulations of the much larger Windows population with mixed feelings—sympathy, relief, even amusement—because their operating system, Mac OS X, is so far 100 percent virus-free. And because Mac OS X comes with less of its plumbing exposed to the Internet than Windows, hackers are a far more distant worry.

This is a big week for Apple. Last week the company unveiled the Windows version of its popular, free iTunes music-downloading software—and tomorrow, it will release Mac OS X version 10.3 (or Panther), the next edition of Apple's three-year-old operating system.

That decimal-point increase (from version 10.2 to 10.3) doesn't give the upgrade's 150 new features enough credit. Then again, Apple's not the only company to have trouble with naming schemes. What's the logic in the sequence of Windows versions—95, 98, Me, XP?

In any case, Apple has lost no time in exploiting the public's fears of computer insecurity. For example, a new feature called FileVault can encrypt your entire "Home folder"—files, Web bookmarks, e-mail and all—and then decode them automatically and invisibly when you log in. If, say, your laptop is stolen, your sensitive stuff is secure and safe. (FileVault uses an encoding scheme so thorough, Apple says, that a password-guessing computer would need 149 trillion years to break it. Just enough time for Apple to reach Mac OS X 11.)

Mac OS X can also sign you out of your account automatically after a certain period so that evildoers can't root through your folders when you've wandered off to get some coffee. And a new Secure Empty Trash command doesn't just delete files; it actually overwrites their parking places on the hard drive with invisible gibberish. If you wind up selling your Mac on eBay someday, no data-recovery snoop will be able to resurrect your lost works.

The anti-spam controls have been beefed up, too. Mac OS X Mail can screen out all messages except what comes from recent correspondents and people in your address book. It also auto-blocks junk-mail graphics that, when opened, report back to the spammer that the message has landed safely at a working e-mail address.

Each of Panther's brushed-metal windows displays the Sidebar, a clever navigation-shortcut panel at the left side where you can drag the icons of favorite disks, folders, files and programs. In effect, the Sidebar lets you fold up your desktop so that any two icons appear side-by-side, no matter how far apart they actually are in your folder hierarchy.

In terms of pure productivity power, Panther's most important perk is a new anti-window-clutter feature called Exposé. When you press a certain keystroke (of your choosing), all windows in all programs visibly shrink and array themselves across the screen like non-overlapping tiles. You just click the one you want to bring it forward at full size. This visual method of plucking a window from a haystack is so brilliant and addictive, you'll wind up using it dozens of times a day. Exposé is the biggest graphical breakthrough that operating systems have achieved in years.

Some of Panther's "new" features are actually old ones resurrected from Mac OS versions of years past. For example, you can categorize files and folders by slapping color-coded labels onto them—"Back Me Up" or "Final Drafts," for example—making it simple to search or sort them en masse. The Schedule dialogue box saves electricity and time by shutting down the Mac automatically each night, and turning it on just in time to greet you each morning.

A number of Panther's new features originated in Windows. (Apple to Microsoft: "Two can play this game.") For example, you can now turn files or folders into compressed Zip files right on the desktop. Pressing Command-Tab to cycle between open programs now summons a floating row of software icons, much as Alt-Tab does in Windows. Faxing is, for the first time, a built-in Mac feature. You can have incoming faxes automatically printed out, saved into a folder, sent to yourself by e-mail, or any combination of those.

Finally, Panther offers Fast User Switching, modeled on the identical feature in Windows XP. If you're working at the Mac when a relative or co-worker wants to check e-mail or a calendar, you no longer have to quit your programs and log out. Instead, your entire world of work remains open but shifts into the background, ready to spring forward again when your fellow account holder is finished. A stunning animation livens up the switching moment: your world appears to rotate out of view as the new account swings onto the screen.

The raft of new or improved programs includes the humble text-editing program called TextEdit, which can now open, edit and even create simple Microsoft Word documents. The Preview graphics viewer has had a makeover, too; it's now a full-blown but faster replacement for the Acrobat Reader program that most people use to read PDF documents. And Safari, Apple's smooth, fast Web browser, is better than ever, with its pop-up blocker and its Google search box right in the toolbar.

(Apple's homegrown versions of important programs like Internet Explorer and Acrobat Reader seem aimed at addressing a common criticism: "Boy, if [insert software company here] ever stops making a Mac version of [insert popular program here], Apple will go out of business." And by reusing certain successful design elements across all of its programs—the new Sidebar is the perfect analog to playlists in iTunes or albums in iPhoto—Apple makes all of them easier to use. On the other hand, Apple should be careful not to alienate powerful partners like Microsoft and Adobe in the process.)

The bad Panther news comes in two parts. First, the small one: as with any major system-software upgrade, Panther "breaks" certain add-on utility programs (QuicKeys, for example), which will require minor compatibility updates. And as with any major system-software upgrade, you'll encounter the fewest bumps and glitches if you install a fresh copy of the operating system rather than just updating your existing one.

Now the big one: Apple wants \$130 for Panther. That's a fine how-de-do for everyone who dutifully paid \$130 last year for version 10.2 and \$130 a year before that for version 10.1. Microsoft, at least, has the decency to wait a few years between upgrades. (You can also get Panther free with a new Mac, for \$100 after rebate from MacConnection.com or as part of a \$200 family five-pack.)

If you need to rationalize the expenditure, remember that Panther comes with iChat AV (normally \$30), Apple's terrific video and audio chat program. It also comes with iTunes, which can convert your CD's into MP3 files (a job that requires a \$10 add-on in Windows XP's Media Player). And Exposé is probably worth about \$47.38 all by itself.

Finally, surely there's value in using an operating system that, well, isn't Windows. Mac OS X isn't just free of viruses; it's also free from copy protection, "activation" (a Windows XP feature that transmits information about your PC back to Microsoft), and pop-up messages that nag you to sign up for some Microsoft database or clean up your icons. When you use Mac OS X, you feel like it's yours; when you use Windows, you feel as though you're using someone else's toys, and Mrs. Microsoft keeps peeking in on

you.

Now, putting in print that Apple has scored another success is always risky business. Such an assertion inevitably invites a shower of e-mail pointing out that Macs are universally more expensive than Windows PC's (true for desktop machines, false for laptops); that far more software is available for Windows (true; "only" 6,500 programs are available for Mac OS X); and that the Apple hallmarks of elegance, beauty and thoughtful design aren't worth paying extra for (a matter of opinion).

But to argue these points is to join a religious war with no hope of resolution. Wherever you stand in the Macs vs. Windows debate, this much is certain: In Panther, Apple has taken an already sparkling, super-stable operating system and made it faster, better equipped and more secure.

FROM THE DESK OF DAVID POGUE

More Thoughts on Apple's New Operating System

In today's "State of the Art" column, I reviewed the new version of Apple's operating system, Mac OS X 10.3, code-named Panther. But there are 150 new features in Panther, and there's only so much you can say in 1300 words.

E-columns are a different story. No trees were harmed in the sending of this column, so I thought I'd elaborate on a few additional interesting features. These are some of the sweet little Panther goodies that Apple doesn't even bother to advertise—stuff I've stumbled onto just by exploring.

- Most keyboard shortcuts are already consistent from program to program on the Mac, but there are exceptions; the Hide All Windows command in Photoshop, for example, should be Command-H like most other Mac programs, not Option-Command-H. Fortunately, using the new Keyboard control panel, you can easily change any keystroke in any program. You can also make up a new keyboard shortcut for menu commands that doesn't have them. I've already found this simple feature useful over and over again.
- Preview (Mac OS X's graphics and PDF reader) has always been good at converting graphics files into other formats. But now it opens raw PostScript or EPS files. The result: you can now use any inkjet printer as, in effect, a PostScript printer—at 10 percent of the price of a laser printer—and even share it on your office network.
- Disk Utility, Mac OS X's disk-repair and disk-copying program, introduces a useful new feature: Its new Restore tab can make a perfect copy of a disk, and replicate it on another hard drive. You might find this useful when, for example, you want to make an exact copy of your old Mac's hard drive on your new one. (You can erase the destination disk in the process, if you like, or just add to what's there.)
- Bluetooth is everywhere, better integrated than ever. You can shoot a file through the air to a fellow PowerBook owner, or even a Windows laptop lugger, with just a couple of clicks; check your email using the Bluetooth cellphone in your pocket as a wireless antenna; or dial the phone using the Mac OS X address book.
- Panther introduces a very handy new key combination: Shift-Option-Command-Escape. It force quits the frontmost program, no questions asked. That's good to know when, for example, the frontmost program has frozen, especially when it's a full-screen program like Apple's Keynote slide-show software that covers up the Apple menu (so you can't get to the usual Force Quit command).

- Shared folders on Windows PC's on your home network show up right on the Mac's screen, ready to open and use. (The opposite is true, too: You can make your Mac's files show up in the PC's Network Neighborhood.) You can also use shared printers that are connected to your PC, and, as always, CD's and DVD's you burn on the Mac play in Windows too.
- In corporations, Mac OS X's Mail program can tap into an Exchange server, Macs can be integrated into an Active Directory database, and Macs can connect remotely to corporate networks using Virtual Private Networking.
- Apple's iPhoto program is nicely integrated. When you want to change your desktop wallpaper, for example, your entire digital photo collection is available for the choosing. Same thing when you're choosing a screen saver: You can pick any one of your "albums" to become an animated, smoothly zooming, cross-fading slide show. (Little do enchanted onlookers realize that this same screen saver can, if you like, be protected by your password, so that sneaky interlopers can't see what you've been working on.)

As I noted in the review, some Mac fans are annoyed with having to pay \$130 for each annual Mac OS X update.

Of course, they don't *have* to do anything. It's up to Apple to make each upgrade so juicy, nobody can resist—and if you ask me, Panther nails it.