

From: Eric Tremblay

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Network Computing
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Hello,

Here are my comments to the article that appeared in the June edition of Network Computing. I have to state that I do not have anything personal against Mr. Hall. I am simply very offended by some of his comments and inaccuracies in his article about the NeXTSTEP operating system. Since I am a long time fan and user of this operating system I take this system quite at heart and I could not just stand by and leave major errors and inaccuracies be printed without a reply. Even if I don't have much time to spend on a reply to this article I felt a strong urge to take the necessary time to make things right. I just hope that the article did not influence people into not buying NeXTSTEP. I also hope that Steve Jobs himself does not see this article and please next time double check your facts and try and backup your comments with facts instead of simply saying a comment.

Sincerely yours,

Eric "E.T." Tremblay

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A printed version of this letter plus other documents has been sent to Amy Lipton and an electronic version was sent in e-mail to
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The Reply

It's a journalists responsibility to it's readers to supply accurate and undistorted information. As a computer journalist, the facts have to be clear and precise. There's enough technobable already in this industry to mix up even the most knowledgeable person. It's the journalist responsibility to clear out any misconception about a product or subject and report the facts accurately.

The journalist is there to guide and give his opinion about something. While I understand that a journalist is biased towards a platform more then another and may have better things to say about the platform he prefers. I resent an article when the facts are either not clear or absolutely wrong. While the choice of an individual is his own choice the facts must stay accurate. As a magazine you have the power to influence peoples decisions. While I don't mind that a certain magazine is biased toward a platform, I do mind when you report false information about a product in a review. While I don't expect a journalist to be an expert in every field of computing, I do expect that a journalist writing a review about a product report accurate information while keeping the language simple. After more then ten years in the computer industry I have failed to understand statements like "object-oriented file system" (page 95, Mac highlights) What does that mean? In the future please try and get all the facts. Anything else is simply doing an injustice to the readers and the product being reviewed.

I was very sad to read the article called State Of The Client by Mr. Eric Hall in the June 1993 issue of Network Computing magazine. I felt that the article did not reflect NeXTSTEP in it's proper light but I was mostly annoyed by the errors in fact or simply the lack of knowledge of the writer has about NeXTSTEP. I feel the only way to judge or give an opinion about a product is to first start out with accurate information which seems to be a little too much to ask in this case. I was also mad to read comments in the Unix With A Twist article. In that article the author comments about the user interface by saying things like "Noisy and clumsy, thought visually appealing." I am tempted to say by reading this type of comment that the author did not use NeXTSTEP or actually only used it for a few moments. There is also another comment that states "The interface can be flaky, requiring your support people to know enough unix to fix the problem." really? I bought a NeXT two years ago without ANY knowledge of unix whatsoever and I can honestly say that it's not true. Plus saying that the interface is "flaky" makes me wonder if the author wasn't looking at Windows instead. While this type of comment is his own personal opinion I would like to know the reasons why he would say such a thing? What are the reasons behind this type of comment? Making a

comment about something is fine but please back it up with real information (reasons?).

Other comments which also leads me to believe that the writer does not know much about NeXTSTEP or again uses unclear language. A specific comment I had in mind was the comment on page 100 about NeXT's Interface Builder. The author states "And NeXTSTEP's proprietary Interface Builder development environment is overkill for most users, who probably just want to write simple macros." Does this mean that Interface Builder is a fancy macro builder? or does it simply mean that because Interface Builder is the most innovative application development tool that it's an overkill? When basic is included with a DOS system is it an overkill for people wanting to make macros? Is QuickBasic an overkill for people wanting to develop their own applications? Not because Interface Builder seems overwhelming to someone means it's an overkill. Is including Interface Builder a fault? Sure sounds like it.

Again in a statement on page 96, the authors says "users can be in only one folder at a time." while the author is describing how you can copy a file to another he also makes the comment "This is an extremely clumsy design and not very intuitive." So I guess the author did not have the time or the will to discover a little menu option that opens up a new viewer which would have given him as many windows as he wished. Not only can you be in one folder at a time you can be in twenty or more if you wished. So in fact "users can be in only one folder at a time." is a completely false and misguided statement. (Mr. Hall please look in the View menu of the Workspace Manager.)

While I found many shocking statements in the article, the most shocking of all was the statement that (page 97) "Storing files and applications on a non-Unix file system is generally not possible because the Workspace Manager doesn't communicate well with foreign file systems." Now this one is a strong contender to the misinformation award. For your CORRECT information, NeXTSTEP can handle more file systems than any other computer I know. Using a floppy disk it can handle NeXT's very own unix format, DOS 720K, 1.44MB floppies, MacIntosh 1.44 floppies without having to add an utility program everything is built-into the Workspace Manager. Plus the Workspace can read ISO-9660, ISO-9660 with RockRidge extensions and MacIntosh HFS cdrom disks. If all this was not enough, if you have a SCSI card on your computer or a native NeXT hardware you can simply plug a DOS hard disk and a MacIntosh hard disk on the SCSI port and the Workspace Manager will recognize these disks in their native format. Making the transition of information from one platform to the other as simple as plugging it in and copying the files.

There's also a point I would like to clear up. The author says in his article that a application copied from the NeXT environment to a DOS FAT format loses it's attributes. This is true because DOS is limited to it's old CPM days of 8.3 long filenames. This is

not a fault of the Workspace Manager but a limit imposed by DOS. The simple reason why an application stored in DOS format no longer works is because the "hint" files like the author likes to call them lost their complete filename since they have been cut due to the limitations of the DOS file system. Did the author ever consider why anyone would want to store a NeXTSTEP application on a DOS file system? Why would someone want to limit himself to storing NeXTSTEP applications on a DOS diskette?

The only reason NeXT includes support for the DOS file system is to make data (text, spreadsheets, graphics) flow from one platform to another without any problems. In fact I share my spreadsheet data and text from my PC laptop to my NeXTSTEP computer everyweek. Making the exchange of data painless one way to the other. Seems again that the author is criticizing Workspace Manager for the deficiencies of DOS.

There's a couple of more comments I would like to make about the article. Like the file linking stuff on page 95. "Whether the operating system lets applications exchange information in real-time matters, too." but I think I cleared up the most important and flagrant errors in the article. I ask you please to double check your information and test the product out properly before actually reviewing it. Your not only not doing your job right but your also not respecting your readers by supplying them with inaccurate information and with the influence you have on the readers who are looking up to you for advice I would work a little harder to get your facts straight. (quote page 97) "Other limitations, which appear to be lurking around every corner, make the system come across as well-intentioned but poorly executed." Well here's my version, "Your limitations, which appear to be lurking around every sentence , makes your article well-intentioned but poorly executed."

In the future before saying that an operating system as good as NeXTSTEP is "poorly executed" try and use the computer for more then a couple of minutes.

A couple of days later I receive this reply from the author of the article

Item 9387802 93/07/27 09:54
From: EHALL@NWCNY.SSCNET.UCLA.EDU@INET#
To: ERICTREMBLAY Eric Tremblay
Sub: NeXTSTEP
Cc: Nelson Fritz <fnelson@nwcny.sscnet.ucla.edu>,
Lipton Amy <alipton@nwcny.sscnet.ucla.edu>

Your enthusiasm for the platform is clear.

However, don't confuse my article with either a shot at NeXTSTEP or as a sign that I don't like the platform. I have a TurboColor box next to my desk, and use it daily for a variety of things. After over a year of use, I've noticed many things that are both good and bad about it. To itemize your comments:

The interface *is* clumsy, in my opinion. Everyone has a right to theirs, and that is mine. I find it extremely cumbersome to navigate through the system, especially when you're six or seven levels down a tree.

NeXTSTEP is flaky. Turn the machine into a NetInfo server, and try to turn it back into a client. Try adding a user with a home directory that already exists. The system wipes out whatever files were already in that directory. You have to go into UNIX-land to fix or bypass these things.

Interface Builder is much more than most end-users need. As we stated, it is an extremely powerful development platform, but most users are NOT developers; they are users. As such, they do not need development tools. Comparing IB to DOS' BASIC is an accurate comparison, where IB wins handily. But DOS also provides a batch command language. NeXTSTEP does not, other than the shell scripting tools, which as I said go way beyond what users need. I could have also pointed out that the shell scripts are not usable from the graphic environment, but only from the command line.

Foreign filesystem support is weak. Sure, they let you store binary files on the foreign devices, but the applications and files lose all their attributes, making them useless. If something is useless, regardless of how many ways it's useless, it is still useless. Whether it is the fault of DOS'FAT filesystem, or the MAC HFS (which doesn't suffer from 8.3 but still doesn't work), or the fault of Interface Manager for not utilizing the filesystem to its advantage, is irrelevant. It doesn't work well enough to use.

I will admit to one error that you point out, however. There is indeed the option to open multiple viewers, and I regret my error.

I would also like to point out the purpose of this piece, as stated in the beginning, was to examine key features of any operating system, and point out the differences in these four. Nowhere do we say which platform is "the best", but rather which platforms are well suited to different types of environments. I am a fan of all of these systems, and the champion of none. Each gets an equal amount of attention and respect.

Personally, I like NeXTSTEP, and wish I could use it more often. But after my experience with THE OTHER ENVIRONMENTS, I can see weaknesses in NeXTSTEP that prevent me from doing this. This is not to say "NeXTSTEP sucks", which I never even hinted at, but to say "these are areas that need addressing."

Do you not agree that there are weaknesses in all systems? Did I not

point out the weaknesses in each of these platforms equally?