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MG: Apple Plays Games
by Tuncer Deniz

In late February Apple and Motorola held a Game Developers' Kitchen in Austin, Texas. Lasting 3 days, Macintosh game developers from around the country came to 'optimize' their new and upcoming games. On hand were Apple engineers (mostly from the team developing Copeland or System 8) who spent countless hours helping developers squeak out every ounce of speed possible out of their games. The results were quite impressive. Most of the developers saw over 50 percent gains in speed in their games, some even more. In fact, some developers who originally planned to just ship just low resolution versions of their games decided to create high resolution versions as a result of the speed gains they were able achieve. DOOM II is a perfect example of this. As a result of the kitchen, DOOM II increased its frame rate two-fold making a high resolution version possible. How cool is that?

The way the kitchen was set-up was rather interesting. All developers had a Power Macintosh in their hotel room where all the coding was done. Apple engineers went from room to room and helped developers fine tune their code. In the end, the developers themselves started helping each other out, which I found extremely enlightening. All in all, roughly 10 developers went home happy with significant speed improvements to their games.

Another thing that surprised me were the caliber of new games at the kitchen. Although I'm legally bound by Apple not to reveal the names of these games, I can tell you that I was shocked by some of the titles I saw there. It looks like 1995 will undoubtably be an incredible year for Macintosh games and I'm extremely excited about the new titles that will make their debut this year.

The mastermind behind the Game Developers' Kitchen is Apple's Games Evangelist, Eric Klein (see this month's interview). It is Klein's goal to not only bring more games to the Macintosh, but to help developers bring 'quality' titles to the market. The Games Kitchen brings Apple and the game developers together to create better looking and faster games for the Macintosh platform. Quite a unique form of cooperation!

Apple also does other things to promote gaming on the Macintosh. Co-marketing is one example. Recently, the company placed multiple full page ads in a number of computer gaming magazines touting the advantages of the Power Macintosh. It remains to be seem

whether these ads will bring PC gamers to the Macintosh, but new titles like DOOM II and Marathon will undoubtably spark interest in the minds of gamers in need of new machines.

Bundling is another form of co-marketing between Apple and game developers. Many of today's Performas are bundled with games and demo CD's containing games are bundled with many Apple CD-ROM drives.

A lot of Apple's recent success in bringing more Macintosh games to the market has to do with their Game Evangelist Eric Klein, who's enthusiasm for games is quite remarkable considering what he has to go up against. Being the underdog is no easy task and he has the unenviable task of trying to convince money-hungry PC game developers to develop on a relatively small platform (compared to the PC platform). Despite these odds, he's managed to convince a number of game publishers to develop for the Macintosh.

Ah, but that's not to say that Apple is completely out of the dog house yet. One of the Macs biggest problem continues to be the lack of Mac products on the shelves of computer retail stores. Go to an Egghead Software or Babagges store and you'll find most of the Mac shelves empty. Why? Well, the problem seems to be that after the initial copies of a new Mac title are sold, the retailer fails to reorder more. So the shelf becomes dry as bone until some other new game comes along and repeats the cycle.

Most of us have learned that buying mail order is the only way to go if you are looking for a particular or hard to find Macintosh product. Call MacWarehouse, MacZone, and any of the other mail order houses and chances are they'll have the title you are looking for. But one of the problems here is that not all game titles are available through mail order. Some of these mail order houses charge publishers outrageous advertising fees for their catalogs and many publishers balk at having to pay so much money (often thousands of dollars) for a dinky little ad.

So where does that leave the consumer looking for Game X? Unfortunately, with not much of an option. Calling the publisher and buying the game directly is ultimately the only option left.

I recently got a call from an irate person who had bought a brand new Performa and was livid about the fact that he couldn't find any Mac game titles on the retail shelf. He found our flyer in a game box and decided to call us for an answer. We explained to him that in the Macintosh world, mail order business accounts for roughly 50 percent of all Macintosh sales. I'm willing to bet there are thousands of other Performa users frustrated by the lack of software in retail stores and do not know about the mail order houses.

Which brings me to the point that Apple still needs to work on the perception retailers and publishers still have about the Macintosh and that is that it is a market in which you can't make money. Which, of course, is absolutely false. It needs to convince these people to carry more Mac products, and to show them that they can make money on the Macintosh market provided they stock the shelves and push those items a bit. Apple also needs to educate its customers in terms of where to find 3rd party products, for example, at mail order houses. Finding a Performa at Montgomery Ward is one thing, but finding software for it is another story.

All in all, however, Apple is trying its best to get the word out about the Macintosh games. That is, that the Macintosh is a great game machine with exciting titles available for it. Is it working? Well, it sure looks like it. Like I mentioned before, some of the titles I saw at the Game Kitchen flat out knocked me out. It finally convinced me that Apple is 100 percent behind games and that they are here to stay.