y Karen Kaye

There was no denying it. It was, after all, right there in front of my eyes. Still, the implication of what I was seeing struck me as so significant, that all I could do was shake my head and stare in disbelief. The source of my astonishment was the cover of the January '96 Macworld.

Having long ago become accustomed to a certain amount of stuffiness from the publication which humbly refers to itself as "The Macintosh Authority," it is difficult for me reconcile my paradigms with the image on the front of the magazine. It features an original piece of art depicting a composite toy with elements from pinball and slot machines, supporting the headline article: "Best Mac Games." In contrast, the review of the Power Mac 8500 is relegated to small print.

But the real surprise is inside the magazine. The amount of print space devoted to games must set a new record for the publication. The reader is treated to Steven Levy's Game Hall of Fame awards, which are traditionally handed out this time of year. In addition, the reviews section of the issue contains six, count'em, six game reviews. This is a far cry from the usual assortment of hardware and desktop publishing tools typically covered by this periodical.

Macworld is not alone in sensing a substantially increased consumer demand for computer games. MacUser, the other pillar of the Macintosh community, has also produced a year-end issue focusing on games. There is a terrific article on technological advances which will impact entertainment software development in the coming months, and of course the ubiquitous game recommendations, which are so popular around the holiday season, are present as well.

It should come as a no surprise that MacUser's game coverage seems more thorough than that of its competitor. The magazine has been providing expanded entertainment coverage since the July '95 issue. The space devoted the subject is a meager three pages, yet it does cover a broad spectrum of topics from children's titles to reference CD-ROMs. Most of the reviews only present a tiny snapshot of the product, while some are mentioned only in a single summary sentence. There is obvious room for improvement, but it is a definite start.

While I think it would be naive not to realize that the sudden focus on computer games in both publications is primarily attributable to the holiday season, it is nonetheless an important sign of the increasing emphasis given to the entertainment segment of the Macintosh software market. Games on the Mac are suddenly a hot topic. If for no other reason, than the fact that every columnist seems to think that they alone know the reason for the resurgence. Naturally, they feel compelled to write about it.

I for one, don't have a unique insight that I think I need to share. I suspect that there is no single reason for the revival. Instead, a number of events have occurred which may have contributed, to varying degrees, towards raising developer interest in the Macintosh market. Although the increase in the number of MacOS games shipping in the last quarter of 1995 is significant, I still don't see us having achieved anything remotely resembling parity with the DOS/Windows community.

If I can be sure of one thing, it is that I disagree with those who claim that the revival is due to radical new technologies introduced by Apple. Although QuickDraw 3D, QuickTime VR, MPEG cards and new sound technology will undoubtedly revolutionize games in 1996, they are not making much of an impact on this year's holiday offerings. The reason for this is simple. The development time required for most pieces of software is a year or more, and since these technologies are relatively recent, the designers could not have had much time to take advantage of them.

On the other hand, if I do look back to a year ago, there is a particular event which may have had something to do with the proliferation of game titles. The introduction of the first PowerPC Performa meant that a complete computer system delivering superior performance, was now available in a price range that made it very competitive with a Pentium based system. Best of all, it could be placed on the shelf at Sear's next to its Windows competitor. I have no figures on the total numbers sold, but three of my friends each snapped one up. The days of the 68K machines were rapidly coming to an end.

Had it not been for a crippling parts shortage earlier in the year, Apple's sales for 1995 might have been phenomenal. Despite this self-inflicted wound, the number of Macintoshes actually sold was fairly respectable. As reported in The Wall Street Journal, Apple shipped 788,000 machines over the past three months, good for 13.1 percent of the domestic market. Not content to rest, the company recently announced rebates and price cuts which position several of its PowerPC Performas under the $2000.00 mark, held by many industry experts as the magical target price for successful home computer sales.

This brisk pace has created a substantial consumer base for Macintosh entertainment products. Still, the availability of affordable PowerPC machines may not have been sufficient, had Apple not devoted both talented people and considerable resources to assist and encourage game software development. Yves Martin, Apple's Home Entertainment Solutions Manager, and Eric Klein, the former Game Evangelist, are just two of the people who made a difference in the choice of entertainment titles currently shipping. Such efforts on the part of Apple have finally succeeded in convincing such software powerhouses as Id and Origin of the financial benefits of supporting the Macintosh. And more is yet to come.

Despite all of this, the cover of the January 96 Macworld is still significant. It represents a milestone of sorts. Not only does it indicate that the computer entertainment industry is taking the PowerPC machine seriously as a gaming platform, it also shows that the Macintosh establishment is ready to accept changes in the Apple community's demographics. Those who have traditionally treated the Mac as a very serious product only to be appreciated by the consummate professional, may have finally come to realize that

games will not be the ruin of the "Little Box That Could."

Indeed, they could quite likely be responsible for its renaissance.

Karen Kaye's occasionally irreverent column covers the Macintosh entertainment community, with a focus on adventure gaming, strategy titles and whatever happens to cross her cross her mind at the time. She welcomes your comments at KarenKaye@eworld.com.