he Mac is the finest desktop computer system in the world. We are in agreement, I expect. Yet, in spite of the excellence of the hardware, software, and peripherals we use throughout the day, we have become accustomed to the idiosyncrasies and unexpected surprises inherent in their usage. For the beginner, these quirks can create a multitude of new sensations ranging from traumatic distress to challenging euphoria. For the experienced Mac user, the computer is such a firmly-embedded fact of life that the ups and downs of crashes, upgrades, and incompatibilities are usually taken in stride.

I am in the middle of reading two books at the moment. I urge you to read them both, at your leisure, one word at a time. Don't dash through them as you normally do with computer manuals and magazines. These books are serious works of computer literature, and deserve your full attention, with note pad and pencil near by.

Sharon Zardetto Aker's Mac Almanac is a primer on the operation and history of the Macintosh. She knows her stuff, and writes with a clear voice. The book was prepared in 1993, before the prevalence of System 7.5 and before the Power Macs became dominant, but don't let that accident of timing fool you: I consider this 900+ page book to be required reading. I hope Ziff Davis and Sharon combine for a Second Edition within the next year, but the current book is still a genuine treasure. Sharon sets the stage for everything you need to know, with the right blend of lore, logic, and lecture.

Pogue and Schorr's MacWorld Mac and Power Mac Secrets should be your next book to study. These two guys are good. The Third Edition of this remarkable book is due to be published in 1996, but the current Second Edition is still a valuable resource. The text is spiced with dialogs between David and Joe, and we sense the human element behind all the technique. The included software has received mixed reviews, but I think you'll find something useful on the diskettes. I guess the Third Edition will utilize software on a CD-ROM. We'll know soon.

The bookstores are loaded with guides and bibles for System 7.5. All these new books are fairly good, yet no single book addresses the system spectrum from 7.0-7.5.1 (or, now, 7.5.2) to my satisfaction. Therefore, stick with Almanac and Secrets for now.

I use the books in three ways:

  for trouble-shooting and problem-solving on specific topics

  for thorough, complete descriptions of routine procedures

  for study and review, to help me 'in the background.'

Which leads me to consider what the Mac has done to our collective consciousness: we have become so accustomed to the brilliance of our computers that we take them for granted. Yep. It's true. You and I expect them to work perfectly, most of the time, and to be able to sprint immediately after they stumble. Life can be grand, but it can also be cruel. Are we setting ourselves up for a major setback?

I personally am not remotely concerned with 'market share' or 'computer wars.' I have made a well-researched decision into which computer brand I choose to use, and I'm happy with my choice. You probably are, too. I'm prepared to weather the learning curve for new applications. I know I'll have to sink a bundle of money into a new Power Macintosh 11500/400MHz/72MB/4GB/8xCD Mac or clone some day fairly soon, with System 8 or 9 (Copland, or perhaps Gershwin?). When the time comes, I'm ready. I'm neither a laggard nor a techie, which means, I suppose, that I'm a middle-of-the-road Macker with a lot of mileage under my mouse.

So where's the black hole? It's time.   We never have enough time to do all that we intend to accomplish on our Macs. Why not? I don't get it, or do I? Let's blame/praise the proliferation of Internet, bulletin board, and online opportunities for the diversion of our otherwise productive energies. Have we, as a group, become addicted to the online world, as we never could have anticipated? Are those hours spent downloading demos, searching for shareware, and wandering through web sites the seeds of our personal undoing? Time will tell, but here's my hunch:

We are losing the ability to schedule our time, given the unlimited availability of our computers for both desktop/laptop productivity/entertainment and open-ended 'onlining.' I am a fairly disciplined person, but I find myself easily letting the minutes drift into hours once the "You have new mail" or "Check out my web site" demon penetrates my skull. How about you? Where do you see this trend leading us? I need to force myself to watch my menu-bar clock, and set my own limits; yet I often exceed them, in spite of my noble intentions.

My epal, Paul from Pittsburgh, reminds me that: "You will tend to gain speed in the online community as you become more familiar with it and become more discerning in your travels. Separating the wheat from the chaff becomes a bit easier. I don't spend nearly as much non-productive time on the computer as I used to. Of course, I still spend more time than in the past, but I also do much more than I used to do." Time remains the decisive factor, whether online of off line.

What about white elephants? Well, they are the computers themselves. A few years from now, these big plastic boxes will be considered pre-Columbian, which is fine. Software, it is

predicted, will exist only on the Internet (or its successor), and will be utilized exclusively via ultra-high-speed access. But I like my Macintosh! Televisions, telephones, and stereos have retained their basic forms, more or less, through the decades. Why should computers be any different? The answer lies in the technologists' state of mind.

The pioneers who design our computers are smart, creative people. Never before in history has there been such a gigantic commercial outlet for the technically talented worker. Our modern computers beg us to keep improving and streamlining them, so we do, and we purchase them by the zillions. Today's innovation is tomorrow's trash.

Please remember the inner-city schools and charitable organizations. They deserve your old Macs. Paul agrees: "Poor schools still find an older computer preferable to none at all. The World Wide Web might not be as pretty in black-and-white, but the information is still there. I'd personally give up speed and color if my only choice was no Internet or AOL at all, versus everything at 2400 bps on a Mac Classic." Old computers are useful, but I'm saddened by the fact that, as consumer items, their life-cycle reduces many of them to garbage remarkably soon.

Yet there remains a golden goose, about to lay a golden egg on your desk or lap (a strange image, I'm sure). What we of the personal computer generation (age 3 to 93 last time I looked) have absorbed is the sensation, the knowledge, the certainty that there really is a better, faster, cheaper, more interesting way to do just about everything these days. Sure, we still need to read books with paper pages every so often, and we still have to think of a word before we can check its spelling or its synonyms, but we really, really know the results are better than the "old" way.

I'm neither old-fashion nor cutting-edge. I'm making my way, one day at a time, with a viable destination in mind. Throughout my day I utilize my Mac to my (not its) utmost, realizing the computer is probably several steps ahead of me at any given time. I am gratified and satisfied in the process, but since time is now measured in picoseconds, it's time to get back to work. You too. Keep in touch.

ohn Nemerovski's monthly column explores the trends, psychology, and emerging culture of the ' digital renaissance'   and how we are all adapting to this "Brave New World". John looks forward to feedback at johnemer@aztec.asu.edu.