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It's not your fault — you're not alone

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by Ken Gruberman

I don't know if what you're about to read is an editorial, commentary, or just a computer-oriented version of Andy Rooney-esque blathering. All I know is that I have to write it... for all Mac users, novices and veterans alike. There are some people I know who really need to hear this, so if your Mac has been invoking your wrath lately, read on... it'll make you feel better!

Just what are you trying to tell me?

For about a year now I've been noticing an alarming trend from those around me who use Macs. Whether novice, intermediate or even advanced user, the complaint is always the same: "why is my Mac doing this? It makes no sense! I thought these things were supposed to be user friendly! It must be something I'm doing wrong... but what?"

My Mac has fallen, and it can't get up!

As computer users this complaint has always been with us, but in the past year it seems to have grown from a trickle to a torrent. Report after report, call after (sometimes hysterical) call tells me of hung screens, blinking question marks where the happy Mac used to be, mysteriously damaged hard disks, programs that used to work perfectly but now have strange quirks to them, sluggish Mac performance for no apparent reason... always with the same conclusion: "it obviously was something I did. It must be my fault." People naturally believe this because they have been taught that computers are perfect. We've all heard it sometime in our lives: "computers don't make mistakes, people do."

Well, guess what folks... Macs are not perfect. Not by a long shot. In fact, it's important to remember that all computers are, in reality, quite stupid. They don't know how to do anything unless told to, and inside the CPU the same instructions are repeated over and over again tens of thousands of times a second. They give the illusion of being smart because they work so fast.

Now, before I go on, let me clarify something right away. It's true that because of ignorance, arrogance, and carelessness, there are things you can do to make your Mac break down, but what I've been seeing an overwhelming amount of recently is the Mac acting up on its own. In other words, to paraphrase a TV doctor, "you're not alone — it's not your fault!" If this is really true, the question must arise: who is at fault?

It's not polite to point, but I'm doing it anyway

Much as I hate to say it, I must point to Apple Computer as the chief culprit in sabotaging the confidence of its users. They probably don't realize they have caused this to happen, but it's happened none the less. The reason for this is, as I see it, the Mythology of the Mac.

This mythology has been "bundled" with the Mac for as long as it has been around. The first great myth is: you don't have to read anything in order to use a Mac; it's so easy, you can just figure it out!

When it was introduced in 1984, the first Mac commercials centered on how much easier it was to use than an IBM PC. An image I especially remember from the early days concerned user manuals: the announcer talks about typical PC manuals as three huge 3-ring binders hit a desk with a loud thud. Then, as he mentions how much easier a Mac is to learn to use, two small booklets float, featherlike, to the desk's surface. The inference was, of course, that you didn't have to read very much — if at all — to learn to use a Mac. It may have been somewhat true then, but modern Macs come with as many as seven — count 'em — seven manuals! I can assure you they make a very loud noise when dropped on a desk.

This “just turn it on, and it’ll come to you” concept, in one form or another, permeates Mac advertising to this day. “The computer for the rest of us,” slogan continued the tradition, and even the latest Windows-bashing ads, while gloriously on target, also make the Mac look easier to use than it really is. In my experience, the vast majority of new Mac users who experience problems have never read the Owners Guide manual that tells them how to properly operate the computer. They thought that you could just “figure it out” based on the famed Myth of the Mac.

I’m taking my ball and going home

The fact is, the Mac is simply a computer, and like all computers, you have to learn how it works, not the other way around. You play by its rules or you don’t play at all. The rules are simpler than a DOS machine, but they are still rules.

Now, please don’t get the wrong idea from these statements... I like the Macintosh. I’ve liked it ever since the first time I set eyes on one. I could easily say I love it, but I’m married and saying something like that can cause problems much worse than a balky computer. Naturally, when you love something that much, you want to share the experience with other people; that’s why I’m in a user group. User group members hear Mac horror stories all the time and with the same woeful refrain of “they said this thing was easy to use, but it’s not!” The Myth again. It becomes painful after awhile.

Don’t get a complex over this

A second frequent cause of user inferiority-complex is... complexity. Software complexity, that is. As the Mac gets more powerful, software gets more powerful to take advantage of the hardware’s potential. The software pushes the envelope with more and more features (many based on user requests), growing bigger and bigger in size and memory appetite, and new Macs are invented to accomodate them. And the cycle starts anew. Every so often, the Mac system software itself changes, causing software developers more pain and misery as they try to cope with the changes. The system software becomes more and more complex. As with most things in life, the more complex a thing is, the more likely it is to break.

Here’s a sobering example of software escalating out of control. In January of 1985, Microsoft Word 1.0 debuted. It required a svelte 653k of disk space and only needed 384k of RAM. The latest version, 5.0a, takes up an astonishing 6 megabytes of hard disk space when fully installed, and, under System 7, needs 4 megabytes of RAM! Sure, Word can do lots of things now it could never do before, but at what price?

At its core a Mac is more complex than a DOS machine because of its fabled GUI, or Graphic User Interface. The friendly desktop, with its icons and menus, is actually a facade. Hiding just underneath are all those 1’s and 0’s that most of us hate. The Mac’s Finder has, from its inception, been a boon to computer users because it “runs interference” for them, taking away the drudgery of DOS commands and letting the user get work done. However, you should remember that it takes a lot of power to make something look simple. As Mac system software provides more “ease-of-use” features, and software tries to make itself more accessible to less experienced users, the size and complexity of that software must expand. The downside? This ballooning hardware/software arena also creates an easier way for bugs and incompatibilities to manifest themselves.

Share and share alike

Let’s not forget our friends, Inits (better known as System extensions) CDEV’s and less-than-perfect shareware. I used to have 5 or 6 little icons marching across the bottom of my Mac screen when I started in 1987. Now I have almost 2 whole rows of the things. I try to cut down, but... you know how it is. Mix these little memory vultures together with the afore-mentioned sophisticated software, throw in a little well-meaning but unstable shareware programs, and... voilà! The Mac starts having a cow.

Which brings us to the second great Mac Myth perpetrated by Apple: all software is compatible

with the Mac and each other. The original guiding philosophy of Mac software design called for all software, from all companies, to have things in common. Such as, how they access Mac functions, and how consistent they are to each other. You know, Command-Q is always “quit,” Command-N is always “New,” and so on. Again, it started out like that, but over the years programmers (most noticeably from Microsoft) have pulled and tugged at the guidelines or just out-and-out ignored them.

Informing software companies of incompatibility problems doesn't always work either. I can cite you several examples of well-known software companies “warring” with each other. I've actually heard this when I called a software publisher with a problem: “Our software works right, it's that other program that needs fixing. The problems you're experiencing are their fault! We can't be responsible for them!” Calling the other company gets you “Oh yeah? Well, they didn't follow proper Mac guidelines, so tell them to shape up!” The poor user gets caught in the middle.

Plug and pray

The final Mac Myth that's still being perpetuated by Apple is: Mac hardware is so easy to set up, anyone can do it! You just plug and play! The people who want you to believe this have obviously never (a) dealt with a SCSI chain and (b) never tried to hook up a Multimedia setup.

I can honestly tell you that, after 5 years of using a Mac, I have no idea how a SCSI chain really works. I have never found anyone else who does, either. Yes, a Mac fits the “plug-and-play” scenario as long as you never attach peripheral devices to it. As soon as you add an external hard drive, CD-ROM player, or cartridge drive, (I have all three) things take a turn for the weird.

For example: even though I have given all 3 of my devices have their own unique SCSI ID number (a requirement) the Mac won't even turn on unless they are stacked in a certain order! I have the CD-ROM stacked on top of the cart, which is on top of the external drive. If I switch their positions, even though the cables remain in the same order, I get a black screen and 5 tones. Likewise, the cable order — from Mac to CD to cart to HD — also doesn't like to be changed. Talk about quirks!

I'm all hooked up

In theory, it shouldn't matter in what order things are hooked up or how they sit on each other, as long as they're terminated properly and have no conflicting ID numbers. My esteemed friend and fabulous know-it-all, Robert “The Prez” Wright, tells me that it could be resistances, or capacitance changes, or electronic “echoes,” but in the end who really knows? What we both know is that this is not plug-and-play and never has been. SCSI science is more voodoo and magic than hard facts.

You must remember this, a Mac is still a Mac

So, the next time you throw up your hands at a bomb icon, or blinking question mark, or frozen screen, and think “what did I do to cause this?” remember the following:

- It's not your fault that you believed the Mac took no real effort to learn to use properly
- It's not your fault that your favorite program works differently depending on what kind of Mac you run it on, regardless of how much RAM there is
- It's not your fault that your favorite programs and INITs may not get along with each other, and may actually be, at times, hostile to each other
- It's not your fault that hooking up more than one SCSI peripheral to a Mac is almost impossible to do correctly
- It's not your fault that there are now so many “undocumented features” in both system software and regular software, features you really need to know in order to use them correctly, that you can never remember them all
- It's not your fault that Mac Owners Manuals never stress the importance of logical ways to organize the contents of your hard disk, or about the importance of backing up, or that you'll have to de-fragment your hard disk every once in a while
- It's not your fault that Macs, in general, are now harder to learn to use than ever before. (Don't believe me? The current edition of The Mac Bible is now over 1100 pages long! What other

explanation can you think of for this?)

It's Face-the-Music time

What, then, is your fault? That one's easy: not taking any action to change your situation. The things I've discussed in this article are annoying but, for the most part, can be dealt with. What I'm asking you to do, especially new users, is to take control of your life by taking control of the Mac. You should be the master of your Mac, not the other way around. If it screws up on you, swat it back into shape. Sometimes this can take a few minutes, sometimes a few hours (for the real weird stuff) but, barring hardware defects, if you try hard enough you'll always win.

Are you tired of always having to call someone because you don't understand what your computer's done to you? Are you tired of wasted hours, wasted days, trying to get something done that you know should be easy? Are you mad as hell? You're not going to take it anymore? Good! Here are some guidelines I've thought of to help you get out of that "victim" mentality.

Remember, I'm not saying that if you follow them you'll never have a problem again. I'm saying that if you follow them, you'll understand what has happened (at least, most of the time) and know how to fix it yourself.

1. I can't stress this enough, and I've even mentioned it earlier in this article: read the manuals!! If you read just one manual in your life, make it the Mac Owners Guide/Guide to System Software. If you do this, and understand it, you can successfully bluff your way through about 80% of the software you encounter. If you find there's a program you like and use a lot, read its manual too! Cover to cover. If you think I'm over-emphasizing the propensity of Mac users to ignore manuals, why do you suppose that every manual you've ever seen has a page near the front called "For People Who Never Read Manuals"? Who told them not to read manuals? I sure didn't!

2. Don't stop there... read either MacUser, or MacWorld, or better yet, MacWEEK. And of course, read the MacValley Voice in its entirety every month. If you don't consider yourself a casual computer user, don't treat your computer casually. If you have questions, don't be embarrassed to ask them. Do you know what I get asked more than anything else? "How did you learn all that stuff you know? How'd you figure it all out?" I read, that's how. Books, periodicals, you name it... sometimes the same book or article 2 or 3 times. Coming to the User Group meeting every month helps as well. Remember that computer software and hardware is constantly evolving. You cannot stick your head in the sand about this; if something isn't working right with a program, chances are there's a new version that's fixed it. If you're not informed, you won't know about it and you'll be the one that suffers. In a perfect world, all software companies would tell you about every new version that comes along, but most don't, and probably never will. That's your responsibility.

3. On the other hand, remember the time-honored axiom: "If it ain't broke, don't fix it!" This means, if you've got an SE with 1 meg of RAM and Word 3 and things are working fine, leave it alone. If you decide you need Word 5 and System 7, be prepared to up your hardware as well. Keep your hardware and software on the same productivity level if you can. If you must use the latest advanced software, but your SE's now too slow, you'll either have to accelerate it or buy a newer, more powerful Mac. That's just the way life is in Computer-land. Get used to it.

4. Don't become a "Jack of all trades, Master of none." Try to completely master one program at a time. Don't jump from spreadsheet to spreadsheet, word processor to word processor, always looking for the better one. It's taken me two years to completely learn the programs I use for my bread-and-butter: Microsoft Word and Professional Composer. And I mean completely; I now know them like the back of my hand. It's not that they take that long to learn, but almost all competent software has this concept: a few weeks to become familiar with basic functions but a year or more to reveal their true depth. Hang in there, and keep plugging away. If you hop from one program to the next you may never understand how powerful any one of them really is.

5. Figure out how logically to organize your hard disk and name files. Stick to this plan. Every so often weed out unused files and unnecessary applications. Archive them to floppies. Rebuild your

desktop every once in a while as well. Keep your hard drive clean and neat.

6. Backup your drive often... as a minimum, every day is a good idea. The time comes to all of us when tragedy strikes, and if you have a backup you can laugh in the face of catastrophe. When I'm working on an important file, I've been known to backup to a floppy every few minutes while I'm working on it! Murphy's law of computing states: the more important a work in progress, the more likely it is that something bad will happen to it.

7. When a certain program misbehaves and you can't figure out why, call their technical support line. I'm amazed at the number of people who don't do this. They call friends, relatives, anyone with a Mac, but not the tech support people. That's what they're there for! Are you upset at paying long distance charges for many of these calls? Sorry... it's another fact of Mac life. To get the answer to a problem when a big job is on the line is worth the money, so go ahead... live a little. If the problem is happening at a time when the tech support offices are closed, go to MacValley Online or AOL. You can usually get an answer from someone within an hour!

Help is on the way

What's the next software revolution? Smart software — software that actually learns from you and adapts to the way you use it. Software that may actually be able to teach you how to use it as well — in a way that you'll understand. It's on the way and should be here soon.

There are those who wonder, myself included, if this will truly be an advance. Will it make for better Mac users, or just dumber ones? I've spent years (and pages in this article, come to think of it) exhorting Mac users to learn how their computer operates so they can use it more efficiently. It is said that knowledge is power. If software becomes smart enough to fill in the gaps of a users knowledge, will the power be in someone hands other than yours? Only time will tell.

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