

MG: Fair Game

by Ross Scott Rubin

Everything Old Ain't Newton Again

Apple touted it as a revolutionary new way of computing that would change the world amidst some of the grandest hype the industry has ever seen. When it finally arrived, however, people were quick to point out its shortcomings. It was expensive and its screen was small and monochrome. Its memory was inadequate. Its pointing device required practice. And its software was sadly lacking. What kind of toy was this anyway? It was the first Macintosh.

Apple did many things right with even the first Mac, but tweaking the machine for games wasn't one of them. There was no color and no joystick port. And Apple, whose II platform had attracted some of the best games designers in the industry, turned its back on game developers, afraid that a good selection of games would worsen the Mac's already unenviable perception as a toy.

That was a mistake for which many people feel the Mac still suffers. There are now at least three decent game controllers for the Mac with more coming, and color has been a staple for six years. The Mac has a rich if small library of excellent games available for it today. Yet many game developers still see the Mac as technically inferior, even as Apple has devoted resources to encouraging entertainment developers. Surely, if Apple were to start over today, it would make sure to develop a platform more attractive to game developers.

[lack and White and Wrote All Over](#)

Enter Newton, Apple's first new computing platform in nearly 10 years. Forget what the airheads at Newsweek say; the MessagePad is cool and it really works. It's black — well, dark green, and sleek. It has a RISC processor. It recognizes your handwriting . . . most of the time. And as far as gamers should be concerned, it's Apple's way of letting us know that there are worse things than running games on PowerBooks.

After all, the limitations of Newton are strikingly similar to those surrounding the first Macs; and a new generation of blind drones have surfaced to cry "toy." From the small, monochrome screen to the lack of game buttons, much less a joystick or directional controller, Newton is a pretty unattractive game platform.

It didn't have to be this way. Nintendo has done pretty well with a smaller monochrome screen at a lower resolution than the Newton. Zoomer, the forthcoming Newton knockoff that will go head-to-head with its inspiration on price, includes game buttons.

Hasn't Apple learned anything? Well, maybe something.

[A Change of Heart](#)

Both the first Mac and the first Newton had Apple logos on them, but they are from two entirely different companies. The first game for the Macintosh — the Puzzle desk accessory — faced a long fight before being allowed into the System file. But the Newton has embraced its first game — a kind of SuperTetris knock-off — as a trick to get people to learn its handwriting. The company is willing to let the device's built-in productivity and nearly built-in communications to dispel the toy myth without any game-bashing help from mother Apple. In fact, Newton's parents will be producing some of the better games for the PDA from the get-go.

Nevertheless, the first products out of the chute don't seem encouraging. One of the first game packages expected for Newton is ClarisGames. This collection is cumulatively about as interesting as golf, if you're watching the grass instead of the ball. The package consists of such time-honored snoozers as Pegs, Hangman, a Maze, and a MasterMind derivative. As one developer sneered, "Great, let's recompile some old BASIC programs in NewtonScript." What's more astonishing is that another Newton developer is planning to come out with a similar package that concentrates on this old nonsense.

If developers insist on porting games to Newton, I'd much rather see the Infocom classics on PCMCIA or a Deja Vu. Regardless, though, it's painfully evident that some real games developers need to look into Newton for the platform to offer any breakthrough entertainment programs.

The shareware scene has already been more encouraging. Mike O'Connor of CompuServe Navigator and EasyPlay fame has released a delightful — and free — version of Video Poker for Newton, while Michael Herman has released a shareware version of MasterMind. Its interface is not as endearing as Poker's, but as those Windows users say, "Hey, it's got a cool icon."

The Starring Role

Apple has tapped several third party developers whose wares they will publish under the Starcore rubric, including two of the better-looking entertainment titles. One — Dell's Crosswords and Word Games — should prove popular to wordsmiths. It has hundreds of crosswords, word searches and other diversions well-suited to the pen interface. The other title, Columbo's Mystery Capers, lets you question witnesses and search for clues at a crime scene. This one has some amusing graphics potential. The use of the detective's name came late, though, so let's hope Apple can squeeze some personality into the title.

Newton isn't doomed for games. Its small screen boasts a high resolution. Its speaker lets it play enriching sounds, and its beaming ability presents interesting mano-a-mano possibilities. By making extensive use of pop-ups and limiting writing, developers can tap Newton's potential.

Even when the price drops to around \$500, the first Newton won't attract much of the GameBoy development crowd. Had the hardware been designed differently, though, the MessagePad could have run GameBoy quality. Nevertheless, third party developers are going to have to crank it up a bit if they intend to compete with Starcore.

The incentive is there. The first Newton may not have been aimed at a games market crowd, but there's nothing stopping Apple from shooting at a lower end model. In fact, I would be surprised if we didn't see models more aggressively aimed squarely at the "edutainment" crowd within a year. A couple of buttons would have made Newton a far more attractive gaming platform, but when life gives you bad apples, you just have to make apple juice.

Ross Scott Rubin is the author of three books about the Macintosh and has written for MacUser, MacWEEK, Mac Home Journal, and other publications. He is also a forum consultant in America Online's Macintosh Hardware Forum.