

y Karen Kaye

IF WE BUILD THEM, WILL THEY COME?

About a six months ago, things were looking outright dismal on the Mac front. Of the vendors signed up to produce Mac Clones, only one, Power Computing, could claim any measure of success. They were garnering critical accolades by producing fast, top of the line machines and successfully marketing their version of a Macintosh cleverly hidden inside a PC box. The other company producing Mac Clones was Radius, but their dream of producing a success story was turning into a financial nightmare. The simple reality was that the consumers were not responding to a machine that offered precious little beyond an appealing enclosure.

But then something interesting happened. The relatively stagnant Mac market suddenly exploded in a flurry of activity. Five companies announced some 15 new MacOs compatibles, covering the whole gamut of consumer needs from bargain priced entry level systems, to multi-processor speed demons, to the most powerful personal computer currently available — the PowerTower Pro 225. Yet, despite all the hoopla surrounding all these new systems, as well as the entry into the market by such giants as Motorola, there are no clear signals yet of the dawn of a new day for MacOs compatibles.

It is not even clear yet whether all the new licensees have done very much at all to increase the market share held by the MacOS. The prognosis is by no means rosy. Recent reports in trade journals seem to vacillate between a marginal increase in the popularity of Apple's operating system, and a more pessimistic outlook that states that the only thing that the Mac Clone makers have been able to achieve is draw existing customers away from Apple. If the end of year reports due in a few months confirm this, there is a strong likelihood of Apple's stock sinking to an all-time low.

Still, it is hard to ignore all the new MacOS systems that are budding all over like a bed of wild flowers. While Apple has streamlined its product line, other companies — especially Power Computing — have begun to offer a myriad of MacOS computing options to the consumer. The competition has had a two-fold impact on the Mac community: lower prices and faster product updates. Best of all, the consumers purchasing entry level systems have benefitted the most.

Last September, Apple had just rolled its basic Power Mac 7200, with a 75 MHz 601 chip, 8 MB of RAM, no L2 cache, and a 500 MB hard drive. Consider that the same \$1,800 today could get you a PowerCenter 132, with a 120 MHz 604 chip, 16 MB of RAM, a 512K L2 cache, and a 1 GB hard drive. The differences between these two systems are nothing short of astounding, especially when one considers that the same configuration in 1995 was available in Apple's PowerMac 8500 at a price of over \$4000!

There is a real potential for a tangible recovery in Apple's fortunes. The part of the equation that remains difficult to reconcile is Apple's ability to deliver System 8.0 on anything remotely resembling a schedule. The lingering questions about the availability of the operating system, especially for the much touted Common Hardware Reference Platform (CHRP) machines, is tempering the enthusiasm of the one key segment of the industry required for the MacOS' success: software developers.

The abundance of hardware options are yet to be matched with a commensurate dramatic increase of software titles. The options are certainly increasing for Mac users, and this is certainly true among companies producing entertainment titles. Porting delays are still inherent in the system, but the situation is dramatically improved from that which existed over a year ago. Ultimately, the true indicator of the MacOS' success in reaching the hearts and the minds of the American consumers is the day when Mac titles begin to show up in substantial numbers at local computer and electronics chains.

But I don't mean to sound pessimistic, especially when there is plenty of reason to celebrate. There hasn't been a much better time to trade in that old 68040 Mac for a new spiffyer model, and with the drop in RAM prices, I would even recommend treating oneself to another 16 MB to sweeten the transition. Although I would not have said this 6 months ago, the present and the immediate future does indeed look good.

As a matter of fact, it may even get so bright that I'll have to find my old pair of shades.

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 KMKaye@aol.com.