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MG: *Fair Game*
by Ross Scott Rubin

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Will Houdini Make Mac Games Disappear?

Jane Yuppiedrone, Centris owner, discovers that her colleague has sent her the latest revision to the team's financial model. Not only is it on a DOS disk, but it relies heavily on macros created in Quattro Pro for Windows. Without so much as wishing a pox upon Philippe Kahn (well, some of us might do that), she sits down and strikes a key combination. The Finder disappears and up comes Microsoft Windows' File Manager, complete with buttons in three dimensions and file names in eight letters.

This is the dream of Apple Computer, Inc. You remember these guys, the revolutionaries? The ones who likened PC users to lemmings going blindly off a cliff? That was when Apple was a small company with little to lose, and even a FedEx delivery guy with an Uzi couldn't get the Mac through the front door of a major corporation.

A Corporate Conjurer
But the times they have a-changed. Nowadays, Apple is having a hard enough time trying to save itself, much less the rest of the world. As the Mac approaches its tenth anniversary, Apple has come to a sad realization. Even the best evangelists in the world can't get every DOS developer to port their wares to the Macintosh.

Those who do often take months or even years to get out a Mac version. Even Microsoft, who you'd think would have this cross-platform stuff down by now, still releases their Mac applications (those that they decide to port) a month or three after introduction for that

other GUI. Since 1984, Mac users have always had reasons to run DOS programs, and the old file sharing solution hasn't always cut it. Neither do current DOS-running solutions. SoftPC and the Orange486 cards are both impressive technically, but the former is just too slow and the latter is just too expensive. So after years of just saying no to DOS software, Apple is ready to throw in its rainbow-striped towel.

The product is code-named Houdini (that's HOUD.INI for you Windows users), and it borrows elements from the two DOS software solutions available today. Like the Orange486, it will be a card with a genuine 486 processor on board, although the clock speed at this time is unknown. Unlike the Orange486, this one may even have Intel Inside. Like SoftPC, it will allegedly let you use the Mac's RAM, hard disk, keyboard, mouse, and SCSI peripherals with your virtual PC. And according to the trade weekly MacWEEK, the price may be pretty close to SoftPC, too—less than $500 and possibly as low as $299! The implications are obvious for the Mac gaming community. If Apple can keep the board's street price at under $300, it will be an easy check-off item at large corporations, but it will also be a reasonable option for the (admittedly well-funded) home gamer.

Could This Be Magic?
Unlike the original Houdini, Apple's version will not enthrall everyone in its audience. In particular, some Mac game developers are wary of the card. Detractors have gone as far as to insist that the card will mean the end of Mac game development. At the very least, they argue, you can forget about popular DOS developers creating real Mac versions of their games; Houdini will kill the incentive.

Their scenario goes something like this. If Houdini really does allow Mac users to play DOS games with a modicum of effort and expense, Mac game developers will have a level of competition beyond their marketing departments' worst nightmares. A good many Mac games developers are small shops struggling even in their cloistered worlds. They wouldn't be able to compete against the giant advertising and marketing resources of an Electronic Arts.

And why should any Big Blue-blooded DOS developer spend considerable time and effort porting their game for the Macintosh? I mean, after all, it has only 20 percent of the market, and besides—what about that card?

Mysterious Magician
Indeed, what about that card? For as much as we know about Houdini, we don't know even more. An on-board 486, even at a low clock-speed, should keep those who need to run Windows happy and provide enough pure horsepower for many DOS games. According to the MacWEEK story, the card will have a VGA chip on board, also good enough for the vast majority of DOS diversions. There are even whispers that the card will have its own joystick port. Yet, the critical unknowns of sound and speed prevent us from predicting whether Houdini will turn the Mac into a valid DOS gaming environment. If the Orange486 is any indication, Houdini may well fall just short.

First, Orange Micro's PC-on-a-NuBus card runs mainstream DOS and Windows applications at an acceptable clip, but can only display smooth animation during game play when its window is set at 320 X 200, a quarter of the resolution of a Mac-standard 13" of 14" monitor. One game developer insists that Apple will get around the update problem by spitting VGA out directly to the full Mac screen. However, it remains to be seen whether Houdini will actually be able to do this without the purchase of a separate VGA monitor, an expense that only the most diehard gamers with the largest of desks would accept.

Second, how many of those diehard Mac gamers lusting after DOS games have Centrises and Quadras, which Houdini will require to run? The Centris 610 may be the price/performance darling of the home market right now, but it is still relatively expensive compared to Apple's crowded middle-end machines offering IIci performance. The Centrises also don't enjoy the Performa distribution channels where many home users buy. If Houdini is wildly successful, Apple might consider doing a NuBus or LC bus version. That, however, is a dim prospect in the new bottom-line religion at Apple, especially considering that DOS emulation under PowerPC is on the way in and NuBus is on the way out.

Finally, Houdini will allegedly have no slot for a standard PC expansion slot, and that means no sound cards. Unless Apple is willing to invest substantial development time redirecting SoundBlaster calls through the sound port (a technical challenge and market improbability in a product aimed to run mainstream business applications), those DOS games may emit the pitch-varied monotone that is a sound card-less PC's game soundtrack or be silent movies altogether. Sound is an important part of the gaming experience, especially among Mac users. And even any DOS game mavens worth their joystick port purchase a SoundBlaster or compatible sound card for their gaming pleasure. Games without sound are about as entertaining as C-SPAN.

Beating the Odds
Nevertheless, it is conceivable that Apple could tweak the video update speed and use some tricks of Sound Manager 3.0 to produce SoundBlaster-quality effects through the Mac's built-in speaker. Do the Graphic Simulations and Delta Taos go home and call it a day?

Hardly. The reason is that native Mac games, like any native Mac applications, have competitive advantages when done right. (Sadly, this may say more about the lackluster state of many Mac games.) DOS games don't do QuickTime. They don't do AppleTalk. They don't have windows and don't let you switch into the background. But more importantly, they don't follow Mac conventions (or any conventions). If you think Mac users are real persnickety about this stuff on Mac software, wait till they get a load of managing conventional memory and a half-dozen autoexec.bat files! Even when trying to run games, trying to configure a PC is about as fun as having one fall on you. And we're not talking laptops here, either.

As for the DOS developers, there are many reasons why they don't port. Remember that only a relative handful of DOS games are in heavy demand by Mac users anyway, Houdini, if it does run DOS games perfectly, and if it is available for mainstream Macs, will not truly sway borderline DOS developers, only offer them another lame excuse. History has shown that Mac users just don't go in for ports that don't take advantage of the Mac; why will they suddenly flock to these games when they have to pay $300 to run them.

The PowerPC to Run DOS Best

Purists can mourn that Apple is admitting at least partial defeat. But he who fights and runs away lives to fight with an object-oriented OS. You don't need to be a stockbroker to realize that Houdini makes the Mac (well, certain Macs) a more versatile platform. Releasing it is a sign of strength, if not market savvy. That's because you can bet your bottom DOS prompt that once PowerPC-based Macs ship next year, Insignia Solutions will have a version of SoftPC that effectively emulates today's mainstream PCs. Even if it doesn't do a hot job of animation, it will effectively quell the business users who occasionally need to run some legacy DOS or Windows software, i.e., Houdini's market.

Furthermore, don't think that Houdini will mean the end of evangelism for Apple, which would leave the hardware business before turning the Mac into another PC clone. The Macintosh didn't get where it is by running second-tier applications and it isn't going to its future there, either. Sound Manager 3.0, QuickDraw GX, and future versions of QuickTime are providing a slew of options for Mac game developers. Don't think they aren't noticing.

Emulators always face a moving target and the games market is a fast one. A 486 seems pretty fast today, and PC games continue to evolve, incorporating advances like Mac-like SuperVGA resolution. Mac developers who want a piece of the future, though, all have an eye on PowerPC. If you think Mac games today outshine their PC counterparts, imagine what developers will be able to deliver under mass-market-priced PowerPC-based Macs offering two to four times the performance of today's Quadras! Those on the Intel side, of course, have Pentium to ponder, but it will be a while before most gamers can afford pricey Pentium-based PCs, impeding advanced game development. On the other hand, if Pentium does catch on in the home, that's where the hot PC games will appear, and no Mac gamer will care about '486 emulation.

Houdini as a concept is intriguing, maybe even threatening to productivity applications developers. But even clone makers with years of experience sometimes run into compatibility glitches. How can it be that Apple's first stab will be seamless and perfect? If Houdini offers Mac users more freedom of choice, I'm all for it. For $300, though, there's a good chance it will let a fraction of Mac gamers run choppy, awkward, silent, low-res games. Presented with that option, I'll take a Genesis and a Super Nintendo to go.

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. Fair Game appears occasionally in Inside Mac Games.