

## Why There Will Always Be an Apple (or Something Like It)

Suppose that we had a year to get everyone in higher education off Macs. We could do it. It would be traumatic, but everyone would get over it.

Would we be worse off at the end of that year? No. Would faculty research falter? No. Would students take more time to learn less? No. Would administrative systems grind to a halt? No. But if our goal in moving people off Macs were to have full homogeneity, a single computing

dog. We hate Goliath. Inertia. Laziness. Stubbornness. Fashion sense. Love of square pixels. A gift from Mom and Dad.

You might expect to hear Apple advocacy from a Dartmouth person like me. The Mac-centric spread of Dartmouth College in the May 13, 1984, *New York Times Magazine* arguably put Apple on the higher education map. Dartmouth is an Apple bastion. But put aside your prejudices. My advocacy is not as simple as you think.

packets. We built our own routers to run AppleTalk.

Now, eight years later, only half of all Dartmouth computers are Macs. Of the fall 2001 class, 80 percent had Dell computers, and the scales keep tilting. At Dartmouth, previously all Mac, Apple will soon reach its once-stated 20 percent national market-share goal for higher education. Although this is due in part to my CIO thumb being on the scales out of functional and financial necessity, it's due



provider akin to the pre-deregulation phone company, it wouldn't work. Something like Apple would reappear—and with it something like Macs.

There are rational arguments why there will always be an Apple. Apple excels in niche markets, much as do luxury cars and designer labels (ever notice that if there are computers in ads for niche products, they're always Macs?). Macs are superior for people in certain kinds of jobs, such as art and advertising. Apple represents Microsoft's loyal opposition, providing stimulating competition for the ruling party, with the consumer as the winner (well, OK, maybe it's not so loyal). There are even instances in which Apple provides the only viable solution.

And of course there are not-quite-so-rational arguments: We love the under-

I arrived at Dartmouth in 1984, along with the Mac. That Mac was a 128K, crash-all-the-time, two-application masterpiece. Coming from Indiana, I was "Mr. DOS." I clucked and snickered at the Mac. But then I saw how quickly it won people over. And it didn't win over just DOS users; much more important, it won over people who had wanted nothing at all to do with computers.

Through about 1994, Dartmouth was essentially all Mac, and arrogant about it. After a brief ramp-up period, from 1984 to 1994 every member of Dartmouth's faculty, student body, and staff had at least one Mac. We were a 100 percent wired campus, with an AppleTalk network that ran everywhere long before the "wired campus" became common, let alone desirable. We tunneled IP in AppleTalk

far more to widespread changes in how people think about computers and how the market supports them.

Indeed, mainstream tendencies like those I've seen at Dartmouth are discernible within Apple itself, and Apple tendencies are discernible in unlikely places. At a recent meeting of higher education types at Apple's headquarters, the most typically Apple presentation was by three Office developers from Microsoft. They appeared to be about fifteen years old. They were so excited about what they were doing: proud, giggling, serious, confident, exchanging little glances with each other as they did their thing in front of the adults—bright, fast, dear, and cute! They were right out of Apple-past. But their paychecks come from Redmond, not Cupertino.

I remember a whole company of those types. Some wore pink sneakers; others wore floor-length dusters and mirrored sunglasses. They put in appearances at conferences as if they were movie stars, and they were treated as such. They had business cards that said "Software Developer and Ski Coach." Sure, there was still that pesky vendor/customer thing (they had product, we had money), but it was often superseded by friendships and working partnerships based on a common nonbusiness cause.

So it was all the more surprising—or perhaps just all the more depressing—that the most typically Microsoft display of behavior at this same meeting was by an Apple executive. He got mad and yelled at us—us, "the customers"—for providing constructive feedback. D'oh. So much for the old days.

Why this behavior reversal by Apple? In large part, it is because Apple has become confused about its goal: does it want to become a majority provider (as its sales press releases suggest), or a dominant provider within functional niches

(probably the most defensible position), or the dominant provider within certain kinds of organizations, such as colleges and universities (a focus that gets much lip service but is hard to distinguish in pricing, licensing, and developer policies)? Apple is not succeeding in becoming the majority player. Nor is it attending to the needs of the niche, at least not the higher education niche. And it's not able to match the functionality of the majority players. It never understood that by seeking a 20 percent market share across higher education, it would decrease its influence on campuses like Dartmouth, which are important places for Apple, even if it might raise its influence on other campuses, which aren't important places for Apple and never will be. Perhaps Apple should have had two different goals, but it's too late for that to work. Apple has also missed a related point: it is harder and harder to market to niches *within* higher education. Colleges and universities are organisms, not loose aggregations of small groups and individuals. As desires for support grow and budgets decline, consistency across plat-

forms goes a long way. Niches vanish.

In light of this market and cultural decline, many counsel me that life would be much easier for everyone, at Dartmouth and in the rest of the world, if Apple simply disappeared. (This includes my spouse and, amazing to say, my kids.) Developers often find the Mac to be an unnecessary problem: higher product-development cost with very little return. Lab managers would prefer to support only one kind of computer. Stores could carry fewer items if there were no Apple and would lose less money from carrying inventory.

Yet here I am arguing that we must always have an Apple. Why?

None of the rational and quasi-rational arguments I sketched above really tell us why. My argument is subtler, more cultural, very Apple-past: we need something like Apple because having things like Apple is how the universe works best. Yin and yang. Microsoft is not the void, so there has to be an anti-Microsoft. Apple is like a file that recreates itself if you throw it away, a disk image that keeps reappearing on your desktop regardless of ejects and reboots. (We wouldn't even have that metaphor were it not for Apple.) Apple embodies a primal IT archetype, the outlier whose obsession with being different and inspired impels change, albeit change not always to its own benefit.

So this is why we need an Apple. It may not always be great to have Apple around, but we'd be worse off without it. Microsoft is trying to control and profit from anything that is or can be digitized: content, access to content, transactions, our identities, and the tools used to work this all. Apple forces some positive basics, like how to get people turned on to and excited about using IT, how to inspire and get plain-old work done, how to think about an interface. Periodically, it throws hammers at the picture on the big screen.

This, I believe, is the way it should be. There must always be an Apple. We will need to create one if there is not. We're much better off keeping the one we have.

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