

## Why Switch to Macs?

### *Thoughts from a recent switcher...*

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I've been asked for my thoughts on the "PC vs. Mac" issue, so I decided to take the opportunity to develop my thoughts in a brief essay. If you want the "bullet point" version, see the very end of this document.

My first instinct, when asked, "Why switch?" is to respond, "Why not?" This, I recognize, is hardly a well-developed answer, but the reason I go there immediately is because I believe that it is presumptuous to put the entire burden of proof on the Mac side. Another way to look at this is to ask, "Why decide on PCs?" I feel strongly that the two should be seen as equals, for all practical purposes,<sup>1</sup> and the decision should be made based on the intended use and the merits of each.

#### **The Pros for PCs**

The fairest way to approach this is to first consider why one might decide to buy a PC.<sup>2</sup> Here I have to admit: they are nearly ubiquitous; it is almost certain that you can go anywhere in the U.S. and find a compatible system, and a familiar operating system (hereafter "OS"), if you are a PC user. This bodes well for the PC user. After all, who wants to get stuck without a compatible machine?

Beyond that, I cannot argue with the fact that there is a massive amount of software available for PCs. I think that it would be nearly impossible to overestimate the number of software developers turning out new and, often, innovative applications for the Windows OS. While many developers port their products to both platforms, it is fair to say that the PC version usually gets more attention and innovation. This is especially true in the game world; there are many more games made for PCs than for Macs.

Similarly, there are more hardware necessities (keyboards, mice, monitors) and peripherals (add-on devices like printers, scanners, etc.) made specifically for PCs. These days, a lot of hardware is made to be universally compatible, but even then some things are oriented toward PCs rather than Macs. And those things that are not made to be universally compatible are difficult to adapt, at best; some are outright impossible to use with anything other than a PC.

Some will argue that PCs are more affordable, as well. Mostly, this claim is based on memory more than the current state of affairs; however, in some cases then this argument still holds water. For example, a burned-out soundcard or faulty memory can often be replaced more inexpensively for a PC than for a Mac.

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<sup>1</sup> Of course, the obvious claim to inequality (for the PC side) is the overwhelmingly large market share. I'll address this issue briefly, but I must also ask: is market share an important factor in your daily computing? I know it never enters the picture in mine...

<sup>2</sup> Let's suspend, for now, the reality that "PC" simply means "personal computer"—of which category both Macs and Microsoft Windows-based machines are members. Since the moniker originated from the fact that the Microsoft operating system was developed specifically for a computer called the "IBM PC™," and subsequent knock-offs were commonly called "PC-compatibles" (later shortened to simply "PCs"), we'll assume that my use of the "PC" label means generically a Microsoft Windows Operating System machine (since that is far too long to keep typing out!).

So the case could be made that someone must buy a PC if they had very specific needs that required it. If, perhaps, there was a particular piece of software that everyone in your office or department used, and it was available only for PCs, then obviously you would need to go PC, right? (Maybe not; I'll address this more in a minute.) Similarly, there may be a specialized hardware device that was both irreplaceable and essential, and it is a PC-only peripheral. In the event of this type of circumstance, the decision is basically made for you; why are you bothering to read this essay?

That kind of scenario probably accounts for a solid 1% of the PC world. Most of the time, on the other hand, the decision is made based on one of two things (or both together): familiarity (“I’ve already used PCs, but never Macs”) or expense (in the sense that the buyer already owns certain software or hardware that, to some degree, predicts what they will buy). Since it takes about two hours for a PC user to get comfortable with the differences in the Mac OS (which is at least the same amount of time as it takes to become familiar with a Microsoft upgrade), the first reason strikes me as ineffective. I can understand the rationale behind the second reason; however, considering the frequency of software upgrades and hardware improvements, this should not be seen as an insurmountable obstacle to changing platforms.

And of course both of these reasons (especially the second) are predicated on an assumption that the buyer-to-be is already an owner and user of a PC. If the buyer-to-be is not already an owner of one machine or the other, they are not yet a “stakeholder” in any platform, and have no reason not to at least consider a Mac. If the buyer-to-be is a PC owner but not a user—because they find it cumbersome, unfriendly to use, hard to master, whatever—then a change to a Mac might be the best thing for them.

### **The Middle Ground Debate: Pro-Mac Counterpoints to PC Objections**

Inevitably, there are plenty of PC folks who feel threatened enough by Macs to argue against even considering a Mac. My guess is that they fear that the Mac will too often emerge the clearly superior machine, so they want to discourage open-minded buyers from even giving Macs a look. Here are a few of the common arguments I’ve heard, and why I don’t buy them.

#### *Macs are too expensive!*

Historically, this has been true, mainly because Macs are made only by Apple while PCs are mass-produced by dozens (maybe hundreds) of companies—which drives the costs of parts and labor down, by way of competitive pricing (and, yes, the larger market share does help here, since there is a larger market for PC parts). In recent years, however, the prices have leveled to a very competitive range. These days, for example, a standard-sized Mac notebook computer costs about the same as a PC notebook with the same specs; a compact Mac notebook (with a 12-inch screen and lightweight case) is actually a good bit less costly than a comparable PC. In fact, a case can be made (and will be, in the next section) that, across the board, Macs are actually less expensive than a comparable PC machine.

#### *Compatibility always gets in the way.*

Again, once upon a time there were problems with the compatibility of files from one platform to another, and Mac users had difficulty getting their documents into a format that was useable by a PC user (remember, though, that back then PC users had the same problem within their platform: WordPerfect™ users couldn’t read Microsoft Word™ users’ files, either!). These days, there is seldom a problem with this. I exchange files with PC users all the time, as well as continuing to use all of my own PC-originated files, and never have any trouble with compatibility. And in the rare

case that you have a document that won't be readable by a PC, Macs can convert any document to a PDF!<sup>3</sup>

*There is no software/hardware for Macs.*

It would be foolish to try to argue that there is as much software for Macs as for PCs, as I've already stated. And as I acknowledged before, a lot of hardware is made to be used primarily with PCs—though almost all of it can be used with a Mac. But that doesn't mean that software and hardware are hard to come by for Macs. In addition to the broad variety of both software and hardware that Apple produces for their computers, they recommend over 23,000 products made by third-party developers on their website. (And that doesn't account for the products that don't have an official Apple endorsement.) Plus, a lot of the stuff made for PCs is cheap—not just in cost, but in quality. In my experience, the products made for Macs are generally of a better quality.

*Using networks is too difficult.*

Actually, connecting to any network—whether it is run on a Mac system, Windows XP™, NT™, 2000™, or whatever—is as straightforward and seamless as anyone could ask. I've actually heard that it is more difficult to connect certain PC OS to other PC OS networks (for example, connecting a Windows XP™ machine to a Windows 98™ network) than it is to connect a Mac to either one. This is true of that great big network—the Internet—as well. Macs connect very easily to the Web (and all other parts of the Internet, as well), and have little trouble keeping up with their PC companions.

*Macs are slower.*

The stated “clock speed” of the processors doesn't lie, does it? Actually, yes. Without going into too much technical detail (which I only understand to a limited degree, anyway), let me say this: the architecture of the Mac is completely different from that of a PC. So, for example, while a PC might run a processor with a “clock speed” of 3.7 Ghz, while a comparable Mac is at 2.5 Ghz, that PC is bringing data to and from the processor at a different rate of speed than the Mac. Think about it this way: the fastest toll-booth operator in the world can still only serve one lane at a time—and the PC architecture is like having one operator to the Mac's two or even four. And on top of that, PCs send all of their video processes through the same chip as everything else, while Macs use a different video chip. But the bottom line is this: do they “feel” slower? Go to the Apple store and play with one—are you tapping your toes waiting on processes that the PC you have at home blitzes through? I doubt it.

*PCs are as easy to use as Macs.*

When everything is running great on a PC, then the actual function is pretty much as easy as Mac. But what happens when you buy a new printer, scanner, or digital camera—how easy is it to set up in your PC? The last scanner I installed on my PC had to be re-installed three times before it would even be recognized, and the accompanying software had to be re-installed twice. *The same scanner* installed on my new Mac as soon as it was plugged in, and the software worked the first time. Plus, how often are things “running great” on a PC—especially with viruses and spyware bogging things down? How many times a day should I have to re-start my computer? (With my Mac, by the way, the answer is, “Zero.”) And what about changing settings, customizing, and aesthetics? I never did learn how to work with things like “config.sys” and “exec.bat”—but I know that I needed to if I wanted to get certain things accomplished. Macs make it easy.

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<sup>3</sup> PDF stands for “Portable Data File”—a document compatible with Adobe's universally-used Acrobat Reader.

## What Macs Do that PCs Don't

Still not convinced? Let me go through a few more reasons why Macs are simply great machines—in comparison to others, or all by themselves. Here are some of the things Macs have going for them:

1. ***The Mac OS.*** One glance at a Mac will tell you there's something different about it. Just the icons and text have a cleaner, more aesthetically pleasing look than Microsoft Windows. Don't think aesthetics are that important? Try staring at the screen of a Mac for a day; notice how your eyes don't hurt like they do when you use a PC? OS X (pronounced "Oh Ess Ten") is not just nice to look at—it's nice to use, as well. It is a powerful system, combining the best elements of three well-established operating systems to bring a level of function and form that is miles ahead of anything else out there. There are big features, like the fact that Unix integration means that heavy-duty research applications and 1000s of free programs will run on your Mac. There are small features, like system-wide searching, spell-checking everywhere you type, and producing PDFs from any print command. And the latest version of the Macintosh operating system—OS X 10.4, "Tiger"—brings a hoard of amazing new features to the picture.
2. ***Fully Software-Loaded.*** Macs come ready to play. The most basic Mac comes with a wide array of software already on-board, including: Web browser, E-mail client (I know—PCs have these, too), Quicken, the iLife suite (iPhoto digital photo organizer, iTunes jukebox/media player, GarageBand recording software, iCal calendar/day planner, iMovie video editor/creator, iDVD media burning software, iChat video/audio chatting and conferencing), Appleworks (Word processing, spreadsheet, database, presentation, paint/draw applications), Address Book, Worldbook Encyclopedia, several great games, and other software. Several of Apple's programs—including iPhoto and GarageBand—have won awards for their elegance and ease of use. The software alone is worth several hundred dollars—and if you were to try to buy the same stuff for your PC just to get it to a comparable level, the price would go through the roof.
3. ***Hardcore Hardware.*** Even the mid-range Dell or Compaq uses the cheapest hardware they can get away with, leaving you with shabby video, mediocre sound, and extra costs for "add-on" features that should be standard these days, like wireless network cards. Macs come with the real deal already built-in: high-end displays (the best around—Apple displays are universally considered the top of the line), even on the least expensive laptop; fast video cards; high-quality audio; wireless and wired networking included. Add to that the fact that even the smallest Mac laptops have full-sized keyboards, and all of their laptops are lightweight and durable (not just the \$3000+ models). Combine the better hardware with the bundled software and every Mac looks about \$400 less expensive when compared to its PC counterpart.
4. ***Reliability and Service.*** Macs are always at the top of the rankings for the most reliable machines, both in the desktop and laptop categories. They are simply well-built. When they do have trouble, however, they have a secret weapon: Applecare. Apple's support services are simply amazing; from the "Genius Bar" at the local Apple stores (where they will often fix your computer for free while you wait) to the service they will bring to your front door (I've heard of replacement parts arriving at 9am the morning after a 10pm service phone call), Applecare is also top-ranked for the service provided to Mac users.

5. *(Almost) Crash-Proof.* Macs never display a “blue screen of death.” They seldom lock-up. They don’t require regular re-boots. They just work. Think about it: the hardware is designed and assembled by the same company that writes the operating system, so everything is made to work correctly. Even the third-party software and hardware complies with very tight standards in order to get the Apple go-ahead. The result is a machine that gets out of the way so that you can do the work you want to do with your computer. Your focus doesn’t have to be on the computer itself, but on what you need to get done.
6. *Microsoft Office.* Ironic, isn’t it? But Microsoft Office is the most popular software on the Mac platform, too. Thus, you get complete compatibility with your PC counterparts, but you get the friendly and pleasant environment of the Mac. By the way, what was the latest edition of MS Office for PCs? If you guessed “Office 2003™” then you’re correct; but what is the latest version for the Mac? Office 2004 for Macintosh™ introduced a host of new features that aren’t even available on the PC. (The next version of MS Office for the PC is not due out until the end of 2005.) And the “Student and Teacher” edition is an affordable \$150.
7. *A Clean Bill of Health.* As of mid-2005, there are no (as in zero) viruses in existence for the Mac OS. At the same time, there are over 100,000 viruses on the PC. Over 90% of PCs are infected with viruses, and allegedly it takes the average PC only 20 minutes of use (from the very first start-up) before it is infected with its first virus. Add to that the growing problem of “Malware” (spyware, adware, and other programs that install themselves onto PCs and cause havoc and privacy concerns) and there is reason enough to leave PCs behind for good. Macs are unaffected (for now, at least) because they were made to be secure machines—nothing can install itself onto a Mac without password-enabled permission, which rules out all known methods of propagating viruses and malware. And they’ve got built-in firewall protection, so others can’t try to hack into your system.
8. *Virtual PC.* Another irony: Microsoft™ offers a program called “Virtual PC” that runs Windows XP™ (or Windows 2000™) within your Mac. So, if you’ve got a truly irreplaceable program that runs only on Windows, you have an option for continuing to use it on your Mac.
9. *Longer Lifecycle.* These days, PC users are accustomed to replacing their entire system frequently. The lifecycle of a PC laptop is, at best, two years, and desktops last only a bit longer. But Macs are built to last; I know a Mac user who just got a new iBook, and she seriously expects to use it for the next five to six years. In our house, we have an iMac that was built in 2000, and it should easily last another year or two. This is part of the reason why “market share” is not such a compelling argument for Macs; of course a company whose product lasts more than twice as long as its competitors will sell fewer of them. Nevertheless, there are an estimated 10 million Macs in use today—that’s a pretty strong number for a company that regularly gets panned for its low market share.
10. *Beauty in Design.* Macs aren’t only pleasing to the eyes on the screen—they look good all around. In a world of black and grey plastic, Macs stand out with their white acrylic and brushed aluminum. Whether it is the iBook, the iMac, or the Mac Mini, the design that goes into the case of the computers is just as amazing as the rest of the Mac experience.

## Conclusion

In short, the Mac is a great machine with a lot of power and ease of use. One friend commented, “I’ve never heard anyone say, ‘I sure do love my PC.’ But people do say, ‘I love my Mac.’” Why? It may be the friendliness, the fact that it is pleasant to look at, or the dependability. It may simply be the fact that a Mac will not be your adversary, always getting in the way of your work and productivity. But at the end of the day, you may find that you will love your Mac, too. Who knows—you might even start to ask, “Why would anyone buy a PC?”

## Summary:

### *Reasons for PCs*

- Ubiquity of compatible machines
- Quantity of software available
- Quantity of hardware available
- (Often) A more familiar system

### *Reasons for Macs*

- The superior Mac OS
- Great software and hardware on-board
- Excellent reliability and service
- Few-to-no crashes
- Microsoft Office and Virtual PC
- Virus and malware-free
- Longer lifecycle
- Aesthetically pleasing all around

## Want to make the switch?

Visit Apple’s special website designed to answer all of your switching questions:  
<http://www.apple.com/switch>

Or, visit an Apple store in-person or online; they even offer educational discounts on hardware and software. Go to their website (<http://store.apple.com/>) to make your purchase or to find a retail location near you.

Also, don’t miss David Pogue’s excellent article, “Make the Switch” in the June 2005 issue of *MacWorld* (<http://www.macworld.com>), a guide to nomenclature and compatibility for those already entrenched in the Microsoft™ Windows PC world.

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