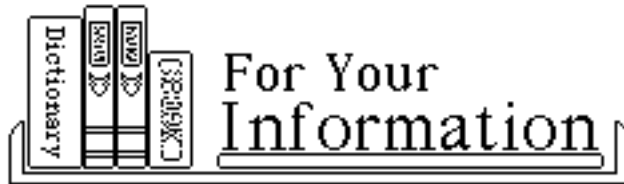




These folks were the last to become Mac Help Desk client/friends this century: Penelope Ottan, John Lauter, Chuck & Linda Alexander, Laurie Adams, AlphaGraphics - Campbell Rd, Richardson, Lindsay Short, Barbara Waddington, Genea Madison, Sandi Taylor, and Hickory Street Glass. Welcome all!



iSay, Apple's iStrategy Is iMpressive

by Adam C. Engst

It turns out that the biggest surprise of the keynote wasn't that the Mac OS X user interface appeared, or even that no hardware announcements were made. Rather, what many thought was just a warm-up to the big news turned out to be the big news: Apple's Internet strategy.

In the Out Portal -- As Jobs noted in his keynote address, Apple has a number of Internet assets, including 9.5 million visitors to Apple's home page each week, strong Internet support built into Mac OS 9, and powerful Internet server software in the form of WebObjects running on Macs running Mac OS X Server. So Apple started looking at what sort of Internet services they could provide to Mac users as a way of further differentiating the Macintosh from Windows-based PCs. In essence, Apple's goal is to turn www.apple.com into a "portal" for Macintosh users via iReview, iTools, and iCards.

Before I get into the specific services, let me explain the portal concept. The basic idea behind a portal site is to provide a broad set of services that will cause users either to set that site as their browser's default home page or at least to attract them to visit frequently. It's not a bad idea, and most of the large search engines like Yahoo, Excite, Lycos, and InfoSeek have adopted portal strategies when they realized that being just a search engine wouldn't let them expand as much as they wanted. The problem with portals, though, is that I can't see how there can be room for that many. For instance, we use My Yahoo heavily for personal things because we like Yahoo's collection of services such as TV listings, headline news, stock portfolio tracking, telephone number lookups, maps and driving directions, and movie times. But the fact is that My Yahoo satisfies our needs for those services it offers - we never bother to go to any competing site.

That's the major fallacy of the portal concept in my eyes - it will work for a few sites, but the major portals are likely to meet most people's needs, leaving too few eyeballs available for smaller portal sites that offer similar types of services. Since all portal sites are supported by advertising, those eyeballs are important.

However, Apple has tweaked the portal model in three ways. First, Apple's portal goes beyond the standard services offered by other portals and avoids those that provide no added value to the Macintosh user. So yes, free email, free Web pages, Web site reviews, and greeting cards are relatively common, but they're combined with the access-control system KidSafe and the Internet storage solution iDisk, both of which integrate tightly with Mac OS 9 itself. So while most portals focus on information such as the items for which we use My Yahoo, Apple's portal is primarily functional. Each of the tools, even the Web site reviews, is aimed at helping Macintosh users do something. As the slogan says, "iTools. At your service."

Second, Apple's new Internet services lack banner advertising entirely because Apple doesn't intend to make money from eyeballs, they want their Internet services to increase the overall value of a Macintosh. Buy a Mac with Mac OS 9 and you have access to all of Apple's services for free. Users of other operating systems need not apply. Since the Internet is the primary driving force behind increased computer use - market research shows 93 percent of iMac owners are on the Internet - it makes perfect sense for Apple to increase the Internet appeal of the Macintosh with these services.

Third and finally, from what I can see so far, Apple has done an extremely good job with these Internet services in terms of design, execution, and integration. Let's look at the details of each service now, all of which are accessible from the new tabs at the top of Apple's Web pages.

iReview -- The interesting thing about iReview, which is Apple's Web site review service, is that the massive growth of the Web caused similar services to fall by the wayside somewhat over the years. There were simply too many Web sites to review, and the companies doing it felt that increasing the number of listings was more important than comprehensive reviews. So with iReview, Apple is going back in time slightly, but with a service that I think new users in particular will appreciate. For added breadth of opinion, Apple took a page from Amazon.com's book and lets other iReview readers rate the included sites as well.

iCards -- I gather that electronic greeting cards are one of the most popular Internet services, and as much as I thoroughly applaud the ecological savings of moving online from wasteful paper-based cards and envelopes, I have to admit that most online greeting cards I've seen... well, they just suck. The art ranges from ugly to tacky, the necessary advertising brings a sour taste to the well-wishes, and you generally must visit a Web site to see your card, a process that sometimes requires typing special codes. Steve Jobs stated his disgust even more forcefully during the keynote, saying that these services make him "embarrassed to be a human." Harsh.

But he has a point, and Apple did a great job with iCards, licensing a ton of attractive art and graphics (including some images from the popular Think Different campaign), letting you create cards with GIF or JPEG images you've uploaded to your iDisk, using a clean design for both the process of card creation and the actual look of the cards, and sending the cards as images in email rather than forcing people to visit Web sites (of course, the impact will be greatest for those that use a modern email program that can display graphics). The card image in email is always a JPEG, so animated GIFs lose their animation, which could otherwise be used to make an "inside" of the greeting card.

Email -- The first of the iTools is Email, which provides you with a free Mac.com address (wonder how much Apple paid for the Mac.com domain?). Free email is nothing new, but few services offer free POP-based access to email since there's no easy way to display ads to users retrieving mail via POP. (In a cursory glance, the only truly free POP access service I could find was Yahoo! Mail, and there you had to agree to receive an advertising message once per week for POP access.) But since Apple doesn't need to do ads, you can retrieve your Mac.com mail via any standard email program. If you have another email address, you can forward your Mac.com email, and you can also set up an auto-reply if you go on vacation or wish to avoid email for a while (it appears to respond with only a single message per sender, as it should to avoid overwhelming mailing lists). You're limited to 5 MB of email in your account, but downloading mail deletes it from the server, freeing up space for new messages.

Apple can auto-configure Outlook Express 5.0 to work with the iTools Email, and they provide instructions for Outlook Express 5.0 (and earlier versions) and Netscape Communicator, since both are bundled with the Mac OS. Also available are minimal instructions for configuring other email clients - you need to enter only four pieces of information:

Username: Enter your iTools username.

Password: Enter your iTools password.

POP server: Enter mail.mac.com

SMTP server: Enter your ISP's SMTP server.

KidSafe -- The second of the iTools is KidSafe, a collection of Web sites that have been approved by a group of what Steve Jobs called "certified teachers and librarians." Unlike other such lists, KidSafe ensures that children don't accidentally see inappropriate sites by integrating tightly with Mac OS 9's Multiple Users feature and Sherlock 2. The idea is that when a kid logs into the Mac with their username and password, KidSafe prevents the kid from seeing any Web site, FTP site, online chat, or online game that hasn't been approved either by the KidSafe reviewers or by the owner of the Macintosh (in other words, you can manually add sites and services that aren't yet on the KidSafe list so your kid can see them). The Sherlock 2 integration ensures that the kid can, for instance, use Sherlock to search for normally dangerous words like "sex" and find pages relevant to genetics without being inundated with online pornography.

KidSafe has already been the focus of some controversy, since many people feel that parents and educators should assume the responsibility for monitoring and guiding children's use of the Internet personally (and that's certainly an ideal to strive toward). However, the reality is that there are numerous situations where an adult cannot be present the entire time a kid is using the Internet, most notably in schools and libraries where a single adult may have to work with many children simultaneously. Also note that KidSafe is primarily useful for preventing younger children from accidentally seeing things they aren't old enough to understand, not from preventing older and more technically astute children from intentionally visiting sites deemed inappropriate by adults. Older children who want to explore freely will find a way to avoid KidSafe, either by guessing the owner password or simply using another computer that lacks KidSafe.

iDisk -- The most interesting of the iTools is iDisk (not iDrive, as many people have accidentally said), which is a 20 MB virtual disk on the Internet. It's too bad Apple didn't introduce iDisk with the first iMacs, since it's a perfect answer to the lack of a floppy disk. Once you've logged into iTools, you can go to the iDisk page and mount your iDisk on your desktop, just like any other disk.

The magic behind iDisk is AppleShare over IP, which has been in the Mac OS since Mac OS 8 and can even work back to System 7.5 if you update the AppleShare Client Chooser extension to version 3.7 or later. Because iDisk uses AppleShare over IP, you can make aliases to your iDisk or even to any of the folders or items inside, and access them just as you would items on any network disk without using the iDisk Web page. I haven't yet figured out the password to use with an alias to someone else's Public folder - the login dialog box shows the other person's username for the username, but there's no hint what the password might be. Until we figure that out, you'll have to go to the iDisk Web page to mount someone else's Public folder.

Inside your iDisk are five folders, Documents, Movies, Pictures, Sites, and Public, along with a SimpleText document telling you about the iDisk. You can't delete or rename those folders, but they're the base of much of the iTools integration. For instance, you can copy GIF or JPEG images into the Pictures folder, and once you've done that, those images are accessible for custom iCards and for creating a photo album on your iTools Web page. The Movies folder is similar - copy QuickTime movies to that folder to include them in an iMovie Theater on your Web pages. The HTML documents that actually comprise your Web site live in the Sites folder, and you can just drop any HTML document or file in there to make them accessible via the Web to anyone, even if they're not using a Mac. For sharing files with people who are using Mac OS 9 and iTools, copy files to your Public folder, after which others can mount your Public folder like a disk and copy files out of it. No one may drop files in your Public folder though. The Documents folder is simply a place where you can store files and keep them private; it could be a great place to keep a backup of your most important files.

If you're concerned about security, remember that Mac OS 9 can encrypt files. Just select the file and choose Encrypt from the File menu. Enter a passphrase, wait for the file to be encrypted, then upload it to your Documents folder. This is also a great way to share sensitive documents via your

Public folder, since anyone can see and download them, but without the passphrase, no one will be able to read them.

To reduce overhead, Apple limits the amount of time you can keep an iDisk mounted on your desktop. In my testing it seemed that I had about 15 minutes of idle time before the 2 minute warning (sometimes it was a 3 or 4 minute warning). Just opening a folder in the iDisk was enough to provide another 15 or 20 minutes, but after 60 minutes you'll be kicked off even if you have been using the iDisk. To continue using your iDisk, just connect again. Although the warning dialogs are modal, like other AppleShare server messages they disappear automatically under Mac OS 9 if you're not at your computer, and leave behind a text file on the desktop called AppleShare Server Messages that contains the text of the warning dialogs. Although the Mac OS won't let you dismount an iDisk (or any other disk) by dragging it to the Trash if you have a document from that disk open, that won't prevent Apple from disconnecting you automatically after your idle time. So be careful not open a document from an iDisk and leave it open unattended.

HomePage -- The final part of iTools is HomePage, not to be confused with Claris Home Page, the Web-authoring tool that stayed with FileMaker Inc., when most of the rest of Claris's products moved over to Apple after Claris was disbanded.

At its heart, HomePage is simply a free Web site that uses files stored in the disk space in your iDisk. The easiest way to create pages in your HomePage Web site is via Apple's templates, which fall into several categories: Photo Album, iMovie Theater, Invites, Baby Announcements, and Resume. Within each category there are one or more themes that control the look of your final page. After you pick a category and a theme, you click Edit buttons next to each part of the page that you can change, make the necessary change, and click the Apply button to save your change. When you're done, you can preview the page, and if it looks correct, click a button to publish it. At that point, the page is accessible to the world via homepage.mac.com, as I've done below with TidBITS.

You can also create HTML pages and graphics using any tool you want and upload them to your iDisk's Sites folder to publish them, but there are quirks. If you create any pages using the templates Apple provides, one of them will be set as your default page, and a locked document called index.html appears in your Sites folder to redirect users to the appropriate template-based page. You cannot delete or edit that index.html file manually, so if you wish to have a different default page, your only choice is to delete all the template-based pages, then click the Make Start Page button with nothing available in the list to delete the automatically created index.html file. After that, you can upload a new index.html file and have that work properly as the default page. Be careful, though, since creating a page with a template will automatically set that template-based page as the default page and the resulting index.html file will overwrite your index.html file with no warning.

This sounds complex, but in fact, if you play along the lines Apple intends, it's hard to screw up. As with all of the other iTools, Apple did a good job with design and usability for beginners. More experienced users will find the template-filling process a bit tedious, and it would be good if HomePage would let you pick any HTML file you had uploaded as the default page, but I suspect both are relatively easily added in the future.

What Do You Think? Okay, so after reading all these details, we come to this week's poll question: "Do you plan to use any of Apple's new Internet services?" The iTools require Mac OS 9, but iReview and iCards don't require a specific version of the Mac OS or even that you sign up with Apple. Frankly, I find them quite interesting, and I'll be using some of the services. Register your opinion on our home page!

The iFuture -- All of these tools were made possible because Apple controls both the server (running WebObjects) and the client-side Mac OS. It's clear to me that although these iTools are generally well done, they're also a 1.0 product and Apple could easily improve upon the existing iTools plus add new ones later on.

