

Polishing Apples for Education

by John W. Rice

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I'm a Wintel guy. I've been that way since buying my first computer in college. It was a used [Leading Edge 8088](#), with dual 5.25 floppies and a green CRT monitor. Readers of a certain age will know what I'm talking about. It's not that I wasn't exposed to Apple products early on. In high school we used the venerable Apple IIc in computer science class. Early in college I got to use the first Mac, the one [advertised](#) during Superbowl XVIII in 1984.

The Mac was really nice. In the days before Windows, it blew away anything running on DOS. But, alas, I was a poor college student. The used Leading Edge was \$400. Anything approaching four figures was out of my price range. So, I became the proud owner of a used 8088.

I later upgraded to a local box with a [386SX](#) chip. The SX concept let Intel sell a cheaper, weaker chip so that folks would be even more encouraged to stick with PCs and their clones. It won me over. By that time, I was able to afford a budget in the \$1000 range so I splurged on a good monitor for my new box, an expensive NEC MultiSync. I almost cried 8 years later when it finally died. It had outlived the usefulness of three computers.

In 1990, on my trusty 386SX's 40 meg hard drive, I installed [Windows 3.0](#). This was a big jump. I had been using a menu system so that programs could start by just punching in a number after the computer booted. This was easier than typing in commands at the C prompt. I had seen previous versions of Windows, but they appeared as nothing more than fancy menu systems, and I already had one of those. But the folks at [PC Magazine](#) said Windows 3.0 was worth it, so I shelled out the money and installed the program. When 3.1 came out, PC Magazine said it was worth the upgrade, so I upgraded.

I knew, and friends who used Apple computers were quick to tell me, that the Mac environment was superior to Windows. I knew that Apple controlled their hardware and software, and that Wintel systems were comprised of components from a hodgepodge of companies trying to finagle often disparate parts and software. I spent hours tracing down error codes, dipswitches, and hardware and software settings for each new upgrade or peripheral. But I stayed with my local box, MS-DOS, and Windows 3.1 as I embarked on my career in teaching.

By the time Windows 95 came out, I was moving from teaching to administration, specifically the (still relatively new) technology coordinator position. I upgraded boxes and operating system again and became familiar with the new environment. The district I worked for was Wintel-based. Schools were moving away from Apple. A local provider, or even a large one like Dell, or a vendor carrying brand names like [CompuAdd](#) could provide cheaper machines. Districts are always under a tight budget. Also, I remember one superintendent's justification for going with local boxes instead of Macs revolved around the fact students would face Windows in the work environment. Following that line, he reasoned students may as well learn Windows while in school.

Nonetheless, there remained strong Apple advocates in education. Being a Wintel fellow myself, I had respect for Macs, but not the sometimes fanatical devotion others seemed to have. I recall interviewing for the tech coordinator position at a district that was mixed. It was a small, three school district. The principals had leeway to purchase the computers they wanted. As a result, the elementary and middle schools were Apple-based, while the high school had Wintel machines. An underlying tension existed between the lower schools and the high school over the issue. The hiring committee for the tech coordinator position was comprised of teachers from all three campuses. As they reviewed my credentials and accomplishments, one of the high school teachers was impressed with my résumé and the answers I'd given so far. How do you do it, he wanted to know. How do you keep up with everything that is going on in the computer world?

“Well, first I ignore everything dealing with Macs.”

That statement offended two-thirds of the hiring committee and started an argument among warring factions on the spot. I didn't get the job.

Mixed districts are still out there, at least in Texas. A couple years back I spent several weeks delivering professional development to teachers in a large Austin suburb, near Dell's home turf. The district installed Dells with giant monitors in each of the middle school classrooms, so teachers could show students what they were doing onscreen. The instructional technology staff, on the other hand, used the latest Macs in their offices. I pointed out to one of them that Apple now had a market share somewhere between three and five percent whereas Dell as the largest maker of PCs held a considerably larger share of the world market. She shrugged it off and said, “Not everyone can drive a Jag, either.”

Apple as a company has been interesting to [watch](#) over the years, too. I recall being disappointed in how Steve Jobs was sacked. A business professor I knew heard Jobs speak shortly after starting [NeXT](#) Computers. The professor's assessment: “He'll do alright.”

Sure enough, Jobs did alright, and eventually came back to Apple. With Jobs at the helm the company has diversified and expanded beyond simply being just another computer company. Today, when Apple announces a product of any kind, they generate the kind of buzz and [excitement](#) other tech companies can only dream of. Now, they will offer computers with [Intel](#) chips. I suppose we might have to call them Mactel systems.

I still don't have a Mac. My university is predominantly Wintel, so work is completed on machines running XP. At home, I remain a fan of bargain computers, and have gone through several models from Dell, HP, and Sony, as well as a few local boxes. Closeouts are nice. Recently discontinued models are always bargain priced.

I'm fond of Apple products like the iPod. Nothing could be more cool to a gadget lover than the latest iPod. Time and again, the company hits the proverbial nail on the head when it comes to consumer products. Apple has made a few strides in education lately. Selling PowerBooks to districts, even across entire [states](#), has no doubt been beneficial to their bottom line and has earned reams of free publicity. But they lack the momentum they once had in the education realm. I still like Macs, though. And that's saying a lot, coming from a Wintel guy.

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