

A moment for appreciation

By Holly Lisle

I'm up – writing this morning in spite of the fact that I feel like hell. Doing a Baanraak and June Bug scene, and a Rekkthav scene (poor Rekkthav – junior dark god with “Kick Me” painted on the back of his carapace and a problem with bosses that just makes you want to weep) and feeling like crap, I am still having a whole lot of fun. The pages are rolling, the music is going, and this is what it's supposed to feel like. (Except for the fever, but ignore that.)

I'm in a mood to wax effusive. It isn't the fever talking, either. I think I made enough noise about my loathing for the whole Microsoft Windows XP concept (“pay big bucks to be our spyware/bugware OS beta tester, and call MommyRedmond to get our permission to reinstall your already-paid-for OS every time you change configurations or reformat your hard drive”) and about my search for something to save me from upgrading to anything Windows ever again that the fact that I've switched operating systems will elicit an eyeroll and an ‘oh, yeah, big surprise’ from most of the folks who read this. I kept looking for a Linux version that I could get to run on my old configuration – I wanted Linux because I loved the idea of open source software.

Well, I'm running Unix instead, of which Linux is an offshoot, and running straight Unix open-source software seamlessly and side by side with Apple software on my new iMac – the Christmas present that has had a bigger effect on my life and the pleasure I get in the physical aspects of my work than any present I've ever received or any purchase I've made myself. As a thoughtful gift for your resident writer, an iMac just friggin' goes off the scale.

I have the baseline flat-screen model, which is like saying “I

got the **little** Mercedes for Christmas". Dropped an extra 256 megs of RAM in myself, a process that took three minutes from start to finish including opening and closing the case.

At rock bottom, it is just another computer, and just another operating system. The stuff you can do on OS X, the new Mac operating system, you can do on Windows, or Linux, or traditional Unix, or FreeBSD or anything else currently out there. You can process words and images and numbers, you can play games, and you can use the Internet, printers and other peripherals. Apple hasn't found a way to make the thing write the words for you, so when you switch, you'll have just as much work ahead of you to get the books written as you had before.

But my analogy to a Mercedes (the finest car I've ever ridden in, bar none) was not made lightly. You can get from New York to California in a Hugo, or you can get there in in an S-Class – the difference will be in how much you enjoy the trip. And, honey child, in the world of computing, I have been driving Hugos since 1985. I've written twenty-four novels on Microsoft systems, so it can be done. You have to get used to the feel of springs poking in your kidneys, and you have to be willing to forego air conditioning, and you have to plan ahead for frequent crashes and weary down-time, and sleepovers in bad hotels with giant cockroaches. You'll hone your vocabulary of four-letter words to razor sharpness, and expand it into the realm of ten-letter profanity on bad days. But you can get twenty-four novels out on Win boxes. Only, if you don't have to, why the hell would you want to? And now, for the first time, even if you're command-line phobic and dread the unfriendliness of Linux, there really is a better way.

Everything is integrated in OS X. Frinstance ... If I want to move my music over from the disks that I laboriously made when leaving my Win box, I drop the the Windows-made disk into the CD-RW drive (yeah, the iMac will read your Windows-formatted disks and files. Don't look for the same politeness from your

Win box with your Mac stuff), and when its icon appears, I drag it into the open window of iTunes. The music is all instantly filed for me, sorted away, and added to the main playlist. I want to set up a few of my songs on a disk to take with me to keep the current book's soundtrack with me? I create a playlist by making a name for it, dragging the songs I want into it – and then I open my new playlist and click "Burn CD," right from iTunes. It burns in the background while I'm writing, and researching online. Wait for the machine to work? I don't think so. I'll have six or seven other things going at the same time, and everything will work anyway. Well ... every once in a while Word freezes up. (It is, after all, a Microsoft product. Crashes come with the territory, no extra charge.) But when Word dies on me, I get a little message – "Your application has unexpectedly quit. None of the rest of your applications have been affected." I re-open Word, fish out the saved copy the machine has thoughtfully dropped into the Microsoft User Data folder on my desktop, and go back to work. I have GIMP, a Unix image creation program open on my desk with OS X Dreamweaver MX and OS X Word all open together, everything running simultaneously, everything working together, and I can move stuff from the Apple programs to the Unix program and back without a glitch, a blink, a stutter. Everything works. And while I'm doing all this other stuff, my music runs in the background, smoothly and without stutters.

Blue Screen of Death, you say? No, Mercedes did not see the need to include planned breakdowns in its cars, and Apple, with OS X, did not see the need to include them in its OS. (Please note – I used Apple machines with earlier OSes – I **hated** them. I don't like mice, I don't like being constrained to mousing. I like keyboard commands – and OS X has them if you want them. I didn't like the frequent crashing, either. I thought, 'Hell, I already have that. Why change?')

The open-source community is working madly to bring Unix applications to the Mac with OS X. Scripting is already here

if you want to put the time into writing your own – or just plug and play the ones that come pre-installed. With your OS comes an amazingly generous complement of included, quality software that you'd have to pay through the nose for if you wanted something similar for your Win box. The command line is readily available if you choose to use it – I've poked around a bit, but, hell, I write books. For me, the command line is fun, but I'll never need it. Everything I need to do, I can do in the most gorgeous interface I've ever seen.

At some point, it becomes about comfort. About fit and finish. About being able to drop a BB at the top of the hood of the car and watch it roll all the way to the bottom without having it fall in anywhere. The flat-screen iMac and OS X have that comfort. That fit and finish. All the seams are smooth. The engine purrs, so softly it's just music. You can get from New York to California without having to mess with the radiator, fix flat tires, drop in a new transmission, roll down the window and eat dust when the AC dies.

This is a computer and an operating system combo with class. I haven't been excited about tech stuff in about ten years. I am now. I've just found a computer I can love.

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