

O B L I Q U E P E R S P E C T I V E

High-Flying Technology

Turbulence in Cyberspace?

By John Wharton, Applications Research

It's like an Information Superhighway, without the information.

— promotional spot for *Late Show with David Letterman*

I'm in the Seattle-Tacoma airport, rushing to make Alaska Airlines flight 464 to San Jose after a particularly rough week dealing with family problems in Olympia. At the security checkpoint, I hand my PowerBook 180 to an attendant to pass around the X-ray scanner; so do the businesswomen in front of and behind me, who are also carrying identical-looking gray PowerBooks.

By the time I remove sufficient keys and change from my pockets to appease the walk-through metal detector, Businesswoman #1 is already headed for her gate with one of the laptops. I boot one of the others for the inspector; its desktop looks alien to me. So does the third's. I chase down Businesswoman #1 and ask her to reboot her system so we can sort out whose computer is whose.

Which suggests two great ideas. The first is a simple way to upgrade low-end PowerBook 100s to something newer for free; just be sure to backup the file system first. Should work for Duos, too.

The second idea is for a new Macintosh TV spot:

Voiceover: "What's on your PowerBook?"

Long-haired columnist in a pathetically disorganized office, scratching his head: "Beats me. Looks like it might be somebody *else's* business plan."

Preboarding

Jostling down the aisle, it seems that practically every passenger is carrying a laptop. Clearly the flights from SeaTac to San Jose don't suffer from any shortage of propellerheads.

Most of the women on board seem to be carrying Macs, while the men generally all have Compaqs, Toshibaes, Dells, and other DOS/Windows machines. When I get home I'll ask Mary Eisenhart, the Editor of *MicroTimes*, if she thinks PowerBooks are disproportionately popular among female executives. "Well," she'll say, "women *do* tend to dominate the graphic arts field and other creative areas where the Mac has an edge. And Apple's ads have *always* shown women using computers along with the men; maybe the idea is taking hold." It was a woman, after all, who threw the hammer into the face of Big Blue in the milestone 1984 Macintosh ad. "Be-

sides," Mary will say, "women know what's good."

Taking Off

I'm sitting in seat 19C. Passenger 19A is named Mike Webb. "Gee," I say, "I met AMD's Mike Webb last fall; you must be Intel's version." He is. Faithful readers may recall that years ago this same Mike Webb achieved his 15 minutes of fame by inadvertently receiving a FedEx parcel that had been intended for a second Mike Webb staying at the same Santa Clara hotel. Mike Webb #2, it seems, worked for AMD. AMD's entire 386 marketing and introduction strategy thus accidentally fell into Intel's lap months before AMD planned to reveal it was getting into the 386 game (see MDR 10/17/90 p. 4).

I introduce myself as a columnist for *Microprocessor Report*. No reaction. I hand him a business card. "Oh, right," he says. "We get that in the sales office. I like your stuff." I tell him we'd had a lot of fun with the misdirected FedEx story and mention that Contributing Editor Nick Tredennick suggested that AMD should have responded by opening immediate job requisitions for anyone named John Crawford, Pat Gelsinger, or Dave House. He's not amused.

Later it hits me that the Intel/AMD 287 microcode retrieval had begun that very same week, at the Federal Courthouse in—of all places—San Jose! Might Intel have summoned *its* Mr. Webb from his Seattle office in order to have him book rooms in every hotel in San Jose, and then sit back until the trial is over and hope for the best? And if so, is he likely to cross paths with a team of newly hired AMD salesmen named Bill Davidow, Roger Borovoy, and Tom Dunlap?

Cruising Altitude

The in-flight "Airfone" telephone on the back of seat 18B carries a decal that says "Modem Compatible"; indeed, there's an RJ11 socket on the handset beside the mouthpiece. A second decal reads, "Contact flight attendant for assistance if handset cord fails to retract." The Airfone designers apparently allow for customers with quite a range of technological knowhow.

My trip *has* left me behind on my e-mail, I think, and there *is* a modem in my PowerBook; alas, I have no RJ11 cable to plug into the phone. Semi-facetiously I ask Intel's Mike Webb clone if he's got an extra.

"Sure," he says. ("Doesn't everyone?") "It's in the overhead compartment. Should I get it down?"

Don't bother, I tell him. Out of curiosity, I ask out loud, to no one in particular, "Who here has a spare RJ11 cord?" Half a dozen or so passengers within earshot turn and raise their hands. (I'm not making this up.)

The fellow one row up quickly produces a cable. I thank him. He says he works for Microsoft. I consider the half-dozen highly critical columns I'd written about Bill Gates and Microsoft in the past, and I decide not to tell him who I am or what I do. I ask him if it's true that on their wedding night, Melinda French-Gates told Bill, "Now I know why you called it Microsoft." He's not amused.

Logging In Through the Ether

The Airfone instructions say it costs \$4.00 to place a call, plus \$2.00 for each extra minute or part thereof. I swipe my charge card through the mag-stripe reader ("American Express: don't enter cyberspace without it") and try to call the Portal on-line service. Through the din of airline cabin noise I can hear the modem dial and Portal answer. From the modem beeps and squawking noises it sounds like the machines are trying to negotiate a reliable transfer protocol. A minute or so later the PowerBook unceremoniously hangs up, unable to make a connection.

Through the PowerBook speaker it sounds as though the handset microphone is still enabled, and the ambient cabin noise is—surprise!—drowning out the modem signal. I cover the mouthpiece with my hand and try again. Again the PowerBook squawks; again the handshake fails. Three or four attempts and five or six minutes later I notice several other passengers staring at me. Finally I quit.

"You're very persistent," my row-mate remarks. "I'd have given up after one or two tries."

Persistent? Try obsessive-compulsive. I stopped only because my battery had died. "May I serve you a beverage?" the flight attendant asks. "No, but my computer could sure use a drink," I reply.

Another great idea: in addition to \$3.00 in-flight movie headsets, tomorrow's flight attendants could rent out RJ11 cords (\$8.00) and charged PowerBook batteries (\$12.00 plus a dead battery as deposit).

Down to Earth

In dismay, I make one last call to Airfone customer service to ask if I did something wrong. "No, sir," the operator says. "The modem interface software won't be on line for another four weeks." But don't the seat-back decals say the phones are modem-compatible now? "That's just so passengers will get used to bringing modems on board with them." As opposed to what? Checking their laptops as luggage? Removing the DSP chips at the gate?

Great. True blue-sky vaporware. As we land, I return the RJ11 cable to Mr. Microsoft. "How'd it go?" he

asks. "Any luck?" No, I say, and explain that the modem interface software has been delayed a month, but that it cost me \$30 to find out. "That figures," he says, smiling. "I never use in-flight phones until I'm sure they work for someone else. Don't want to waste money on unproven technology."

"That figures," I think, smiling back. After all, MS-DOS was a quick and dirty copy of Digital Research's CP/M, Excel—then called MultiPlan—was a knock-off of VisiCalc, Windows is still a poor imitation of the Mac OS, and PenWindows lifted some of its technology from Go's PenPoint. Microsoft was just ordered to pay Stac Electronics a \$120 million judgment for improperly using its proprietary file compression technology in MS-DOS 6.0. Unwillingness to "waste money on unproven technology" must be a cornerstone of the Microsoft Philosophy.

No Superhighway in the Sky

It's amazing how quickly and deeply the "information superhighway" concept has entered the collective consciousness. It's made the cover of *Newsweek*, been discussed on *Nightline*, *Letterman*, and *Murphy Brown*, and been featured in the *Doonesbury*, *Dilbert*, and *Outland* comic strips. The artist who draws *Dilbert* includes his e-mail address in every strip, and the host of the *West Coast Live* NPR radio show now reads e-mail on the air, including items received while the show is in progress. When an article in *The New Yorker* magazine printed Bill Gates' private e-mail address, he was immediately deluged by thousands of postings from readers.

MCI recently began running a series of TV spots in which a young girl describes the glorious benefits that will accrue once the seamless "information infrastructure" is in place; AT&T and Pacific Bell soon followed suit. The impression these ads give is that the new data network will be a finely-meshed fabric that blankets the nation.

But "seamlessness" is a matter of degree. Predicts Sun Microsystems programmer Marianne Mueller, "When all is said and done, when the superhighway is finished, I think its shape will be more like the Mandelbrot set." The network may indeed be connected, you may well be able to get from Point A to Point B, but the path is neither direct nor robust.

Building the infrastructure is a necessary first step; you can't flesh out a body until the skeleton is in place. But a lot of the on ramps to this highway have yet to be built, as my Alaska Airlines experiences show. A whole lot of speed bumps must still be removed, and a whole lot of potholes must still be filled in, before the ride through cyberspace will be as smooth as the experts predict. ♦

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