Macintosh: insanely great?

Insanely Great: The Life and Times of Macintosh, The Computer that Changed Everything by Steven Levy. Published by Penguin Books

Macintosh, argues Steven Levy, 'is the most important consumer product in the last half of the twentieth century'.

'Long after its departure, [it] will be remembered as the product that brought just plain people, uninterested in the particulars of technology, into the trenches of the information age.'

The 'Mac', as it became known, was 'indisputably the third great standard in personal computerdom after the Apple II and DOS,' according to Levy. It was, first and foremost, an idea - the idea that a computer should be easy to use, fun even. Ease of use would come primarily from two related things - 'metaphors' and 'consistency'.

Metaphors - a 'desktop' on the screen to signify the user's work space; a trash can in which to put things the user did not want; the capacity to move things about inside the computer through moving them in an apparently physical way on the screen, and many others - would diminish the need for specialist computer knowledge. Skills acquired outside computers would become relevant in using computers. The 'mouse', with its pointing, clicking and dragging functions, was one of Macintosh's key 'metaphoric' innovations.

Consistency across different computer applications - a 'tool bar' across the top of the screen; pull-down menus and others - would make skills acquired in one Macintosh application relevant in using other Macintosh applications (eg, spreadsheets, desktop publishing and ultimately electronic mail and the Internet).

Together, metaphors and consist-ency across applications would make Macintosh computer use more intuitive.

There were many other innovations bound up in what became Macintosh - from 'bit-mapping', which eliminated the flicker from the screen, to the machine's distinctive look and start-up (its inventors insisted the machine be ready to use when it was turned on). 'Macintosh was for drivers, not repairmen.'

Apple built a machine, an operating system and some software. Unlike IBM, it did not, until recently, allow other companies to 'clone' its machine. On the other hand, it deliberately set out to encourage others to make software for the Macintosh, rather than to try to corner the market for it itself. A computer which was good to use would encourage people using it to be creative. Macintosh would become the 'platform' to be on if you wanted to be in touch with what the real computer creatives were doing.

This openness proved to be Macintosh's saviour. The first model, released in 1984, 'was a visionary computer, [but] you had to be a visionary to appreciate it'. Important changes were made but the Mac's sales dawdled until the release of PageMaker, developed for the Macintosh by a software company called Aldus, and the Laser Writer, developed by Apple employing Adobe's PostScript page description language.

Many such relationships between Apple and other organisations were crucial to the Macintosh - Microsoft's decision to develop software for Macintosh (Microsoft's use of a graphic interface in Windows meant: 'All computers were destined to be descendants of the Mac'), the development of

Hypercard software for Macintosh, and the relationship with IBM to develop the Power Macintosh - unthinkable earlier.

With hindsight, Macintosh's dream of a humane, forgiving computer seems an obvious goal. But, at the time, there had been no reason to assume computers - big, expensive, complex things - should be made accessible to a mass market which could never hope to afford them or fit them in their houses.

Indeed, the Macintosh's 'friendliness' was initially one of its commercial problems, according to Levy. In the mid-1980s, most computers were not bought by users but by organisational computer departments. To their predominantly male technocrats, the first Macintosh was not a computer, it was a toy.

Also, although its inventors worshipped at the altar of consistency within their own system - the 'Macintosh Way' - that Way happened to be incompatible with the Way everyone else was doing it at the time - with IBM personal computers.

The Mac team saw themselves as artists, arguing passionately about how many buttons a mouse should have and how many times pull-down menus should blink. But they were a special kind of artist who linked creativity very directly to commerce. The art was about making computers accessible to ordinary people. It would be a failure if people didn't want it.

'The final step of an artist was getting his or her work into boxes, at which point the marketing guys take over...To make a difference in the world and a dent in the universe, you had to ship...Real artists ship'. ❑

Jock Given