Down in the DOS, out in the OS X

You sometimes hate to admit it, but a good fraction of our time is spent tinkering with our computers. Most of us should run an instant cost-benefit ratio on what we are trying to accomplish. We expend this valuable commodity, time, to even up a column or nudge an object in a drawing. In the grand scheme of things, nothing will change and no one will be richer, smarter, or happier for these efforts.

But in parallel with these difficulties we foist upon ourselves, we are battered by the rush of technology. Yes, even though most of us are early adopters of most new devices and programs, there are times when I would like to plead with computer manufacturers to slow down or, maybe, stop.

Some things just get out of sync. A few days ago I was evaluating some optical components using a Fizeau interferometer and I was plunged back into the 1990s. The instrument, a Zygo Mark II, was donated to Georgia Tech in 1984. At that time students learned to align a component and evaluate its surfaces. The fringes had to be tweaked and sequenced before the pattern was submitted for computer analysis. It was crude, but it provided them with experience in practical interferometry. Eight years later we updated the instrument with a Wyko phase shifter. Since then, it has operated well, although the framegrabbing, phase shifting, and fringe analysis is done with a 486 computer. I have never been tempted to bring the device up to date because the cost would be far greater than the benefits we would derive from a new computer. After all, Mark II provides all of the data that any student would ever need, given this is the first time any of them have ever laid eyes on one.

Still, the components I was evaluating cried out for a printout of contour patterns showing on the full-color screen. The problem was the color printers available listed on the monitor were probably the first HP inkjet printers ever sold. My IT guy and I tried a number of strategies including surfing of the web printer sites for older drivers, but nothing has worked. In desperation we even went into Windows 3.1 (remember that one? with its File Manager?) to see if we could play some tricks with screen dumps. As the day wore on I became increasingly aware of the loss of time and the lack of progress. When do you stop? Maybe we ought to upgrade. After all, how long can the 486 last?

But sometimes my problems don't come from ancient programs and machines. Sometimes the latest advance can give you just as much grief.

I have been an Apple, then Macintosh, user since I bought my first Apple II in 1978. Although I am required to use Intel-type machines for some research work, including optical design, I chafe under the poorly executed interface and peripheral handling. The operating system contains barriers to the quick and efficient handling of files and folders. It is the transparency of the Macintosh operating system that I most appreciate. The operations are, for me, very intuitive, permitting me to get on with my work.

However, I now have to contend with a new operating system, OS X, and I'm not liking it. Although the graphics interface features buttons and actions are rendered with lovely transparency, the operating system is anything but. This new operating system comes with additional folders and features whose purpose and procedures are completely unintuitive. For me the greatest drawback of this new system is the inability to add to the functionality of my system and troubleshoot my problems. Now, fixes involve complete reinstalls or invocation of UNIX commands in the terminal program. Considering that a mistyped or ill-formed command can turn the machine into a blinking mute, I am reluctant to progress beyond experimentation.

My first approach was that of denial. I would stick with my familiar system and to heck with OS X. But I realize that as time progresses my Macintosh will begin to resemble that DOS beast that has given me such grief. The question is how to approach this brave new UNIX world. So far, I have added the system on an external drive to my home machine, so that I can invoke OS X at startup, if I choose, but it will start in OS 9 normally. Now I am gathering the upgraded tools as they become available.

On my Mac here at Tech I won't switch until I have verified that the OS X version of Eudora will behave properly. From my end the editing of this journal is handled by three programs: Eudora, Microsoft Excel, and

Adobe Acrobat Reader. Eudora is a first-rate mail program that serves as my manuscript and correspondence database. With the exception of setting a few filters for mailboxes, I can easily find and track the actions that have been taken on any manuscript. Eventually I will make the switch, but I will do so with reluctance.

Technology is supposed to make things easier for us, but sometimes I wonder. I begin to sound like a curmudgeon, yet that is not my approach to new ideas and devices. But additional whistles and bells, functions and features, can confuse the user and send even the most adventurous of us back to DOS. Well, maybe not DOS, but the comfort of a comprehensible operating system.

Donald C. O'Shea
Editor

Rudolf Kingslake Medal and Prize

The Rudolf Kingslake Medal and Prize is awarded annually in recognition of the most noteworthy original paper to appear in *Optical Engineering* on theoretical or experimental aspects of optical engineering. The 2001 Rudolf Kingslake Medal and Prize is awarded to **Giuseppe Schirripa Spagnolo** and **Dario Ambrosini** for their paper entitled **"Diffractive optical element-based profilometer for surface inspection,"** which appeared in the January 2001 issue. This paper, selected by the Kingslake Award Committee, was considered to be a novel application of three-dimensional sensing for the important application of preserving art.

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