

■ STEWART ALSOP

WHAT'S A POWER USER TO DO?



The best things in life don't come easy or cheap. Choosing a top-of-the-line computer that does everything is enough to drive anyone to distraction.

I've got a problem. I've got to buy a new computer. This is a really tough decision right now.

Let me clarify. I don't want just any old wimpy computer. I'm a pundit, after all, and I've got to have the latest and greatest, which means a computer with a 32-bit processor, lots of memory and storage, and powerful software. On that basis, I have four choices.

As I write this column, I can go out and buy a Compaq Deskpro 386. Or I can wait about a month and buy an Apple Macintosh II. Or I can wait until sometime between July and September and buy an IBM Model 80-041. Or I can wait another 3 months and buy an IBM Model 80-111.

If I buy a Deskpro 386 right now, I'll have to spend about \$6,500 at list price to get the box, which includes a 16-MHz processor, 1 megabyte of memory, and 40 megabytes of hard disk storage. With a Deskpro 386, I will be able to keep using the high-resolution multiscanning monitor, the multimode graphics board, the modem, network adapter, facsimile board, and expanded memory board I now own.

I will also be able to use the new operating system, OS/2, that IBM and Microsoft have promised to deliver sometime next year in addition to all of the DOS 3.3 software I already have. But when that operating system is delivered, I will have to first wait for and then buy the amazing new applications that are supposed to become available for it sometime in late 1988 or early 1989. In addition, if all the board makers and software developers begin to support the graphics modes and bus of

IBM's PS/2 computers, I may run the risk of not being able to use some of those products.

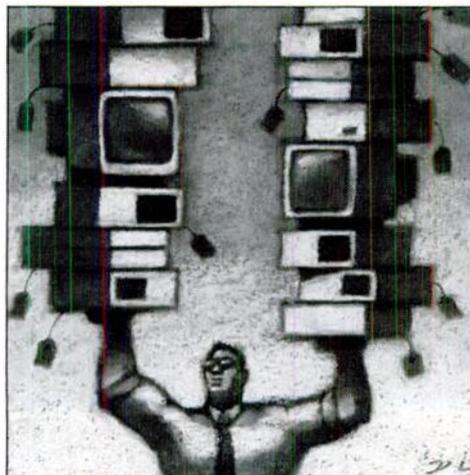
If I wait a month to buy an Apple Macintosh II when it ships, I'll have to spend about \$5,500 at list price to get the box, which also includes a 16-MHz processor, 1 megabyte of memory, and 40 megabytes of hard disk storage. I will also have to buy a \$1,000 color monitor, a \$500 video board, and any other adapter boards I might need (although one network adapter is already built in) when they become available. To be fair, though, since I already own two external hard disks totaling 60 megabytes, I could get away with the floppy-only version of the box for \$3,900. That makes the total price about \$6,500.

COMPATIBLE APPLE I also know that I will be able to use Apple's new multitasking operating system for the Macintosh, and, unlike with the Compaq or the IBM, I

know that virtually all of my old Macintosh software will continue to work with this new operating system. Indeed, if I also wanted to run most of my PC software on the Macintosh, I could combine the two by buying a \$1,500 board set and \$400 disk drive for the Macintosh that would give me a full-blown, 8-MHz, 80286-based PC that could run the software that's got drivers for the old monochrome and color/graphics adapters.

If I wait until this summer to buy an IBM PS/2 Model 80-041, I will have to spend about \$7,000 at list price to get the box, which will include the same processor, memory, and hard-disk storage. Unfortunately, I will also have to spend \$600 to get the 14-inch color monitor (since old monitors don't work with the new computers, although the video adapter is now built in), and I will have to replace all of my adapter boards to accommodate the new PS/2 bus, including the modem, network board, memory expansion, and facsimile board, which probably comes to another \$3,500 or so. (Unless add-in companies are real quick, I will also have to buy all those cards from IBM, which isn't currently offering a facsimile board.)

Once I've done all of that, though, I will also be able to use most of my existing software (except that which is "timing-dependent": offhand, I can't say which of my programs fits that description). And I know that I will be able to use the new operating system and its new applications and that those applications will probably perform better than they would on a machine like the Deskpro 386.



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Last, if I wait until this fall to buy an IBM PS/2 Model 80-111, I will have to spend about \$11,000 to get the box, which includes a 20-MHz processor, 2 megabytes of memory, and 115 megabytes of

hard disk storage. As with the Model 80-041, I will end up spending a lot of money replacing all of my adapter boards and my monitor and will get the same access to old and new software.

EXPENSIVE CHOICES So there I am, faced with a purchasing decision that could set me back from \$6,500 (without access to Macintosh software) to \$8,000 (with access to both) to about \$11,000 (again without access to Macintosh software) to about \$14,000 (for better performance, more storage, but no access to Macintosh software).

What's a power user to do, for gosh sakes? On any of these systems, I will be able to run most of my existing PC software. But only on the Macintosh will I be able to run Macintosh software. (It's important for pundits to know what's going on in other parts of the industry. And, regrettably, many of the fancy new applications that I'm supposed to be able to get on OS/2 already exist on the Macintosh.) But

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■ I'm going to have to buy two computers, a Macintosh II and a PS/2 Model 80-041, which will set me back \$15,000.

the Macintosh gives me only the possibility, not the assurance, of being able to run the new OS/2 stuff.

Indeed, the sad fact is that, to be sure that I can run software from both environments and still get the whizzy new operating system and coprocessor cards that will run on the new IBM bus, I'm going to have to buy two computers, a Macintosh II and a PS/2 Model 80-041, which will set me back somewhere around \$15,000.

It sure is getting expensive to be a pundit. (Does anybody have any spare change?) Of course, I could always stick with my wimpy old computers, get a real job, and let IBM, Apple, and Compaq fight it out for another year or so. That way I can wait for all this operating system stuff to sort itself out and then go out and buy the one computer that will do everything I want. But then I couldn't be a pundit anymore, and it's too much fun writing these crazy columns.