Apple's Macintosh brings a smile

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As a veteran Silicon Valley computer dealer acknowledged the other day: Apple's Macintosh is "the first computer that has made me smile." Quite a confession, particularly since he does not carry Apple products himself.

My experience confirms his observation. After more than a month of experimentation, I found the $2,195 "Mac" to be an enjoyable machine. Within limits, it is also quite capable. Certainly it is the most distinctive computer now on the market.

If you don't watch television and don't read magazines, you might not know what this computer looks like. At right is a kind of self-portrait, drawn on the Macintosh.

Besides giving a general idea of the computer's appearance, it also illustrates what makes Apple's newest offering unique: its high-resolution black-and-white graphics.

Of course, this capability allows you to draw pretty pictures. But more important, it allows the Mac to use pictures, along with a pointing device quaintly called a mouse, to ease substantially the learning process. The mouse, a box that fits in the palm of your hand, is on the right side of our Macintosh self-portrait.

As you scoot the mouse around on the tabletop, the blinking cursor on the display screen zips about in similar fashion. It is much quicker than using the "arrow" keys most other computers employ for navigation. It also makes productive use of menus and graphic symbols, called icons.

Across the top of the Macintosh screen is a white bar bearing words like File, Edit, Search, and Format. As you move the cursor to one of these words, pushing the button on the mouse and "dragging" downward, a menu appears. It is something like pulling down a window shade. Each menu contains a number of operations.

In word processing, for instance, the Search Menu contains two entries: Find and Change. Despite such innovations, however, Macintosh's use of menus for repetitive operations gets tedious at times.

Superb graphics also allow Apple to treat the screen as an electronic desk. You can "fill" it with any number of "file folders" — little tabbed rectangles. You can move these around, put documents into them, or pull them out. These documents, of course, are not like pieces of paper. They are windows onto computer files which you can expand and contract. A window can fill the entire screen or it can be buried under any number of other windows.

All this "user friendliness" comes at a certain cost. Straining history some, Apple asserts that Macintosh is as big an advance over other computers as was the telephone over the telegraph. A better anology may be the difference between an automobile's automatic and standard transmissions: An automatic is easier to learn, but you lose some performance and some control. So it is with the Mac.

When the computer is busy, the cursor turns into a tiny image of a wristwatch. The Mac owner should be prepared to spend a considerable amount of time staring at this watch, waiting until the machine is ready to accept the next command. This is particularly noticeable with disk operations such as loading files into memory and saving them on the disk. But then, the IBM PC is not blazingly fast, either.

Also, the computer's housekeeping software takes up a large amount of the available space on a diskette, leaving little room for application software, document files, and graphics files. As a result, working with the Mac with only its built-in disk drive requires nearly the patience of Job. Serious shoppers should plan to get the second disk drive, which has only recently become available and retails for $495.

While the mouse is quite handy in most instances, there are times when it is a real nuisance. Writing is a case in point. As Seymour Rubinstein, the man behind the best-selling word processing program WordStar, quipped, "The mouse is perfect for a person with three hands."

When composing text, there are often instances when keyboard cursor control would be preferable to mousing around the screen. And there was no reason, beyond the technical puritanism of Apple cofounder Steven Jobs, that the machine could not have included both.

But for use within the business environment, it may be Apple's $595 Imagewriter printer that is the Macintosh Achilles' heel.

On one hand, the Imagewriter is well integrated with the computer. Besides reproducing pictures nicely, it allows you to print your text in a variety of fonts (for instance Monaco, Chicago, and Athens),
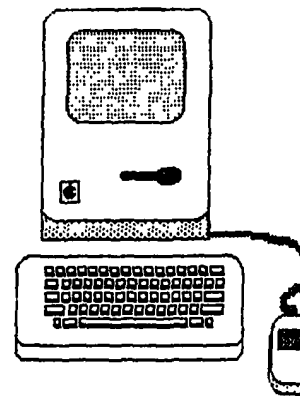
A 'Mac' self-portrait, complete with attached 'mouse'

A sampler of Macintosh type faces, hieroglyphs

styles (like bold or italic), and sizes (9 point, 12 point, and even 24 point). (See illustration).

But the printer is very slow: It took 15 minutes to print this article in the high-quality mode. It is faster in the draft and standard modes, but the quality of the output is also substantially poorer. This is because Imagewriter is a dot matrix type of printer. If you look closely at the letters coming out of the printer you will see that they are made up of dots. Even in this high-quality mode, they are not acceptable for much business correspondence. And, at the faster settings, the characters are considerably more ragged. You can hook up the Macintosh to a daisy wheel printer for that well-typed look, but then you lose the ability to print out fancy graphics.

So for many business applications, two printers will be required, adding to system cost and complexity.

Another problem with this computer has been lack of software. Because it is a radical departure from conventional personal computers, the Mac will not run any of the thousands of programs written either for the Apple II or for the IBM PC. The software publishing pipeline is about a year long. As a result, a variety of interesting programs are just now beginning to hit the market.

When it was released, the computer came with two Apple programs: for drawing and word processing. Shortly thereafter, Microsoft Corporation released versions of its popular financial planning program, Multiplan, and the programming language BASIC. But other software has been slow in coming.

One thing holding up software development has been the Mac's modest, 128,000-character memory. This is simply not large enough to accommodate some of the most sophisticated software now being written, such as Lotus Development Cor-

poration's best-selling program "1-2-3." But this barrier has been largely cleared away with Apple's recent announcement that it will begin producing the "Fat Mac," with a generous 512,000-character memory and a $3,195 price tag.

The popularity of the Macintosh suggests that the software problem is temporary. By now over 75 software packages are available, and it has inspired some innovative products.

One of these is the MacPhone, by Intermatrix. This is a telephone that installs right on the computer's side. For $199.95 you get not only telephone hardware but software that turns the Macintosh into a potent accessory. You can type hundreds of names and phone numbers into the computer and use it as an autodialer. It also maintains a complete log of whom you called, when you called, and how long you talked. You can type notes into the computer as you chat. And the program includes an appointment calendar.

Another unusual offering is a graphic filing program called Filevision, created by Telos Software Products, which sells for $195.

To understand how Filevision organizes images as well as texts and numbers, imagine a company with branch offices around the country. Typically, it would store information about each office — such as the address, number of employees, and annual sales — in an ordinary filing program. Quite likely the company would also have a large wall map somewhere with multicolored pins representing the geographic location of each office. Filevision allows you to combine both functions on the computer.

The program allows a user to highlight offices according to a large number of criteria. The only limitation I found is that you cannot drop Filevision displays into documents, as you can with drawings.

This is just one example of how Filevision can be used. It is a general-purpose filing program which allows you to create graphic symbols of almost any type and integrate them with ordinary data. It also allows you to prepare reports and do most of the things ordinary filing programs allow.

Possible uses for Filevision include doing combination floor plan/inventories, landscape architecture projects, personal appointment calendars, flow-charting projects, mapmaking and annotation, and educational illustrations.

Anyone seriously considering a purchase would do well to learn more than I can present here. A good source of additional information is "The Apple Macintosh Book," by Cary Lu (Microsoft Press $18.95). In particular, Mr. Lu's comparison of the Macintosh with the IBM PC is extremely good.