

Apple's iMac has troubling gaps

Design will force buyers to spend extra money to perform basic tasks

By Mike Langberg

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Steve Jobs, co-founder of Apple Computer Inc. and now the company's interim-chief-executive-officer-for-life, lives in the future.

That's great for him, but it's a problem for the rest of us stuck in the present.

On Saturday Jobs delivered his latest creation, the \$1,299 iMac personal computer, a sleek all-in-one design with the electronic guts and a 15-inch monitor packed into a translucent blue-and-white case.

When Jobs first introduced the iMac in May, he proudly called it "next year's computer."

I agree completely: You shouldn't consider buying an iMac in 1998.

Why? Apple engineers made several bizarre design decisions that will force iMac buyers to spend extra money just to perform such basic tasks as saving a file on a floppy disk or connecting their computer to a printer.

What's more, iMac users will have a significantly restricted choice of peripherals until at least next year.

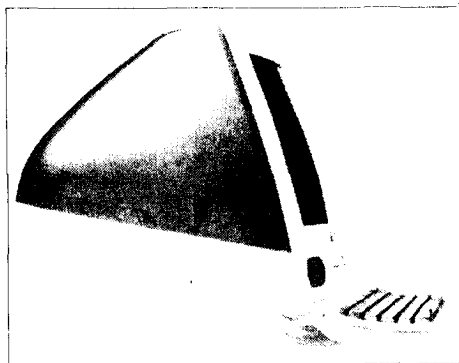
It's a shame, because the iMac is otherwise a well-designed, speedy computer.

Before I explain this sorry situation in detail, I need to insert a disclaimer: I usually take home a loaner unit and spend several days playing with the product before writing a review. Apple couldn't provide a loaner in time to meet my deadline, however, so I instead spent about 90 minutes test-driving an iMac at the company's Cupertino, Calif., offices.

What's most dramatic about the iMac is its appearance: a unique egg shape with a semi-transparent shell that lets you see a vague outline of the electronic components inside. The all-in-one design makes set-up simple—the only task facing users is plugging in the keyboard and mouse, and connecting the computer to an AC outlet and phone line.

The iMac is also a welcome break from a long Apple tradition of delivering less for the money than competing Windows systems. The iMac is also Apple's first recent model priced from the start at less than \$1,500, after two years in which the company virtually ignored the consumer market.

Inside the iMac is a 233 megahertz PowerPC G3 processor, which Apple claims outperforms faster Pentium II chips in Windows PCs. The chip is backed up



Apple Computer Inc.'s new iMac personal computer, shown in this photo reproduced from the company's Internet site, will hit retail stores next month.

AP photo

with 512 kilobytes of what's called "Level 2 cache," a special kind of memory that greatly speeds operations. I can't make statistical comparisons, but I can say that common tasks such as opening on-screen windows and launching applications happened noticeably faster with an iMac than with older Macs I use around the office; the speed seemed roughly comparable to newer Windows machines.

Beyond its odd shape and slightly improved performance, there's no magic in an iMac—it works like any other Mac.

The other specs are adequate, if not outstanding: 32 megabytes of random-access memory (RAM), a four-gigabyte hard drive, a 24X CD-ROM drive, 2 megabytes of video RAM, an Ethernet networking card, built-in speakers with simulated surround-sound, a 56 kilobits-per-second modem and a high-resolution 15-inch color monitor.

All this comes in a 38-pound case measuring 15 inches wide by 18 inches deep by 16 inches high—not much bigger than a standard 15-inch monitor alone. Home users without a lot of desk space will appreciate this efficient design.

There also is a comprehensive bundle of software. The iMac runs the new Mac OS 8.1 operating system software; loaded on the hard disk are the ClarisWorks suite of productivity applications, soon to be renamed AppleWorks; both the Internet Explorer and Netscape Navigator browsers for surfing the Web; the Quicken personal finance program; and several other game and entertainment titles.

The problem with the iMac is what isn't there: a floppy disk drive, or the standard Mac connectors for peripherals such as printers.

Jobs apparently believes the humble floppy disk, which holds a mere 1.4 megabytes of data, is obsolete. Floppies may indeed be obsolete in the future world inhabited by Jobs, but they are still very much alive and kicking today.

For home users in particular, floppies remain the best way to quickly back up crucial files. And since floppies cost less than 50 cents each, they are one of the best ways to share files with friends and colleagues.

Floppy drives are also very inexpensive; adding one to the iMac would have raised the price no more than \$50.

Instead, iMac users seeking to back up their data will have to either send their files to another computer through the Internet or buy external floppy drives.

One such external drive from Imation Corp. should be in stores now; it will cost about \$189 and will also store data on special high-capacity 100-megabyte disks. Another model from Newer Technologies Inc. limited to conventional floppies will cost just \$99, but isn't due until late October or early November.

The only way to plug any external device to the iMac is through two USB ports. USB, an abbreviation for Universal Serial Bus, is a promising new technology offering easy installation, high-speed connections and the ability to plug and unplug devices without turning off the computer.

The iMac is Apple's first computer with USB. That's a problem, because there is almost no Mac hardware designed for USB on the market.