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Will Leopard and Linux shut the Window on Vista?

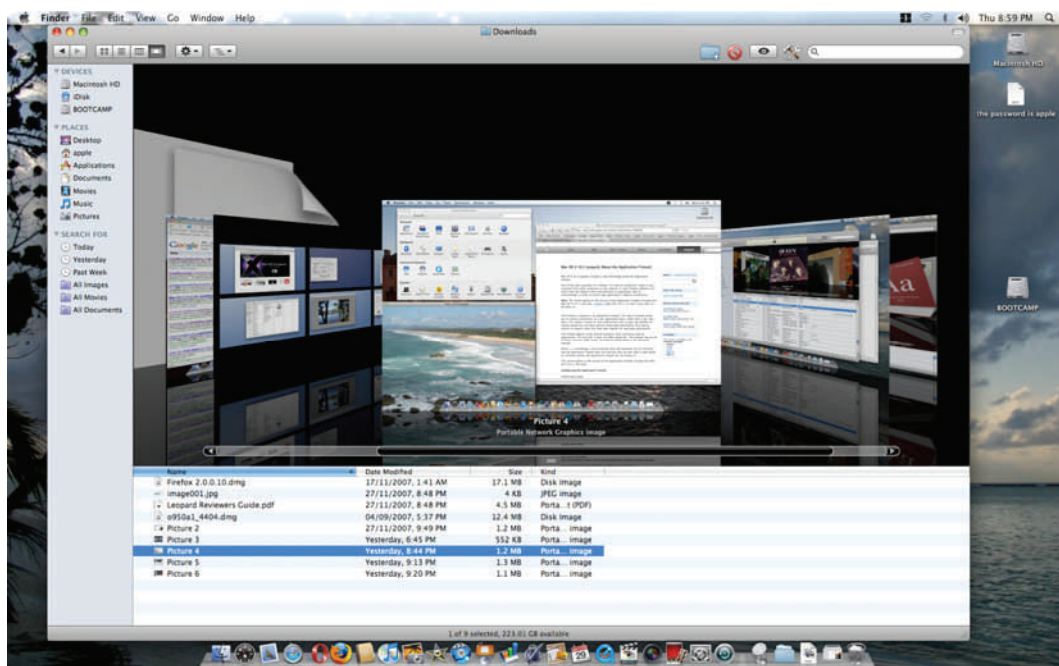
PART 3 THE LEOPARD and CONCLUSION

First Impressions

Apple is about appealing to the senses, I recalled as soon as I took the iMac20 out of its box: the 20" screen on the sculpted brushed metal stand; the sheet of steel keyboard; the sleek white mouse that plugs into it; a Mighty Mouse with no buttons. Plug in the single power cord and the Ethernet cable, push the On switch behind the screen and 30 seconds later the show is ready to begin.

It's not fair, Apple loaning me this gorgeous machine. It's puppy dog selling of the worst kind – I catch myself checking prices on the Net already. Not so fast. Yes, there's much to feast your eyes on here. My second impression is that Leopard is the new millennium's jukebox, not just for music or movies.

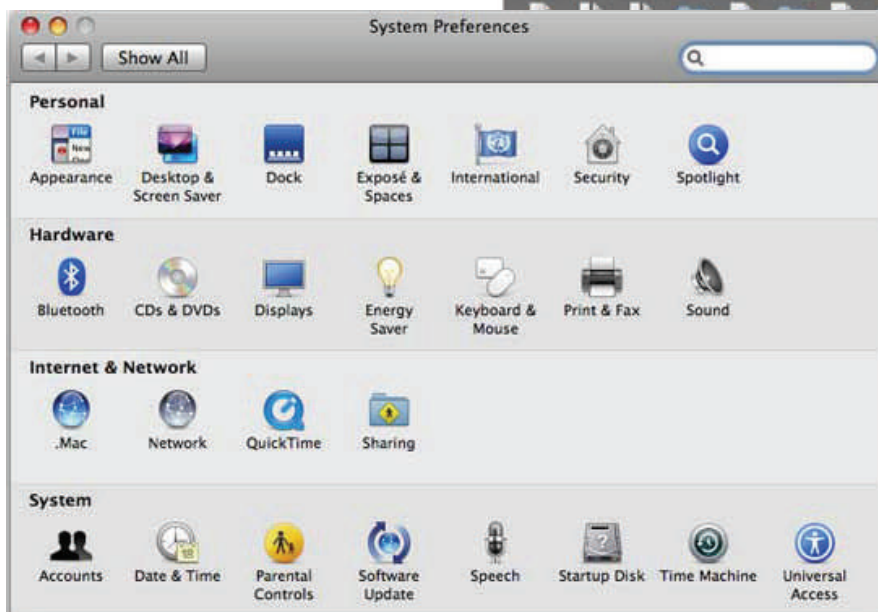
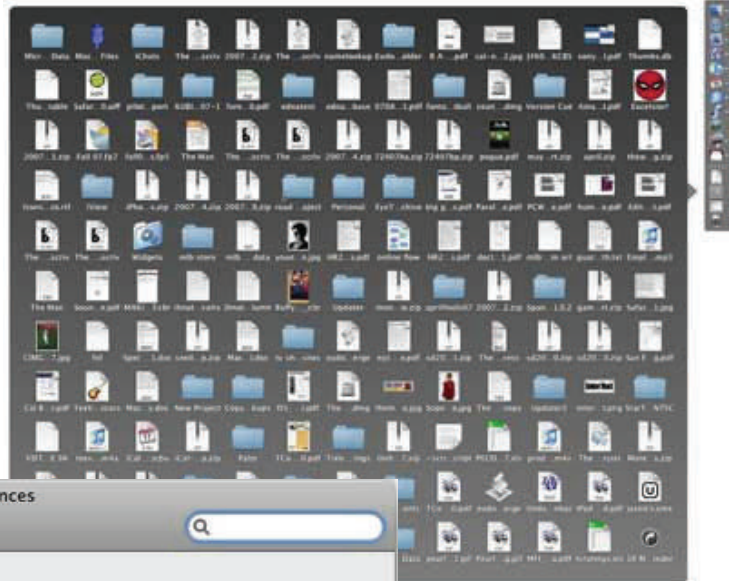
Finder now offers the iTunes view for files and programs, a 3D carousel you can move through, back and forth, slow and fast. 'Coverflow' is a feast for the eyes, sure. Easier to work with? No, but you can select the old folder view if you prefer. The glass sideboard of colourful goodies near the base of the screen is too big



for my liking, and the transparency overdone. The stacks feature is a nice idea, the items inside stacking up as you click on icons like Downloads on the bottom tray, but the stack gets wobbly as it grows taller. You can choose a more stable format: the grid.

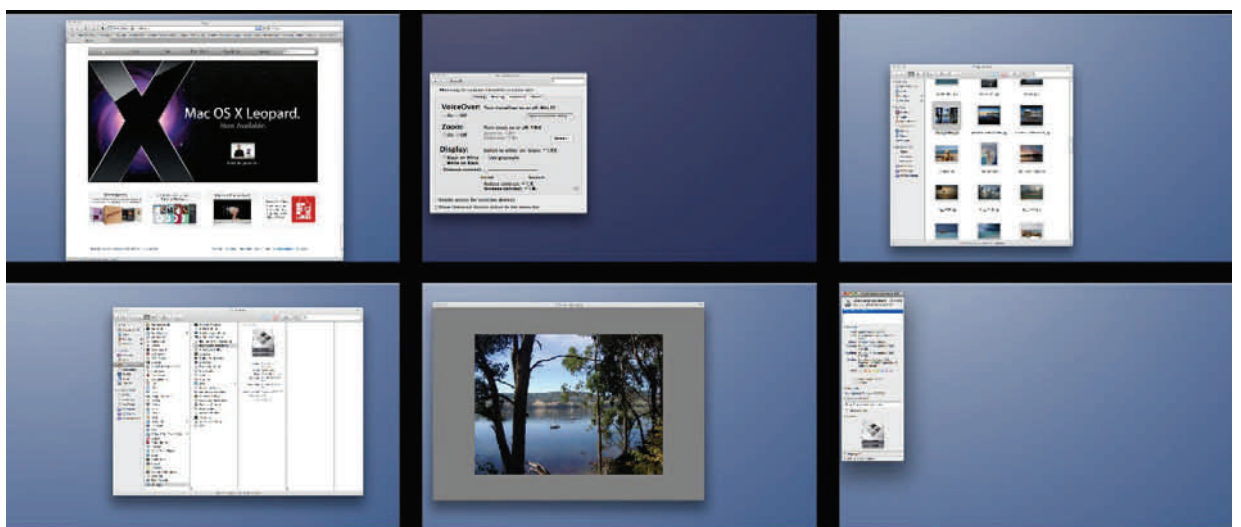
Setup

System Preferences doesn't provide as much flexibility as Leopard's competitors. You can shrink the bottom shelf and reduce the magnification that makes the icons bulge with anticipation when you hover your mouse over them. But I couldn't work out how to make the icons smaller and leave the side-board taking up the full width of the screen. It's a minor quibble, I admit.



Spaces is a 2D way of working in several windows at once but it defeats me at first. Every time I click F8 to activate spaces, all I get is Queen's Greatest Hits, which I played one of earlier. The speakers are decent enough, not HiFi quality but far better than any speakers you'd find on a laptop.

Eventually I got Spaces to work by assigning the right mouse click to enable them but now, every time I right-click on something, it brings up Spaces.



Okay, I'm dumb when it comes to Macs but Macs are for dumb users, aren't they? To my mind, the Linux cube is so much easier to use for separate work spaces.

Response to the Helm

This machine is a drag racer. It boots up in less than thirty seconds, ready to lay rubber. It takes a bit of digging to find out what's behind the glossy screen: a 2.4Ghz Core 2 Duo chip with 2gb of RAM and 320mb of hard disk. Digging deeper, I'm surprised to find OS X 10.5 Leopard using nearly 900mb of RAM idling. 50gb of disk space is gone as well, but this iMac is loaded with movies and other stuff – 9gb is said to be Leopard's basic share.

Later checks show Active RAM in the region of 400 to 600mb, so something must've been going on while I took the first reading. On this evidence, Leopard is a little leaner than Vista but the difference is nowhere near as great as the Apple commercials suggest. Ubuntu is the lean athlete in this trio.

Included Applications

Here is where Leopard flexes his muscles, which bulge with 'i' apps like the iLife suite which includes iTunes and iPhoto and iMovie, iWeb, iDVD and iChat. I can see these apps appealing to the 'I' generation, which seems hell-bent on capturing every moment of their dull lives on celluloid and sharing it with their friends.

The apps are generous, rich and full-featured but carry an annual licence fee.

There are more apps included than I can fully digest, from Aperture for photo buffs and Photo Booth for sending that special snapshot of yourself to a friend.



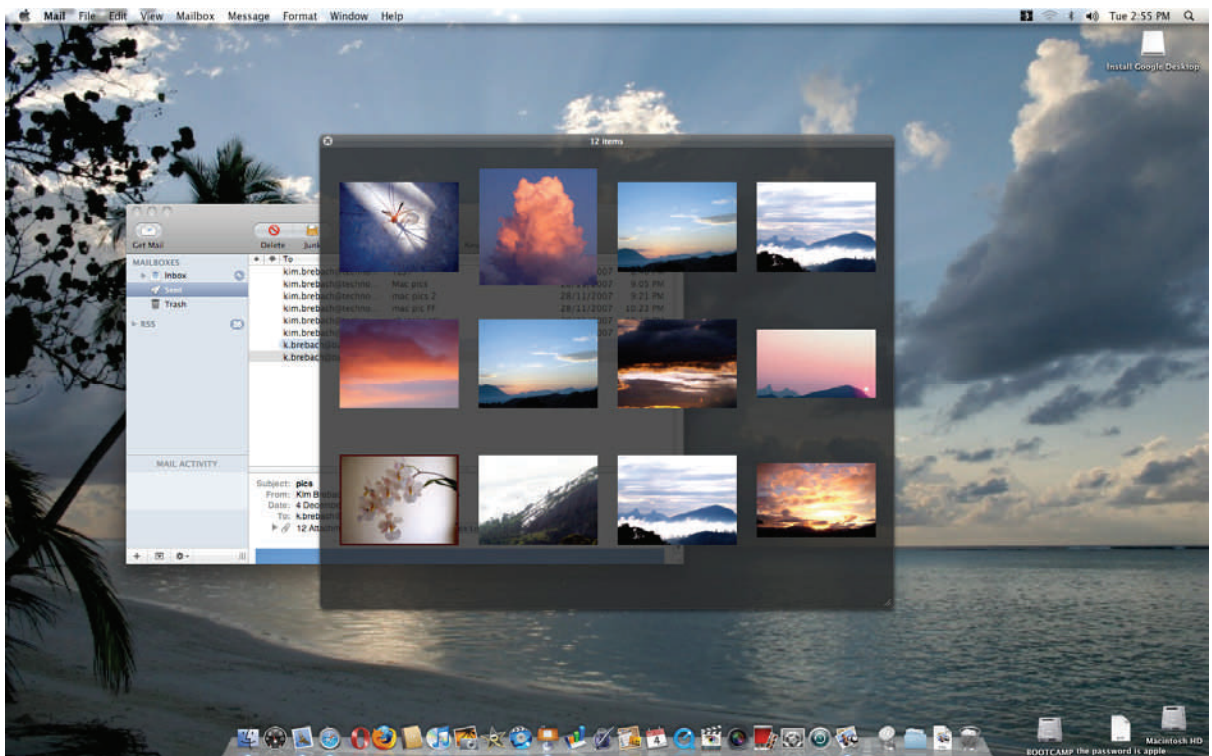
A guy called Automator, who looks like he's walked off a Star Wars set, helps you schedule repetitive tasks.

A new version of Safari is loaded with nifty new features, but I'm not a great fan of this browser. Safari has lost the brushed aluminium look but the active tab is still too hard to pick out. You can check our review of 4 popular browsers here:

<http://www.technoledge.com.au/pdfs/supersoftware-browserbanquet.pdf>

Mail has had a big makeover too, offering fancy stationary and a host of easy options for attaching anything from photos to notes. Mail gave me scant information about some files I attached to an email, but it offered me a peek at them with Quick Look, a new feature that provides a sneak preview of files without launching the associated program. All you do is hit the space bar when the file is the centre of the carousel and the full-size document or record or picture snaps forward.

This tight integration of applications is where Leopard impresses, because Quick Look works in Finder and iLife and even in Time Machine. In Mail, you get the grid view:



Preview is a less obvious blessing that comes into its own with PDF files. It lets you do searches in PDF documents and even includes tools for reordering pages and combining PDFs into a single document. For photos, Preview even includes some image manipulation tools.

What I couldn't find was a screenshot utility (Image Capture is for importing photos from a camera) until Google led me to a keyboard shortcut - Command+Shift+3 - which does the job. You get the whole desktop but that's good enough for my simple purpose.

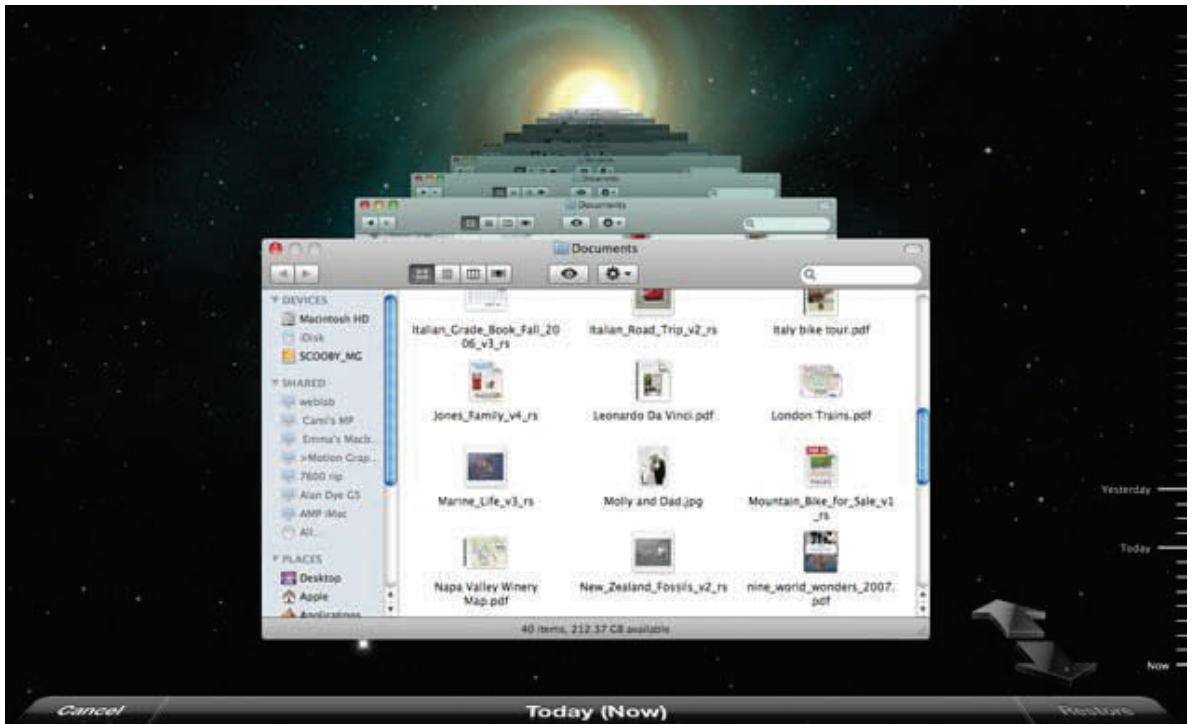
Still on the utilitarian side of Leopard, there's no defrag utility because OS X is based on Unix and, like Linux, doesn't scatter file fragments all over disk drives. Leopard also lets you create and resize hard disk partitions with the greatest of ease.

For security, there's a firewall that doesn't give much away. I can't see more security features apart from parental control options, but the reviewer's guide claims that Leopard includes 'a host of new security features and technologies designed to strengthen the protection of your Mac and your personal information, while remaining easy to use and unobtrusive.' Application signing and sandboxing are said to provide better protection from attacks that attempt to hijack or modify software on the system.

Unobtrusive is fitting here because I never saw a sign of these security provisions. All that happens when you open an app you've downloaded is that Leopard asks you if you really want to use it, a ploy Windows XP users are more than familiar with.

Time Machine

For data security, there's Time Machine, the most talked about Leopard feature of them all. Trust Apple to make a mind-numbing chore like backup a Sci-Fi thriller experience, enticing users to develop good habits – ah, the genius of Apple's designers! From what I read about Time Machine, it wasn't just fun and intuitive but functionally rich as well. I couldn't wait to try it.



Time machine takes snapshots of changes every hour and combines them into a daily view, which is what you see in the 3D picture. You can get down to the nitty gritty with this program, down to restoring single files. Checking back-up files to make sure you restore the right version is made easier by Quick Look. If that fails, there's Spotlight, the new super-search function in Leopard. Nice way to combine features for best effect.

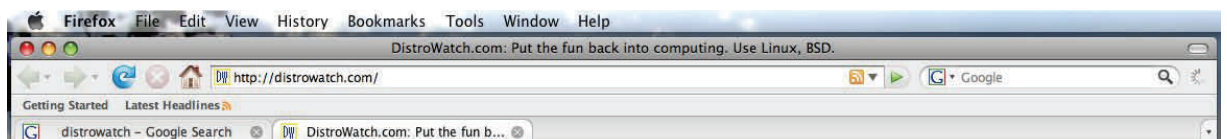
TM found my Seagate USB drive alright but asked me to reformat it. That was a real downer since the drive holds the backups for 3 PCs – it looks like this Time Machine is a solo trip for Mac-only households. Since all the reviews of Leopard praise it's ease of use and say it works reliably, there was no real need for me try it.

Like Vista, it keeps previous versions of files but, unlike Vista, it won't work with inbuilt hard drives, which means laptop users don't have access to older versions of files on the road (as they do in Vista) unless they take their back-up drives with them. On the bright side, Time Machine doesn't demand that you have the USB drive connected all the time, unlike other programs that get their knickers in a real twist. Time Machine simply backs up the changes since the last time you had your laptop plugged in.

Installing extra software

This turns out to be a simple download & drag-and-drop affair but it leaves debris on the desktop that needs to be dragged into the rubbish bin, no big deal but not neat. This doesn't work with Firefox, Leopard telling me I need to close the application first. I'm stumped because I've done that, then I see that the menu on the top line is still set on Firefox (an old Mac custom), so I quit from there and the standard menu returns.

When I open Firefox, Leopard asks me if I really want to do that. When I say Yes, I do, I find the browser wearing a Mac outfit. You can change that, of course.



The Open Office install gave me bigger headaches than Firefox. Writer worked fine (including the Apple fonts) but Leopard seemed to have mislaid Impress, Calc and the rest of the apps that come with the free office suite.

Mac Attack

Leopard also falls a little short of what it promised to deliver, in the same area as Vista: a new file system, in this case SUN's ZFS. A read-only ZFS file system driver is the only part that made the initial leap with Leopard.

To my mind, the age-old Mac custom of separating the top menu bar from the application's panel is a nuisance. I expect the program to close down when I hit the red cross button. Another gripe is the old restriction for resizing windows - from the bottom right-hand corner only. I also don't see why the max, min and close buttons are still in the left top corner - is it just to be different?

The other gripe I have is with Leopard's windows: taking a cue from Safari (or vice versa), the slight variation in the shades of grey makes it hard to be sure of the active panel on the screen. Grey is not my favourite colour but I couldn't find any other options. As it stands, Leopard looks like its wearing a sharp business suit - a boring grey one.

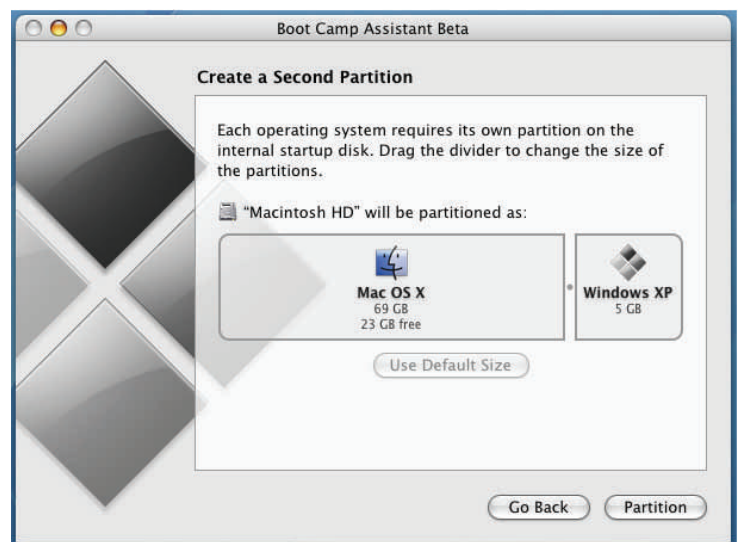
I searched the web for answers and found Mac users deploring how hard it was to theme OS X. Leopard skins weren't readily available, it seemed, only fresh icon sets that looked like they needed special tools and skills to bolt on.

Bootcamp

I'd read that it was easy, and it looked easy but it only works for Windows so I couldn't try Ubuntu for comparison. Vista wasn't an option either since the Presario only came with a recovery partition, not a Vista install disk. So good old XP Professional was the only option.

It's as simple as popping the install CD into the iMac's neat side slot and waiting for the old blue XP install screen to come up. Creating partitions is something Auntie Nell could do over afternoon tea with scones, it's that easy until Leopard asks her if she wants to reformat the partition as NTFS or leave it at FAT32.

I opted for NTFS and got a stern warning that made me change my mind. The rest was easy and XP went on its way for a while, then ran into an insurmountable problem. I was fast losing interest but couldn't retrieve the XP CD.



The power switch was the last resort but, on the reboot, the iMac started loading XP again. I was caught in an idiot loop with no end in sight and had to consult the oracle for help on my desktop PC. Google said: hold down the mouse button as soon as you restart the Mac and the CD will pop out. It did, and the iMac booted as usual.

Parallels is another option, but, without a Vista install CD I still can't do the side-by-side comparison I'd like to do. And with Parallels not supporting the latest versions of Ubuntu, there's little point in a comparison with Linux either. In any case, I have no experience setting up VM machines and don't want to return a broken Leopard to the generous folks at Apple.

Adding Peripherals

I attached my HP 3110 inkjet, turned it on and nothing happened - not a single panel telling me Mac had found a new device. I hunted around looking for some way to install the printer but got lost. Help informed me that 'Mac OS X automatically sets up most printers that connect to your computer using a USB cable'. I printed a page and, lo and behold, it just printed. Magic.

Stability

Checking on updates, I found five packages waiting for me weighing a total of 200mb. Why didn't Leopard tell me that, as Ubuntu does? Why didn't it install them as Vista would? The installation process is more clunky than with Synaptic, partly because you have to agree to several EULAs. For updates?

On the positive side, a month has passed since Leopard was released and Apple has responded to the early problems with a stack of updates and fixes. This stands in stark contrast to Microsoft who claimed there were no problems with Vista and smuggled dozens of fixes down the line under cover of the night, hidden inside various updates.

Leopard only lost the plot once during the time I had it (with bootcamp), and that probably wasn't its fault. A couple of times, it hung with a colour wheel spinning and spinning and spinning, but that wasn't terminal.

Understanding Leopard

Looking beyond the iMac's physical charms, Leopard is a strange mix of the brilliant and the unfathomable. The desktop navigation keeps tripping me up, even after a week. I can't find the thread of logic that runs through this setup - panels disappear when I minimize them, sometimes to the sides, sometimes altogether. Then they all burst on the screen when I click on an icon in the tray.

It felt as if Leopard were trying really hard to anticipate my every desire and give me a great experience, but somehow catching me on the wrong foot. It's probably just a matter of longer acquaintance, but a steep learning curve awaits those of us not familiar with OS X. You can't possibly sample all the delights this banquet offers in a few helpings.

Certain Mac character traits still annoy and aren't easily banished since Leopard isn't that flexible when it comes to layout and themes. The beast can be tamed, I suspect, but the surface settings don't offer that many choices. There is always the UNIX terminal window but that's getting too far under the hood for me. It's the in-between layer that seems to be missing in Leopard.

The lasting impression is one of a highly refined, smoothly integrated production for the cognoscenti, rather than the innocent, the kind of show you need to see several times to fully appreciate.

Summing up the Contenders

It's hard to resist the feeling that PC desktop design reached a functional peak a few years back. Linux still had a way to go but XP was pretty complete after SP2, and OS X Tiger was better according to reliable sources.

Vista and Leopard include functional refinements but the serious work has gone into creating new fashion items for the wardrobe. Some things have been changed for the sake of change, a sure sign that OS designers have reached the end of the road. These productions are becoming too rich for simple users to digest and tend to make these platforms harder to work on, not easier.



Some core features planned for **Vista** didn't make it, even after five years of gestation. One of these is WinFS, the file system designed to replace NTFS after its decade-long tour of duty. A file system that needs constant defragging should've been left behind in the nineties, where it belongs. Adding insult to injury, Vista's inbuilt defragger is a disgrace.

Security has been improved, in theory at least. User Account Control, the most obvious change, is an object lesson in bad design. The inclusion of Windows Defender is a better idea, but why not go all the way and add an AV-engine?

Apart from improved look and feel, Vista doesn't break much new ground and is best seen as a new version of Windows that is incomplete and badly implemented. Many users will be grateful that so much of Vista remains familiar, but the questions remain: why did it take so long and why did it put on so much weight?

That aside, Vista surprised me. After the torrent of complaints that swamped the internet, I'd expected the worst. The worst is what I would've ended up with if I knew as little about Windows as I do about Macs. Out of box performance was woeful and explained the Aida-sized chorus of users singing dirges and laments.

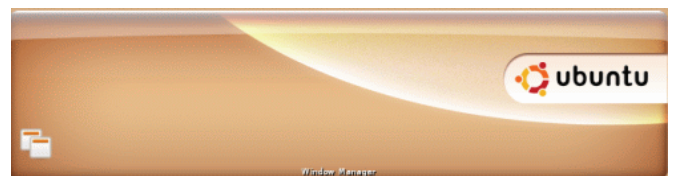
I saw Vista 9 months after its first staging, after many flaws in the production had been fixed. On my laptop's simple stage, the show rarely faltered. I'm not tired of watching it yet, and it remains a show I enjoy going back to as it strikes the right balance between glamour and usability. I like Vista, in part because it's as familiar as my old office. It's had a successful facelift, but everything is still more or less where it was before.

Once Vista is optimised for speed and utility, it's fine to work on and finer to look at. Out of the box, it's just fine to look at. Vista's usability is easily improved but choosing the right freeware requires intimate knowledge of the marketplaces in the kingdom. That said, savvy users can turn Vista into a great experience without handing over bundles of cash for applications and extra hardware.

The ticket price is a major obstacle, not just when buying Vista as an upgrade, but also with applications like Office 2007. The ludicrous \$700 asking price is the first shock, the 300mb of RAM the suite chews up is the second. To accommodate Microsoft's office suite, I'd have to buy more RAM for the little Presario.

Microsoft only gets away with this because few of its customers have any idea that they can get the functionally equivalent Open Office for nothing. For the uninitiated, Vista remains a costly and ponderous production. You'd think that Microsoft would be working flat out to improve performance, but early tests of SP1 show no sign of that except in the transfer speed of files over networks.

Ubuntu isn't pure joy for simple users either. If I hadn't played with Linux desktops for a year, Ubuntu's spinning cube would've eluded me along with the gorgeous Emerald skins.



With that gripe out of the way, Gutsy gave me my first enjoyable trip I've had with this distro. 7.10 is a serious contender for desktop honours despite the silly name. Navigation is easy and logical, the same goes for settings and adjustments. Ubuntu comes with a full set of apps (including Open Office) and provides ready access to more software than you can ever use.

Security is no big deal for Linux desktops since they're such a tiny target. The need to enter your password over and over is annoying when you're tweaking settings or installing software. Like Vista, Ubuntu uses a single password for user and administrator, so the exercise is futile. If you're setting Linux up for a family member with wayward tendencies, an administrator (root) password is an option but parental control is not.

The biggest bonus is Synaptic, which makes software dead simple to install and keep updated. Ubuntu is also rock-solid, doesn't crash and rarely asks you to reboot. Dual-booting is easy and, unlike Leopard's bootcamp, doesn't restrict you to running Windows (or to two operating systems). The Ubuntu show is lightning fast on a basic PC (like a Celeron with 512mb of memory), and costs nothing. That value proposition is hard to beat.

Ubuntu's wardrobe offers by far the most costumes. If you want to beat Vista and Leopard for gloss and glitz, compiz-fusion and Emerald are ready to provide. If you don't like the Gnome desktop, you can opt for Kubuntu with KDE. If you can't decide, you can load both without sinking the ship. For older PCs, there's Xubuntu with Xfce, a desktop on a serious diet. The remaining cosmetic obstacle for Ubuntu, and the last major frontier for Linux desktops, is the way fonts are rendered.

The six-monthly release cycle (in common with other Linux distros) is another bonus. The focus is firmly on incremental improvements and kernel support for the latest software and hardware available. Upgrading to new versions is easy if you set the OS up in its own partition to begin with, separate from your data. That's not hard, even for simple users.

Ubuntu has caught up fast. It lacks little in functionality but is streets ahead on flexibility. You can keep it plain like a workhorse or turn on all the glitter of an expensive costume drama. The speed out of the box is as impressive as the 3D acrobatics on a basic PC. Ease of use is good unless you want to tweak and tinker a lot. There are thousands of free applications, some outstanding and many of decent quality.

When Ubuntu comes pre-installed on a new PC, a Dell laptop for example, it's a viable option for non-technical users. Sure, there some issues left to solve but that applies to Vista as well. Installing Ubuntu from scratch can still pose challenges to users with certain hardware and networking setups. At the rate this distro is maturing, I doubt that these obstacles will persist for long.



Leopard provided the most exciting trip of these three, even after screening out the ultra modern carriage Apple supplied for the occasion. The effects were breathtaking at times, recalling a live performance of Cirque de Soleil.

With Windows and Linux, you have to get your hands dirty to make things work your way. With Leopard, I couldn't get near the cockpit. It's like that old joke - What if operating systems were airlines? - where you ask the Mac Airways flight attendant a question and she says: 'You don't need to know that. Why don't you go back to your seat and enjoy the movie?'

With Leopard, you're travelling luxury class, cocooned in a plush capsule with everything laid on. Why on earth would you have the slightest interest in how this plane works? My problem is that I'm wearing overalls and carrying a toolbox. The Veuve Cliquot flows freely, the gourmet meals are exquisite and the surround sound movies fabulous, but I'm not dressed for this lavish party.

All along I had the feeling that I'd stepped on the wrong flight. If I came to an iMac afresh, as a simple tourist looking for an entertaining trip, I'd be lapping up what Leopard lays on. I suspect that everything is utterly intuitive here but my mind has been warped by the vagaries of Windows and the Rubik's cube challenges of Linux.

For the working user, the extent of feature integration across many applications is impressive. The same goes for the way Leopard serves up such a rich experience with no apparent penalty to performance. I checked various Mac sites on the internet, and the consensus is that Leopard is just a little slower than Tiger on the same hardware. The difference is nothing like the Grand Canyon that separates Vista performance from that of XP.

Leopard is the obvious choice for users who want a multimedia max-out and a super-cool work environment. For me, the max is a bit much and the cool a bit overdone. There's a lot to admire here but form is constantly pulling rank on function, and it gets in the way. Of course I could run Vista on the iMac as a second OS, but that's not the issue here even if it will make it more tempting for some users to switch from Windows.

Leopard's style comes at a premium, and it comes only on a Mac, unless you're among the geeks who've hacked Leopard to run on PCs. After spending a couple of weeks with an iMac, I can see why Apple doesn't want to sell Leopard seats on ordinary planes. It's the whole experience – the sleek fuselage, the sharp outfits of the crew, the gourmet food, the music and the movies.

Down under, a 2ghz iMac with 20in screen, 1gb of RAM and a middling ATI graphics card can be had for about A\$ 1,600. That's no longer a huge premium over a PC with similar specs, but Leopard may not run like the wind on that configuration. Vista won't either, it's fair to say. The iMac configuration I tested costs about \$ A 2,200, not a bad price for the exhilarating trip it delivers.

Leopard looks great, runs fast and offers more than its two competitors here. It's not my kind of beast, but that first impression might change with longer acquaintance - it takes time to get to know someone with so many facets to their personality. If I could buy OS X 10.5 Leopard for one of my PCs, I'd do so just to get to know it better. Since that's not an option, I have to add the iMac to my wish list of gorgeous things I aspire to own one day.

Choice

That's the key in this comparison of three very different operating systems. For far too long, Windows has been the only show in town. Apple seemed content to play to a dwindling audience of diehard fans, while the rebels in the mountains seemed to delight in producing shows that puzzled ordinary folks more than those of Samuel Beckett.

It's good to see Apple taking the fight to Redmond once again. Vista's outrageous demands for hardware, combined with Apple's sharper pricing, have narrowed the gap. However, choosing an iMac is more likely to be a personal style decision than a cold cost calculation.

Linux still has some puzzling elements but Ubuntu has made it accessible to an audience more familiar with the works of Andrew Lloyd-Webber. Now we have a three-way choice, thanks to Mark Shuttleworth and Canonical, the company he founded several years ago. Linux purists tend to scoff at Ubuntu as a 'dumbed-down' version of Linux instead of recognising that it took a visionary to unite at least some of the mountain tribes behind an heroic quest.

To give the purists credit, they wrote most of the code that made distros like Ubuntu possible, and still do, including most of the utilities and applications. It just took someone with deep resources to put it all together in a form that opened a new market for Linux. Others followed, and more will do so over time.

Verdict

Vista is the obvious choice if you're comfortable with the court etiquette of Redmond, and know your way around the marketplaces of the kingdom. Since Vista doesn't deliver much that's really new beyond the initial WOW, it tends to disappoint in the long run. And it demands expensive hardware unless you know how to curb its appetite. Vista is a typical Redmond production: Aida brought up-to-date, with extra elephants.

Leopard is a more exciting show in many ways, better choreographed and seamlessly integrated with the stage it plays on. It's Cirque de Soleil rather than Verdi. Leopard is the clear winner if money is no object and you're looking for a stylish desktop, maximum entertainment and smooth workflow integration. Here as well, patience is required to learn all the tricks on offer, but the WOW will last longer than Vista's.

Ubuntu is the clear choice if you have a tight budget and the patience to learn new ways. It's also a great choice if you're a savvy user of PCs, for the flexibility it offers. And Ubuntu is the clear choice if you believe in open software and balk at paying King William's exorbitant taxes. Ubuntu's transformation of Linux recalls My Fair Lady. If it were marketed more effectively, it could become the Nutcracker Suite.

Footnote

The low performance score Vista gave the little Presario v3000 intrigued me, so I ran PCMark05, which allows easy comparison with similar laptops using basic graphics cards (prices are in A\$). I knew the V3000 was a superseded model when I bought it (at a fair price, I thought). I'd also read that AMD cpus weren't as fast as the new Intel chips, so the results were interesting.

Compaq Presario V3000	AMD Turion 64x2 1.6GHz 1gb RAM	2431	\$950
Compaq Presario V3000	same machine with 2gb Cruzer USB	2741	\$990
Toshiba Satellite A 200	Intel Core Duo T2080 1.73GHz 512mb	2393	\$999
LG FS-3	Intel Core Duo T2130 1.86GHz 1gb RAM	2988	\$1099
Dell Inspiron 6400	Intel Core 2 Duo T7200 2GHz 512mb RAM	2705	\$1199
ASUS F5R	Intel Core Duo T2130 1.86GHz 1gb RAM	2871	\$1299
Lenovo C200	Intel Core 2 Duo T5500 1.66GHz 1gb RAM	2867	\$1399

The table shows that the test machine's performance is pretty average for low-end laptops. It also shows that the low cost Cruzer ReadyBoost option raises overall performance by a measurable degree. It doesn't feel that good in practice, but more memory clearly helps.

* * *

See also:

[Part 1—Introduction and Vista](#)

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