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Dell 'happy' to ship Mac OS X-based PCs

If Apple will ever let him...

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Michael Dell would like to license Mac OS X and ship it with future PC products, the Dell founder and chairman has revealed.

It's not likely to happen any time soon, of course - Apple CEO Steve Jobs has already said it's not something he wants to do for now - but according to name-dropping *Fortune* online columnist David Kirkpatrick, Dell would jump at the chance if offered.

"If Apple decides to open the Mac OS to others, we would be happy to offer it to our customers," Dell apparently wrote in an email.

He's not the only one, apparently. Plenty of industry figures dismiss the Mac as a niche platform in public, but behind closed doors they see the potential in Apple's Unix-based yet slick-looking OS. One Intel acquaintance of ours has often berated the "non-standard" platform, though we suspect he's a little more keen on it since Jobs' announcement he will use Intel processors in future.

It does seem to be the case that Mac OS X is winning grudging respect from the PC world, primarily because of its relative freedom from malware. That's not going to change when it arrives running on x86 processors, any more than the operating system somehow becoming more compatible with Windows. But it's interesting the way that some observers see that as being the case. In reality, the situation isn't going to change. Using an x86-based Mac is going to leave your information no more, or less compatible with the rest of the computing world than using a PowerPC-based Mac is. Moving data from Windows to Mac, or vice versa, isn't going to be any easier, or any harder.

The only 'benefit' will be that if you don't like Mac OS X, you'll be able to wipe it and install Windows on your Mac. Apple has said it won't stop users doing that, though it will prevent PC owners installing Mac OS X on their machines. For a minority, the ability to run Windows alongside Mac OS X will be advantageous, just as plenty of Linux users do the same, primarily to play the latest games.

But should Apple offer Mac OS X to PC makers and even end-users? It's easy to see such a move as the logical step, but Apple needs to be certain that a sufficiently large number of

customers will put down \$100 or so for a copy and that sufficient numbers of the faithful will not stop buying Apple hardware and instead run Mac OS X on cheap PC kit. All these factors are there on the Apple strategic spreadsheet, and there may come a time when the crucial cell changes colour from red to black, but it will be some way off.

Apple has to sell a lot more boxes yet, and while the Mac Mini has proved a sterling success, there's little evidence yet that either the price of the machine or the iPod halo effect is pulling over significant numbers of Windows users. There are some PC owners who'd run Macs if they could afford them, but most are clearly sufficiently happy with Windows that shifting to the Mac is not so much undesirable as unnecessary. For others - and here I could mention a number of non-technical PC owners of my acquaintance - the compatibility issues make moving to the Mac a non-starter, and as I say, that's not going to change when OS X goes x86.

Right now, there is simply insufficient demand for Mac OS X on Intel. Michael Dell says he'd like to offer it to his customers, but there's no firm evidence they would take him up on it. Techies might have very firm views on which operating system they use - the first PC I ever bought was very quickly reconfigured as a BeOS machine - but no one else cares too much. If they did, they'd all be running Linux by now, or have migrated to the Mac.

Alas it's just too easy to make the default selection, and as long as that's the case, Microsoft can relax while Apple works hard to persuade people to splash out on a new OS. ®

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