Apple embraces Windows XP with Boot Camp

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Sometimes the impossible happens. And as confusing as the change may be, it actually turns out not to be the end of the world.

Earlier this month the nearly unthinkable occurred for the Macintosh user community. Apple Computer, its their user base completely by surprise, announced that it had released a public beta of Boot Camp, a program that allows Microsoft's Windows XP Service Pack 2 operating system to be installed on its recently introduced Intel processor-based computers.

Boot Camp comes on the heels of a now-famous computer hack last month in which two users, identifying themselves via their Internet handles as "narf2006" and "blanka," were able to find a workaround that

allowed an Intel-based iMac to boot Windows XP Service Pack 2 in order to win a sponsored contest and claim a $13,854 prize.

The duo later posted pictures and a video of the steps taken to solve the puzzle on the flickr.com photoblogging Web site. Though unstable and lacking support for certain Apple peripherals as well as a full compliment of video drivers, the hack created a stir on the Internet.

Boot Camp, which is available as a free download, allows users to create a partition on their hard drive for the Windows XP operating system without having to reformat their hard drive. Once complete, an assistant program loads that prompts the user to burn a CD containing all drivers needed to run networking, Bluetooth, graphics and other core functions of Windows. Upon completion of the Windows installation, users load the burned CD to install the remaining drivers and complete the process.

Users must provide their own Windows XP Service Pack 2 installation CD, which Apple does not provide.

The software, which is available without technical support, functions as a preview version for Apple's upcoming Mac OS X 10.5 operating system, which will be released later this year.

So far feedback to the program has been positive, even if the change comes as a shock to many Mac users who never thought they'd see a version of Microsoft Windows on their computers of choice and proudly defended the Mac OS X operating system. Faster than the emulation programs than have been used to run the Windows operating systems on Apple's computers, the program allows for Windows XP to run at its full speed on a Macintosh while also offering the choice to run either Mac OS X or Windows XP.

The only significant drawback, to date, seems to be a lack of

compatibility between file formats for the operating systems. Users trying to share files between the two operating systems may run into complications given that Mac OS X can read and write to Windows' Fat32 volume format, but FAT32 can only support file sizes up to 4 gigabytes.

Conversely, Windows' newer NTFS volume format can support larger formats, but Mac OS X can only read the NTFS file format, not write to them. Windows XP cannot read the HFS(plus) file format, which many Macintosh computers use for volume formatting. Third-party software utilities such as Mediafour's MacDrive will need to be installed to ensure compatibility between the two operating systems.

The change, which allows the Macintosh to now run its chief competitor's operating system on the Intel-based hardware, is appreciable on multiple levels. Mac OS X and Windows XP can now be installed with the user booting into the appropriate one as needed to run platform-specific programs. Similar efforts have succeeded on Windows-based PCs wherein users could install partitions for both Windows and a Linux operating system and switch between the two as desired.

"After we released Intel-based Macs we had a lot of customer requests asking if it's possible to run Windows on those machines," said Brian Croll, Apple Computer's senior director of software product marketing.

From the development side, Boot Camp has also come as a surprise but something that could yield future benefits.

"Apple rarely gives developers any advance warning. It's one way they help maintain their drum-tight security. So the first we heard of Boot Camp was the day Apple announced it," said Colin Smith, vice president of Freeverse Software, a cross-platform game and utility firm.

Though Smith looks forward to advantages such as Apple being able to grow its market share by offering the ability to run both operating systems on its machines, he realizes this may change the Mac's software market.

"It's certainly making us rethink some of our development projects. It will hurt some of them and help some others tremendously," said Smith.

"There are so many people I know who would rather own a Mac, save for a few Windows-based applications they need," said Michael Phillips, a graphic designer and avid Macintosh user. "Gamers, for example, will be able to use Mac OS X but be able to quickly jump into Windows for a little Half-Life 2 or Far Cry."

"I was excited," remarked Phillips about the Boot Camp announcement. "It makes buying a Mac so much more flexible and attractive."

While heated discussion continues as to the overall relevance of the change, especially where future development for each operating system is concerned, there's a general excitement around the idea of running both Mac OS X and Windows on one machine.

"When Apple starts making machines that you can replace the video card in, machines that run every operating system and every application, the conversation will become very interesting," said Jerry Holkins, co-creator of the Penny Arcade Web comic.

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