



Insanely Great

*The Life and Times of
Macintosh,
the Computer That Changed Everything*

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The world has arrived at an age of cheap complex devices of great reliability; and something is bound to come of it.

—VANNEVAR BUSH

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hat I first remember was the light.

It was November 1983, and after some Byzantine negotiations, I was admitted to the inner sanctum—a low-slung building in Cupertino, California, containing the most whispered-about secret since the Enigma, or at least since Who shot J.R.? Upon confirming my identity, the receptionist directed me to a small conference room named after a French painter. A short, energetic woman in a suede jumpsuit entered carrying an awkward canvas bag. She set the bag on the table, unzipped the top and reached in, grabbing something by a recessed handle.

The shape is now a familiar component of our culture, as instantly recognizable as a Volkswagen or a Coke bottle. Back then, I had never seen anything like it. All I knew was its name: Macintosh. And that it was supposed to change the world. It certainly looked different.

In about thirty seconds, the woman had everything plugged in and connected. She reached behind it and turned it on. The disk drive ground and whirled. And

the small screen turned milky white. In the middle was a sharp little machine self-portrait, with a blinking question mark inside on the screen inside the screen. Then the disk drive whirled once more and the question mark evaporated. In its place was a happy face. Macintosh was happy.

I was witnessing a revolution.

Until that moment, when one said a computer screen “lit up,” some literary license was required. Unless the display was something from a graphics program or a game, the background on a monitor was invariably black, providing a contrast to the phosphorescent green (sometimes white) letters. Reading text off a computer screen had the feel of staring into the flat bottom part of those toy fortune-telling Eight Balls, where you’d ask the thing a question, turn it upside down, and a cryptic answer would dreamily drift into view. Everyone who used computers considered this one of the standard discomforts: it did hurt your eyes if you stared too long. But we were so accustomed to it that we hardly even thought to conceive otherwise. We simply hadn’t seen the light.

I saw it that day. I also saw many things I didn’t know a computer could do. By the end of the demonstration, I began to understand that these were things a computer *should* do. There was a better way.

On that day in November, I met the people who created that machine. They were groggy and almost giddy from three years of creation. Their eyes blazed with Vision and fire. They told me that with Macintosh, they were going to “put a dent in the Universe.” Their leader,

Steven P. Jobs, told them so. They also told me how Jobs referred to this new computer:

Insanely great.

Ten years later, I am boarding a Metroliner at New York City for quick overnight to Washington, D.C. In my left hand is a seven-pound gray box several times more powerful, but a thousand dollars less expensive, than the object I viewed in wonder that day in November. It is a PowerBook, the latest of my four Macintosh computers.

It is my typewriter, my communications center, my Rolodex, my Filofax, my alarm clock, my fax machine, my notebook, my database, my calculator, my file cabinet, and my opponent in chess and the slaughter of space aliens. It runs on a battery as big as a pack of baseball cards, though I'm just as happy plugging it into a wall socket. As the train pulls out of the station, I slip the PowerBook out of its case and press the space bar on its keyboard. A pleasant chime rings out, and the screen goes from a dusky fog to a familiar still life of little pictures on a lightly dotted whitish background. I have been using Macintosh for ten years now, and each time I turn it on, I am reminded of the first light I saw in Cupertino, 1983. It is exhilarating, like the first glimpse of green grass when entering a baseball stadium.

I have essentially accessed another world, the place where my information lives. It is a world that one enters without thinking of it . . . an ephemeral territory perched on the lip of math and firmament. Using the

keyboard and mouse, one can reach into a metaphoric landscape, which has long become familiar. Though few know all the jargon identifying the peculiar Macintosh furniture—menu bars, title bars, elevators, close boxes, pull-downs and pop-ups—they become as cozy as the living room you grew up in. It's home. And in this place, you find familiar things. The paper you were working on. The spreadsheet figures you entered yesterday. Two different layouts you were considering for a publication you are designing. Even the simulated F-16 fighter jet you were piloting into a hostile zone near the Strait of Hormuz. This is a place with no physical substance, but it is of course wrong to assume that what happens there is in any way intangible. The work you perform there is real.

Very few tools transform their culture. Macintosh has been one of them. In the decade since the Mac's debut Apple has sold over twelve million Macintoshes—the sales rate of PowerBooks alone is over a million per annum. Extending the Macintosh style of handling information even more broadly are many millions more computers that run systems that owe just about everything to the Macintosh, notably Microsoft Windows.

The Macintosh has become a symbol of a sort of intellectual freedom, a signifier that someone has logged into the digital age. On television you see a Mac on Jerry Seinfeld's desk. It peers at you in the background of authors' photographs on book jackets. A newspaper reports breathlessly of producers conducting rapturous relationships with PowerBooks, of screenwriters sleeping

with them. A magazine writes of a movie mogul who “grows rhapsodic” when he speaks of the device, and credits it for a career change and possibly even resolution of a mid-life crisis.

It took some time for people to see the light, but now it is everywhere, not only on personal computers but in television commercials that ape the look of its screen, and soon on cable television controllers and hand-held “personal communicators.” The ideas of Macintosh no longer belong to the future: they dominate the present. And they will shape the way we cope with the future.

This book is about how technology, serendipity, passion, and magic combined to create what I believe is the most important consumer product in the last half of the twentieth century: the Macintosh computer. I will trace how Macintosh came into being, why it is so important, and how it already has set a process into motion that will eventually change our thinking about computers, our thinking about information, and even our thinking about thinking. In terms of our relationship with information, Macintosh changed everything.

I will also try to describe why, after a decade of using Macintosh, I still find it exhilarating.

I certainly don't claim that Macintosh is perfect. (At the time of its release it in some ways wasn't even adequate.) Certainly, I acknowledge that Macintosh is but a step in a path that was probably inevitable, the trail leading to a Digital Nirvana where all information, all