

Monday, December 20, 2004

### The Good, The Bad and The Ugly Powerbook

After the rather abrupt loss of my T42p I needed a new laptop quickly. The delay in getting the Thinkpad originally combined with the headache of getting Linux working on it nicely and also to some extent IBM dumping their PC division all contributed to the decision to go with a 15" Powerbook. If IBM would have supported a real OS on their hardware I would have bought another one in a second. I have never been a Mac fan, but I needed a working Unix laptop quickly. After years of having an absolute crap operating system, they finally have a good one. This thing is a 1.5GHz G4 with a half a Gig of ram and the 128M Radeon and then another 512M from Crucial (<http://www.crucial.com>) added on. Would have been nice to put 2G in it, but those 1G sticks are really expensive. After using it for a week and a half I am quite pleased with it overall. Plenty of little gripes, but overall it is a useful little machine.

The Good (with a few reservations)

Stuff works. I didn't have to fight apm/acpi to get it to sleep properly when I shut the lid, nor did I have to massage my wireless drivers and give them a little tune-up every week. It's a slick-looking block of aluminum, but it doesn't feel nearly as sturdy as the Thinkpad. I guess we will see if it holds up to my abuse and the many around-the-world trips this thing is going to have to endure. The battery status indicator on the battery itself is nice. The dock is cool-looking, but it quickly gets on your nerves. I found QuickSilver (<http://quicksilver.blacktree.com/>) to be a much quicker way to launch things without having to deal with the damn trackpad. Related to the last point, the very non-Unixy approach to installing applications simply by dragging them to the /Applications directory is very handy, especially the way everything is self-contained, but it does make it hard to run things from the command line. I tried the BBEdit demo, for example, and while I finally did figure out how to launch it from the shell, it wasn't very convenient. Not sure how you are supposed to use an editor that you can't quickly launch from the shell. I guess that's why QuickSilver exists. Vi/vim has worked fine for the past 20 years for me, and it will work fine for the next 20. Fink (<http://fink.sourceforge.net/>) makes me feel somewhat at home giving me apt-get for most of the common packages I use. It was trivial getting my development environment set up with Xcode and all the various libraries and tools I need to build PHP. You also quickly become familiar with Versiontracker (<http://www.versiontracker.com/macosx/>) for finding OSX applications. I like the fact that my ancient RG-1000 wireless gateways that I have a bunch of lying around in the garbage pile seem a lot more useful now since I can flash them with the Apple Airport firmware and make them look like real Airport AP's. It was always a massive pain trying to configure these things from Linux via the Java configurator thing. Expose is just cool!

The backlit keyboard has a high coolness factor although it seems a bit too dim to really be useful. It also doesn't light up the row of function keys. A way to turn it on on demand as well as a way to crank up the brightness would be nice. It may be hiding in there somewhere, but I haven't run across it yet. The light around the power plug is cool too, except this one, unlike the keyboard backlight is really bright and doesn't turn off when the machine goes turns off the lcd so twice now my wife has repositioned the idle laptop sitting in the bedroom out of sight. The Skype (<http://www.skype.com>) client is pretty and works very well. There is a plethora of decent web browsers. It came with Safari and IE. Add Mozilla, Firefox and Camino to that and you have 5 browsers that all

seem to work well. I am used to Firefox from Linux, so I am sticking with that.

The Bad (with some workarounds)

For some reason there is no way to do multiple virtual desktops in the standard GUI. Desktop (<http://wsmanager.sourceforge.net/>) manager solves that annoyance. Almost anyway. It would be much more useful if Apple-Tab only cycled through the applications on the current desktop and not all of them. I am guessing they can't hook in and change this without being more integrated with the GUI. (boxes on the left in the menubar image above)

iTunes is pretty nice, but why in the world doesn't it have a way to minimize it to the menu bar. If they are going to force me to keep that stupid menu bar on my screen at all times, the least they could do is make use of it. Luckily there is a very cheap little tool called Synergy (<http://wincen.com/a/products/synergy-classic/>) that fixes that problem. With Synergy installed using the "tabbed" (arrows in the menubar image above) look in the menu bar iTunes is great and would be in the "Good" section if I didn't have to buy this add-on Synergy thing to make it usable. It almost makes me want to pick up an ipod just to play with the

integration.

I was also surprised how badly it reacted when I fed it an xvid AVI file. I thought this thing was a multimedia monster. VLC (<http://www.videolan.org/vlc/download-macosx.html>) took care of that.

I hate IM with a passion, but unfortunately I need to use it. Fire (<http://fire.sourceforge.net/>) seems to do the trick, but I really haven't looked around much for anything better. My only real comment on this one is that the icon sure is ugly and that it hasn't crashed on me yet. Then again, it doesn't really understand Yahoo's status message stuff and Yahoo Messenger (<http://messenger.yahoo.com>) isn't too bad so I have been switching between these two.

For irc I am used to using XChat. The Aqua version (<http://xchataqua.sourceforge.net/>) isn't great, but it works. It really could use an update to the current xchat code. The tabs are centered, which is odd, and when you get disconnected from an SSL'ed connection it gets an error trying to reconnect. I have to restart it in order to get it to connect again. I should probably just install X11 and run the real xchat instead, but I haven't gotten around to that yet.

Pine from fink works nicely. But I have been trying to join this century by using a graphical email client. I don't think I will be able to though. Mail.app is really slow at dealing with huge mailboxes over IMAP. Thunderbird is better and I am close to being able to use it, but why doesn't it let me map 'R' to Reply-All? Using (<http://mozilla.dorando.at/keyconfig.xpi>) I can map it to Ctrl-R or Apple-R, but not simply R. And yes, I know this doesn't really have anything to do with the Powerbook or OSX, but since I am whining about stuff I figured I would throw it in. I also tried offlineimap (<http://offlineimap.sourceforge.net>) to try to speed up the IMAP and give me better disconnected support, but it uses Maildir and having 100,000 files in a directory apparently isn't something the OSX filesystem handles very well.

I have been using Kismet for years on Linux. Kismac (<http://binaervarianz.de/projekte/programmieren/kismac/>) is the OSX version and it seems a bit flaky. It has hung on me a few times and it needs to do weird driver swaps because the native OSX drivers don't support promiscuous mode. The built-in wireless card doesn't seem to do promiscuous mode at all even with the driver swap, but my Cisco and Orinoco pcmcia cards both work ok with it.

Apple left/right to switch between terminal windows is a nice touch, especially since Apple-Tab only cycles through a single window of each running application. But Terminal seems to be the only application that supports this. The same thing for Firefox would be very handy.

### The Ugly

No dedicated Page-up/down keys! I never realized how much I used those until I didn't have them anymore. Fn-up/down is the same thing, but you need two hands for that.

Too many modifiers! Was Fn, Ctrl and Alt really not enough? Why an Apple key where the Alt key should be?

What's with the two Enter keys? Wouldn't it be more useful to have two Ctrl or two Alt keys instead? I definitely don't need two Apple and two Enter keys right next to each other. Obviously it is there for the 3 people left in the world that actually uses numlock and the keyboard as a numeric keypad replacement. So I have a proposal. Let's just deprecate numlock completely and give me a useful key there instead!

Inconsistency in keyboard access to various widgets. Some dropdown boxes don't have keyboard accelerators. 'u' to get you to "United States" in a long country dropdown, for example.

Not being able to hide the top menu bar is really hard to get used to. Coming from a 1600x1200 screen on the T42p down to this 1280x854 screen I am already feeling quite cramped, especially vertically so losing another 16 pixels to a mostly useless menu bar is annoying. You can't even change the font in it or do anything to make it smaller as far as I can tell. Would it be so bad to provide a way to autohide it and move/resize it? Or even better, let me dock it.

The damn clock widget in the menu bar won't show me the day of the month. You can toggle showing the day of the week along with AM/PM and 12/24 hour displays, but you can't get it to say "Dec.20 11:00". I am usually with it enough to know what day of the week it is, but I am always forgetting the day of the month. I know it shows up in the menu when you click on it, but that means I have to move the mouse, click and then hit escape instead of just glancing up there. There are replacement things like wclock that will do this of course, but having to run yet another process just for that minor thing is dumb.

To keep complaining about the clock widget, why doesn't it show something

useful, like the damn date, when I hover over it? Some applications, like Syngery, shows you something useful on hover from the menu bar, so I know it is technically possible. There are many other places where throwing in hover support would be nice.

I of course knew about the trackpad and single mouse button issue and I knew I would have problems with that, and I do. I was however under the impression that the GUI was designed in such a way that you really didn't need more than a single mouse button, but it turns out there are plenty of places where you really need to right-click (Ctrl-Click) on stuff. Like if you want to empty the trash without multiple clicks. A USB mouse mostly solves this annoyance, but that restricts me to having a surface nearby to use the mouse on.

I had heard iPhoto was slow. And it really is slow. It's slower than slow. I find myself pondering what it could be doing while it is chewing on my photos. I hope it is doing something worthwhile with my cpu, like curing cancer, while it is grinding away. It is good for organizing photos as long as you aren't in a hurry and with the iPhotoToGallery (<http://zwily.com/iphoto/index.xsl>) plugin it is really easy to keep the online photo album in synch as well. Sticking with the iPhoto gripes. When I import photos from a fast Sandisk Ultra 512M CF card in a PCMCIA adapter iTunes skips. This is a 1.5GHz CPU with a Gig of RAM. Can it really not copy a file from a CF card and play an MP3 at the same time? Given all my other gripes, this is probably the most disappointing.

Scrolling text input boxes in Firefox leave cursor artifact garbage on the screen. Probably something the Firefox folks are doing wrong and not Apple's fault. But still an annoyance I didn't have under Linux.

Why only a slow DVD-R drive? Every modern DVD burner out there these days doesn't care if you feed it DVD+R or DVD-R media. Seems like it is time to update that. And get one that isn't so noisy.

No amplified audio line-in. Means you need an amplified mic and all the cheap headsets out there designed for voice chat won't work. I suppose the answer is to use a USB headset instead.

Posted by Rasmus in WIFI Toys at 07:46

Instead of Quicksilver, you may want to take a look at Butler (<http://www.petermaurer.de/butler>). It provides a launcher (for apps, bookmarks, email addresses, phone numbers, web searches, etc), and the icon it puts in the menu bar can also display/control iTunes.

I can image that a lack of native multiple desktops is a bit disconcerting for a long-time Linux user. But you'll get used to Exposé. :)

VLC is nice for playing those odd codecs. So is mplayer. Between those two and Quicktime, the only thing I can't play are WMV3

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files (and that's what Virtual PC is for).

I know you said you'd prefer not to run another process, but MenuCalendarClock (<http://www.objectpark.net/>) is a nice way to format the date. It also adds a pop-down monthly calendar, that ties into your iCal appointments. Just run it, and disable the date display from Apple's System Preferences.

I use Mail for mail, with a fairly large IMAP mailbox. The first time you use it, it does take forever. You can change the caching method (all messages, all without attachments, read only, none) from Mail's preferences ... so that might help. Subsequent updates go pretty smoothly though. I try and sync up my iBook once a week, just so I don't get stuck downloading buckets of messages when I really don't want to.

Get iTerm ([iterm.sourceforge.net](http://iterm.sourceforge.net)).

Finally, which version of iPhoto are you running? The newer version (4.something) is supposedly much quicker in processing your images. It will get slower when your library gets full, so you might want to look at iPhoto Buddy to help breakdown your library into a few smaller ones.

Anonymous on Dec 21 2004, 11:47

I'll have a look at Butler.

I tried iTerm. I really didn't like it. Not sure why, but it just doesn't feel right. A little bit too slow and jerky. Terminal feels more robust. My iPhoto says it is version 4.0.3.

Anonymous on Dec 21 2004, 12:07

Just some app tips (from a linux user who went all powerbook over a year ago):

- use adiumx (<http://www.adiumx.com/>) for IM - it uses some gaim guts and works really well for all protocols afaict (though, i don't use Yahoo! IM much)
- give colloquy a shot for IRC (<http://colloquy.info/>) - it uses irssi as it's guts, and is very much a "Mac app". it even does SILC

as for your menubar clock widget gripes - check this hint:  
<http://www.macosxhints.com/article.php?story=20031113121905276>

it allows you alter the format for the clock output (to include things like day of week, etc)

oh, and welcome to the mac ghetto :)

Anonymous on Dec 21 2004, 12:44

I happen to hate iTerm with a passion... Lack of a good terminal is a problem I've had on OSX, but i've found that generally xterm + screen is good enough for all my laptop needs.

Quicksilver I'm told is nice, if you get tired of it, LaunchBar is what I use, mainly 'cause I started using it first and I'm happy with it. I rarely use the doc anymore, except to get AIM notifications (new chat from my FR3ieNds :-P).

Most people I know use Adium, and are happy with it. I like iChat for some odd, yet to be explained reason, so I stick with that (its actually quite nice in conjunction with expose).

For virtual desktops people I know swear by CodeTek. I have no problem with "screen clutter" and expose + launchbar are powerful enough that I rarely miss that stuff (although with a lot of coding, I might). I would stick a month without virtual desktops on your apple, if you still would like them, give codetek a try.

It will leak and make you swap.

As for mail, thunderbird is the best I've found, perhaps Tiger will solve all our pains because of the new fs and search infrastructure... Stranger things have happened.

Oh and iTunes, you can minimize it to a small player window (hit the little minimize button) and if you want it to disappear completely hit apple-H to hide the application and it will just play in the background.

Welcome to the fold! :-)

Anonymous on Dec 21 2004, 14:24

And I forgot to mention, Sidetrack will make the trackpad much more livable. I have the left side setup to scroll the page, and "tapping" it simulates a click. IMHO, the trackpad, while inferior to the nipple in most ever way, is acceptable when combined with Sidetrack.

Anonymous on Dec 21 2004, 14:29

GLTerm all the way. It's far and away the fastest terminal on the mac.

Anonymous on Dec 21 2004, 15:36

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clicking and holding the trashcan in the dock opens a menu from which you can empty trash... other docked apps popup more extensive menus when clicked-and-held... including 'force quit' aka kill -9.

item supports tabbed terminals.. with apple-arrow tab switching and focus-follows-mouse between multiple item windows

unsanity's window shade is pretty useful.. <http://unsanity.com/haxies/wsx> .. if you're used to being able to focus on a window but not have it raised....

ucontrol (<http://gnufoo.org/ucontrol/ucontrol.html>) is useful to remap (more useful) keys over the caps lock buttons (eg: control)  
Anonymous on Dec 23 2004, 01:11

I switched to iView Media Pro (from iPhoto) a while back. It's not free, but it allows me to manage ~ 10 thousand photos reasonably. iPhoto sucks.  
Anonymous on Dec 25 2004, 09:50

I have the 12 PowerBook and the two things that drive me nuts are the single-button mouse and the lack of a backspace key (in-addition to a delete key). Backspace (deleting to the left of the cursor) just seems more natural for me that Apple's delete key (deleting from the right of the cursor).  
Anonymous on Jan 11 2005, 14:33

For IM try Proteus. It's very nice and supports all major chat protocols (except perhaps Jabber--not sure).

As for window switching a la command-arrow in Terminal, a nearly-universal key shortcut is command-` (backtick) to cycle through available windows in a given application.

If you want to tweak mouse-window focus settings, also give Cocktail (<http://www.macosexcocktail.com/>) a try.

Cheers,

--ec

Anonymous on Jan 19 2005, 21:27

While we're at it, what do you guys use to hack php? GLTerm+vim? XCode? BBedit? Textwrangler?

BBedit/Textwrangler don't feel so good for some reason, so I'd like to find something else. It doesn't have to be as cool as a cinema display, but it should come close. :)  
Anonymous on Feb 5 2005, 00:33

iTerm (.sf.net) and Emacs (There's a somewhat "native" OSX build).

Jan

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Anonymous on Feb 5 2005, 02:46

Terminal+vim here

Anonymous on Feb 5 2005, 17:51

For switching windows while staying in the same application, try going to System Preferences -> Keyboard & Mouse Prefs -> Keyboard Shortcuts and make certain you have the Rotate Windows keyboard shortcut turned on (default is Cmd-`). Works great for rolling around between windows in the same app. Use Command-Tab (one key below) to switch between apps.

I highly recommend SideTrack as well for solving the one-button trackpad problem. Also solves the mouse wheel problem as well (although the new Powerbooks released last week apparently have their own solution to that).

Adium is definitely the way to go for IM. Only thing is you can't set a Status without being "Away", but works for me.

For multiple virtual desktops, try \*Virtue\*. Desktop Manager has been pretty much abandoned, and Virtue has nicer transitions and definitely a nicer interface.  
Anonymous on Feb 6 2005, 20:15

Yup, figured out the Apple-- trick and use that all the time now. Tried SideTrack and hated it. I must not be smart enough or have enough dexterity to have different regions on the trackpad. After two months I still hate the damn trackpad. I do like Expose' though and only occasionally load up Desktop Manager these days. I'll give Virtue a shot.  
Anonymous on Feb 6 2005, 20:22

wClock (<http://www.wolfware.com/wClock.html>) is a great, free little clock replacement. it supports a range of formats for the menu bar, and clicking on the date/time there drops down a nice little month-by-month calendar.  
Anonymous on Feb 14 2005, 20:21

Hi,

I am planning to buy a powerbook and it is a LOT of money for me to put in. After reading your post I was wondering whether I should go ahead with it or not. I need it for extensive programming and writing ;)

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It definitely has to run some flavor of Linux properly. I'll have to give up windows which I wont mind but it would be a problem at work becoz we generally make our prototypes work on windoz...

SO I was wondering if it is worth the effort and the money to get one.

TIA

Regards,  
Vibhanshu  
Anonymous on Mar 16 2005, 22:26

Hi,

I believe that some time must have passed now since you got that powerbook and I was wondering if I could get some feedback from you concerning this model and your old t42p.

These days im planning to go for one of these machines and my requirements would be to play with linux on it (gentoo mainly). Having OSX isn't my priority, if I consider the PWB is mainly because of it's look and architecture which I have heard isn't that bad at all.

So i'd like to know, if you had to go back and choose one of these 2 machines (t42p or PWBG4) which one would you choose?

Thanks.  
Anonymous on Apr 10 2005, 04:49

Just got a Powerbook 17" G4 1.67Ghz - thoroughly recommended. Coming from Unix, Linux & Windows, its a real pleasure to use something that just works(tm). I am using it for Java development with Eclipse. no problems so far. Mastering the keyboard shortcuts seems to be a must, but not very hard.

The display is crisp, the system response is great and I like the desktop. The supplied software is ok (not sure I like iTunes, but hey, I've been busy developing) and OSX itself seems reliable.

I've used many, many systems over 22 years in IT. This one seems excellent. I may not be going back.  
Anonymous on Apr 17 2005, 06:07

GLTerm: This is essentially a dead product... support is non-existent. Since one of the primary benefits of selecting GLTerm over Apple's Terminal app is SPEED, failing to even recompile this app in 3 years time is not a good sign. My recommendation to Michel Pollet (gltterm@pollet.net):

Open-source this source code.

I'd implore other potential users to ask the same of Michel. He's written a good speedy terminal app. It just needs some cleanup... something many of us hard-core terminal users would be happy to provide on our own time. Until a new version is released, I can't recommend paying anything for this software.  
Anonymous on Jun 10 2005, 10:38

If you've found Buttler, you will have "Which" from the same guy, setup to swich between the (document)windows of all apps (not even the terminal). Oh yes its free.

And yes, welcome to the Mac.  
Anonymous on Jul 26 2005, 03:46

Good lord, if you hate the single-button mouse why did you buy one? They're not shipped with the machine, so you clearly chose it. Any 2-button mouse works fine with any current Mac.  
Anonymous on Aug 31 2005, 18:15

TextMate! It's a developer's dream: plain, yet powerful. And people who are accustomed to using the shell will love it even more.  
Anonymous on Sep 1 2005, 05:09

For delete, add this to .inputrc

^?: backward-delete-char

(that's a ctrl code, not a ^ then a ?. Type CTRL-V rhen delete)

[http://www.macgeekery.com/tips/configuration/delete\\_in\\_terminal](http://www.macgeekery.com/tips/configuration/delete_in_terminal)

for the details

For opening apps from the command line, I use

open -a emacs code.py

an awful lot. If there's a mapping setup then just

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open fred.pdf

will work

Arthur - another linux -> mac bod.

Anonymous on Dec 21 2005, 13:48

Right-click, right-click, right-click...so annoying I know. Here's the answer: One Finger Snap (<http://www.oldjewelsoftware.com/products/onefingersnap/index.html>). Awesome. I use the trackpad to click so I end up never, ever, using the trackpad button. OFS lets you set the button to open the context menu after a slight delay that you specify. I set mine to .5 which is the lowest and now I have the baddest laptop on the planet.

I know a lot of people say Sidetrack but it completely replaces your trackpad driver and it hoses your two-finger scrolling (which you will learn to love). If all you want is an easy right-click why not just use that big-ass button? What else are you using it for?!

Oh yeah, btw it's shareware but it's only \$7. More than worth it especially considering how insanely hard it is to find an app that only does this one thing.

Anonymous on Mar 7 2006, 16:23