# May the Force of the Operating System Be with You: Macintosh Devotion as Implicit Religion

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# May the Force of the Operating System be with You: Macintosh Devotion as Implicit Religion

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*The purpose of this study is to consider the devotion of Macintosh computer enthusiasts as a case of implicit religion. Data was collected from two primary sources: twelve in-depth face-to-face interviews, and letters to the editor from MacAddict magazine. In addition, supplementary information was obtained from pro-Macintosh Web sites and magazines. Following Nesti (1997), Macintosh devotion was analyzed along four lines: (1) the search for meaning, (2) social forms, (3) the hidden message of the metaphor, and (4) the case of the voyage. I found that Mac devotees used the Macintosh as a "reflective medium" to discover meanings in the midst of changing computer technology. As an implicit religion, Macintosh devotion is based on the sacralization of the bond between people and computers. Its followers envision an utopian future in which humans and technology work together in harmony. Furthermore, the Mac enthusiasts adopted from both Eastern and Western religions a social form that emphasized personal spirituality as well as communal experience. The faith of Mac devotees is reflected and strengthened by their efforts in promoting their computer of choice.*

## INTRODUCTION

> Here's to the crazy ones, the misfits, the rebels, the troublemakers, the round pegs in a square hole, the ones who see things differently. They're not fond of rules, and they have no respect for the status quo. You can quote them, disagree with them, glorify or vilify them. About the only thing you can't do is ignore them, because they change things. They push the human race forward, and while some may see them as the crazy ones, we see genius, because the people who are crazy enough to think they can change the world, are the ones who'll do it (Apple Computer TV Commercial, September 29, 1997).

As this Apple Computer TV commercial was aired for the first time, many of the so-called Mac faithful (some of whom had waited in front of the television to see the commercial air) were deeply affected — some of them were in tears,

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some were thinking of Apple's famous "1984" commercial[1] which signified the introduction of a revolutionary product — the Macintosh computer — to the computing world. After all, it had been a troubled year for Apple Computer; even the most faithful needed some reassurance. Following the airing of the Apple commercial, a stream of responses flooded into Macintosh-related sites on the Internet. Some people offered opinions about whether the commercial was effective, some provided personal reflections on the "think different" message of the commercial, and some offered defenses against the criticism that "think different" was grammatically incorrect.

Why did these people respond to a commercial so emotionally, as if they had personally faced the struggle of a troubled computer company? Why would people consider the "think different" message so solemnly when it was only a commercial? Why would they remain loyal to a computer platform that many, at that time, saw as failing?

In her early work on the relationship between computers and individuals, Turkle (1984) emphasized that the computer is a reflective medium through which individuals create identity and meaning. In her discussion on Macintosh users, Turkle (1995:41) contends that the choice of operating system is not a purely "technical" decision, but also a way for individuals to express their cognitive style. She argues that computer technology provides a projective screen for social concerns. The Macintosh computer, Turkle maintains, is "an object to think with" for many Mac users. As I will discuss in this paper, many Macintosh enthusiasts take their identity as a "Mac user" seriously. When the Mac supporters campaign for the Macintosh computers, they are not fighting for their platform of choice, but they are also expressing their beliefs on the relationship between technology and society. To many Mac devotees, not only is the Macintosh an object-to-think-with, it is also a spiritual path to a future where technology and humans co-exist in harmony.

## MAC DEVOTION AS A CASE OF IMPLICIT RELIGION

> As a magical black box, computers were portrayed as a source of hope amidst fear. As the division of labour, and with it the information explosion, continue to intensify there is more and more knowledge which we not only cannot master but for which we must trust some 'expert.' Extreme specialization means that we lack control over many aspects of our lives. Computers and related communications technologies intensify this situation while promising

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[1] The award winning "1984" commercial was aired during the 1984 Super Bowl to introduce the Macintosh computer to the public (Levy 1994:169-170). In the commercial, a crowd of bald-headed, expressionless drones were marching to an auditorium. On a large screen, there was Big Brother giving a speech in which he preached conformity. Then, a young woman, wearing a T-shirt with the Macintosh logo and red shorts, raced down the aisle and threw a sledgehammer into the screen. The image of Big Brother vanished. The commercial ended with the message "On January 24th, Apple Computer will introduce Macintosh. And you'll know why 1984 won't be like 1984."

> individuals a means of coping with it. Time's reporting reflected this. Vague anxieties were given focus through the magic language surrounding the new technologies (Stahl 1999:97).

Since the 1970s, scholars from different disciplines have examined the impact on society of computer technology. Specifically, they suggest that because of the development of artificial intelligence, the idea of "computer as human" has prompted us to reevaluate our beliefs about human nature (see Wolfe 1993; Joerges 1990; Mitcham 1986; MacCormac 1984; McCorduck 1979; Weizenbaum 1976). In fact, many of the discussions about computers take on a philosophical, or even religious, overtone. According to Cox and Foerst (1997), there are three major themes in the explicitly religious discourse among the new technologists — the transformation of humanity into divinity, the quest for eternity, and the vision of the "blessed community." They maintain that the new technologists often envision a merging existence of machines and the human body — a near perfect existence that is free from all human flaws and weakness — which allows humans to live forever. Moreover, the new technologists believe that the breakthroughs in information technology have liberated human beings from the constraints of body and geography. Consequently, technology allows us to create "a cybernetic global village where misunderstandings and suspicions will melt away as billions of individuals communicate with each other from the privacy of their home" (55). In accord with Cox and Foerst, Wertheim (1999:19) contends that "when early Christians conceived of Heaven as a realm in which their 'souls' would be freed from the frailties and failings of the flesh, so today's champions of cyberspace hail their realm as a place where we will be freed from the elimination and embarrassments of physical embodiment." Cyberspace is portrayed by its proselytizers as a transcendent space of equality, friendship, and virtue.

Alexander (1990) also is interested in the religious overtones in the discussion of computer technology. He believes that no matter how far technology advances, and no matter how the discourse of rationalism is pursued, human beings will continue to divide the world into sacred and profane, as Durkheim expected (Alexander 1990:164). In his analysis of articles from *Popular science* and other magazines, Alexander found that the theme of "salvation" prevails in the discussion of computer technology. Computers are depicted as the possessor of mysterious powers which can solve problems for humankind and lead to a transformation of earthly life. Yet, at the same time, such power is also feared for its potential for evil.

As Nesti (1990) argues, the secularization thesis has not successfully accounted for the changing meaning of "religiousness" that has occurred over the past few decades. While organized religion has lost foothold in society, individuals are striving to find spirituality in other arenas (see also Bailey 1983). As a result, scholars have moved toward the direction of studying the "inarticulate," "unconscious," "mystical" and "symbolic" aspects of religious experience (Bailey 1990:484). For example, Bartkowski and Swearingen (1997) examine

environmentalism in Austin, Texas as a case of implicit religion. Through in-depth interviews, the authors reveal that Barton Springs has spiritual significance to the local environmentalist as a passage that links the mundane, everyday world of existence to a transcendent reality. They believe that the sacralization of Barton Springs has created a sense of belonging in a quasi-religious context. In addition, Chalfant (1992) examines the spiritual elements in twelve-step groups. Correspondingly, in his study of magazine commentaries on technology, Stahl (1999:19) argues that the mysticism associated with computer technology can be seen as an implicit religion:

> As practice, identity, and mystification, technological mysticism lies at the heart of advance industrial society. When we look at technology this way, we find some remarkable similarities with theological traditions. Like a religion, technological mysticism 'binds together' core values into a coherent, if implicit (and often unexamined) set of beliefs and rituals.

Similarly, in the case of the Mac enthusiasts, I found deep religious symbolism that is fundamental to the strong devotion to their computer platform. Like a religion, the beliefs of the Mac devotees are founded on the distinction between the sacred and the profane (Durkheim 1947 [1926], Eliade 1959). To many, there is a sacred bond between computers and people — they should work together in harmony, as Mac users often emphasize that Macintosh computers do not "fight back" as other computers do. And, if such a sacred bond between human and computer is maintained, Mac enthusiasts believe that computer technology will help improve humanity. Thus, while Barton Springs, as a transcendent space, brings people from the Austin community together, the Macintosh computer, which symbolizes a spiritual passage to an utopian future, also ties its followers together. Moreover, the faith of Mac devotees in this utopian future is expressed through their practices, including their "evangelistic" efforts.

In the following sections of this paper, I will examine the religious discourse and practices of the Macintosh enthusiasts as an implicit religion. Following Nesti (1997:434-436), I examine Macintosh devotion along four major lines: (1) the search for meaning, (2) social forms, (3) the hidden message of the metaphor, and (4) the case of the voyage.

## METHODOLOGY

Data for this study were collected primarily through in-depth interviews and letters to the editor published in *MacAddict* magazine. Twelve face-to-face interviews were conducted during October and November, 1997. Eight of interviewees were recruited through flyers posted on campus, and the other four were recruited through personal contacts. The interviewees were university students (three of them were graduate students) ranging in age from eighteen to thirty years old. All but one of the interviewees were white, and three of them

were women. One of my respondents was a devoted PC user, whom I interviewed at the early stage of interviewing, for the purpose of comparison. The interviews were semi-structured and lasted between forty-five and ninety minutes. During the interviews, I showed the respondents pictures from the current Apple ad campaign, a quote from the Apple TV commercial (cited in the beginning of this article), and a "Mac Addict vs. Windows User" picture from the *MacAddict* magazine. To ensure confidentiality, a pseudonym was assigned to each interviewee.

My second source of data was sixteen issues of *MacAddict* magazine (from the premiere issue, published in September 1996, to the December 1997 issue). I chose *MacAddict* because the magazine is marketed to Macintosh enthusiasts (as opposed to *MacWorld*, for example, which is more industry-oriented and emphasizes technical aspects). My analysis mainly focused on letters to the editor, but other relevant articles were also included. I used an emergent themes technique to analyze the transcribed interview data and the *MacAddict* letters .

In addition to the in-depth interviews and the *MacAddict* magazines, I used pro-Macintosh Web sites and articles published in other magazines as supplementary sources of data. I started my Web search using search engines such as "Infoseek" and "Excite" with the keyword "Macintosh." After searching around the Web sites (excluding the sites for technical information), I focused my search on the popular sites, which became my main source of data. In addition, I visited Web sites mentioned during the interviews.

I also collected Mac-related articles (excluding the technical ones) from a variety of computer magazines and news magazines such as *Newsweek* and *Time*. My search for these articles was goal-oriented. For instance, because many of my respondents had criticized the unfair coverage of Apple Computer issues in the print media, I read the abstracts of the Mac-related articles from the library periodical database to get a sense of what the media reported. Finally, I searched for specific information from the magazines to verify information obtained from the interviews.

## THE MAC PROPHECY: THE SEARCH FOR MEANING IN THE COMPUTER AGE

> In the Old Testament there was the first apple, the forbidden fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, which with one taste sent Adam, Eve, and all mankind into the great current of History. The second Apple was Isaac Newton's, the symbol of our entry into the age of modern science. The Apple Computer symbol was not chosen purely at random, it represents the third Apple, the one that widens the paths of knowledge leading toward the future. (Jean-Louis Gassée, then General Manager of Apple France and former President of Apple Products, 1987:9-10)

Commentators have acknowledged the pioneer role of Apple Computer in the computer industry, and its unique culture[2] established by its founders (Levy 1994; Cringely 1992). For instance, Cringely (1992) states that "alone among the microcomputer makers of the 1970s, the people of Apple saw themselves as not just making boxes or making money; they thought of themselves as changing the world." In fact, Steve Jobs, the co-founder of Apple Computer, is often portrayed as a prophetic figure[3] bringing the intensive religious fervor to his Mac design team. As John Schulley, former CEO of Apple Computer describes, "it was almost as if there were magnetic fields, some spiritual force, mesmerizing people. Their eyes were just dazed. Excitement showed on everyone's face. It was nearly a cult environment" (Levy 1994:142).

In its early years, Apple Computer and its followers considered the company as the antithesis to IBM. As Apple's chief rival at that time, IBM was perceived as the symbol of uniformity, bureaucracy and authoritarianism, as depicted in the famous "1984" commercial that introduced the birth of Macintosh. However, since the 1990s, Bill Gates, the co-founder of Microsoft, has become the primary enemy for many Mac enthusiasts. Mac loyalists often accuse Bill Gates of putting mediocre products out in the market and stealing the ideas of others and making them his own. David, one of my interviewees, explains why he hates Bill Gates "with a passion:"

> Bill Gates has no taste. He comes along and put out the impression that whatever the software that he is doing now is the best thing that you can have, and for some reasons people get the impression that he was the one who thought of it, but it's never the case. . . . So basically, he copies everything and doesn't even come up with a lot of taste, good taste, from the company that he copies. I mean, he'll put second rate ideas in just because he wants to make bucks. He doesn't care about doing it right, I guess.

Moreover, Bill Gates is often denounced for his desire to "dominate the computing world." In a *Time Magazine* story about the deal that Microsoft and Apple made, Cathy Booth (1997:29-30) writes:

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[2] For example, Goodell (1996:52), a computer commentator, asserts: "Apple never pretended to be just another Silicon Valley start-up. It had long sold itself as the great hope of the counterculture, living proof that good could triumph over evil, light over darkness, intelligence over authority. It was a company that seemed to have everything going for it: the smartest people, the best technology, the highest hopes, the truest believers. It had a prophet, Steve Jobs, and a wizard, Steve Wozniak. . . . The story of Apple's decline is a morality tale for the Information Age."

[3] In Cringely's (1992) book on the personal computer revolution, he devotes a chapter titled "the Prophet" to the development of the Macintosh under the leadership of Steve Jobs. In addition, as Elmer-Dewitt (1994) observed, "More than any other personal computer, the Mac comes wrapped in hype, most of it directly traceable to Steven Jobs, former chairman of Apple. He loved to tell his designers that the computer they were building — with its icons, its pull-down menus and its mouse — would not only change the world, but also 'put a dent in the universe.' " See also Booth (1997). The role of Jobs as the "savior" of Apple Computer is also exemplified by the enthusiastic response to his return to Apple Computer as "interim CEO" in 1997.

> . . . the idea of Jobs returning to Apple is something akin to that of Luke Skywalker returning to a fight what, until last week, cultists regarded as the evil empire. Gates, by comparison, was perceived as a dweeb Darth Vader, the billionaire bad guy who usurped the idea of the Macintosh's friendly point-and-click operating system for his now dominant Microsoft Windows.

Similarly, Ivan has also used the "Star Wars" theme in his description of the relationship between Apple and Microsoft — Apple represents the good side of the force, while Microsoft and IBM are the dark side — which he borrowed from his Mac addict roommate.[4]

> Whenever somebody switches over from using a Mac to the PC, he says, oh, they run over to the evil side of the force. A lot of people that use Macs like to see Apple as the good people, the people that follow all the rules and stuff like that. The Microsoft especially, they see as people who kind of break rules and steal a lot of stuff from other people, things like that.

This "good vs. evil" theme is a familiar one in the commentary on computer technology. As Alexander (1990) maintains, computers, like other technological advances that have come before it, are perceived as a machine containing great mystical power — a power that could be godly but also evil. In her ethnographic study of "hackers," Turkle (1984:229) noticed a precedent to the "Macintosh versus Microsoft" phenomenon. She described a programming language war at that time in which business languages like FORTRAN and COBOL were perceived as the symbol of "uniformity of mass culture that buries the individual in the crowd," whereas LISP is "the language of pleasure, of individuality, a language that facilities a way of thinking."

## SACRED BONDS: THE SOCIAL FORMS OF THE MACINTOSH RELIGION

> The Annual MacWorld Expo is more than a Computer Convention. For eleven years it has functioned as a revivalist meeting for Apple Computer's true believers. Beginning January 9, 1996, some 80,000 developers, industry executives and alpha geeks gathered at the Moscone Center, in downtown San Francisco, to once again celebrate the glory of Apple, to sing the praises of the Macintosh, and to breathe hellfire and damnation on the evil spirit from the rainy north, Bill Gates.(Goodell 1996:51).

Commentators in the computer industry often refer to Macintosh enthusiasts as cultists, fanatics, or zealots, and compare the Macintosh phenomenon to

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[4] Another favorite analogy among the Mac loyalists is to compare Microsoft with Star Trek's "the Borg," an ultra-rational collective entity governed by one single mind whose mission is to conquer the universe by assimilating other intelligent species and incorporating their knowledge into the collective. Moreover, in a parody of "It's a Wonderful Life," *MacWorld* columnist David Pogue (1998) wrote about how Steve "Jobs" Bailey has changed the world with the Macintosh computers and fought against the big monopolist Bill "Gates" Potter.

a religion. Most of the Mac users who I interviewed were somewhat sensitive about these references. Some of them readily dismiss such associations, while others express the attitude that "I don't care whatever they say. They simply don't understand us." In contrast, explicit religious terminology is common in many of the pro-Macintosh Web sites. For example, one pro-Macintosh Web Site is named "the Cult of Macintosh." As Bailey (1983, 1990) stresses, the concept of implicit religion is useful because it allows the examination of the "unconscious" dimension of religiousness.[5] A Mac user was quoted in *MacWorld* (1994) saying, "For me, the Mac was the closest thing to religion I could deal with." Regardless of the immediate dismissals of the religious references, most of my respondents revealed, explicitly or implicitly during the interviews, their spiritual reflections on computer technology . In his study of the twelve-step programs, Chalfant (1992) found that the students who attended the group meetings distinguished the personal, spiritual approach of the programs from the institutionalized form of religion. I discovered the same distinction in my study of the Macintosh devotees. While skepticism of the religious institution exists, Mac enthusiasts borrowed the terminology from Eastern religions, which have a strong emphasis on individual spirituality, in expressing their beliefs in computer technology.

An important component of the Macintosh beliefs is the sacralization of the bonding between human and computers. These beliefs are articulated by the "spiritual leaders," such as the MacKiDo Warrior and the Apple Jedi, in the Mac community. David Every (1997), who called himself the "MacKiDo Warrior," coined the term "MacKiDo" — the Way to achieve enlightenment through the Power of Macintosh. He established the MacKiDo Web site to actively promote his philosophy of computing, and it has become a popular site among Mac enthusiasts. In another Web site, the Apple Jedi encourages his fellow Mac users to "find the Way" and to "grow in harmony with the OS" through helping out others with technical problems, participating in a Mac User Group, keeping up with developments in Apple and the computing industry, influencing the computing decisions in one's organization, and setting up Mac-related Web Sites (Katzman 1997). According to these leaders, Macintosh devotion is manifested at two different levels: (1) the bonds between computers and humans, and (2) the bonds between Macintosh users. This corresponds to what Bartkowski and Swearingen (1997) observed in the case of Austin environmentalism in which Barton Springs serves as the passage to a transcendent reality, as well as the link

[5] Mac devotees have different opinions on whether or not people should consider the Macintosh as a religion. For instance, one Mac addict states that "the Mac is not a religion but it is an ethic. Ethics involve the discernment between Good and Evil and are derived from each person's axiology (i.e. intrinsic values). We discern Macs as Good and Wintels as Evil. That's why our reactions are so visceral" (Davila 1997). On the other hand, some Mac enthusiasts would send humorous pieces to *MacAddict* with reference to the "Mac religion." For example, one reader writes, "I recently put my Macintosh II on an altar and prayed to it 1,024 times. The next day, it became a Power Macintosh 9500/180MP. Macintosh is a real god" (MacAddict 1997b).

to the community. Furthermore, while the sacralization of this bond is fundamental to Macintosh devotion, it also provides the link between personal faith and religious practice. In a sense, the bonds between computers and individuals are the foundation for the fellowship among the Mac believers and their actions.

### *The Bond between Computers and Humans*

Like the MacKiDo Warrior and the Apple Jedi, many Mac devotees believe that their bond with the Macintosh computer is unique, personal, or even sacred. Some of the respondents compared their Macintosh computer to a friend. For example, Frank talked about his love of the Macintosh affectionately: "You know when you turn on your machine, a happy face is there, and it *greets you*, you know. I guess maybe that's part of the things that I like Mac for." Speaking of the similarities between the Macintosh and the Windows operating systems, he said, "It's just being familiar with an old friend, and this one (Windows) is like, you look like my friend, you behave like my friend, but you are *not* my friend. You are like an impostor, you know. I don't know how to put it into words. Just different personality." In addition, when I asked David whether he had an emotional attachment to his Macintosh, he replied, "Probably. Em, it'd probably depress the hell out of me if something happens to it and I have to go without it." Considering his Macintosh as a tool that he was very comfortable with, David explained that his "neuro-pathways" had been reinforced into using the Macintosh. When asked the same question on emotional attachment, Helen responded:

> Definitely. Very definitely. I would spend many nights crying over a broken Mac. Umm, there's been a lot of good things coming from my computer. . . . Like having Internet connection on it, connecting with people around the world that way. For instance, I've had a boyfriend for two years where all we did — our only contact was email. So, it's like I depend on *that specific computer* to get the email. Little things like that add up. I mean there has been time that I hugged my computer and stuff like that. I have never hugged a PC.

### *The Bonds between Macintosh Users*

The relationship between individuals and their Macintosh computers, however, is only one component of the Macintosh faith. As noted previously, the communal experience of Macintosh devotees is also emphasized by their spiritual leaders. For instance, the Apple Jedi (Katzmann 1997) says:

> Finally, the most important part of being an Apple Jedi: remember that you are not alone. Many exist who will seek your help, just as others have helped you and will help you in future. We may debate at length about larger forces and general trends in the industry, but that is beyond us as individuals. Our salvation does not lie there.

> True Jedi know that all power comes ultimately from within, and so it is within ourselves that we must look if we are to prevail.
>
> If anything characterizes the history of Apple and its users, it is their sense of community. Nurture it. Help strengthen it. Guide your actions in harmony with that which binds us all together, unseen and yet keenly felt by the Apple Jedi. In the arrogance of its marketing and the nature of its tactics the Dark Side understands not these things, and cannot fight them. As so, it is in the deepening of this community that the greatest responsibility of an Apple Jedi lies, for it is in this power that Mac OS aficionados can find strength to triumph.

Along with the Web sites, Macintosh User Groups (MUGs) have also helped create the religious-like cohesiveness among Mac users. As noted in a *MacWorld* article (1994) entitled "The Macintosh Religion:" "MUGs have always been churchlike — preaching to the converted, reaching out to whoever needed help. And like churches, MUGs offer a feeling of community. They have a populist spirit, but in a self-help sense rather than a social or political sense." In terms of organization and function, the Mac User Groups are similar to local congregations of a national church. In 1997, there were more than 2,200 MUGs in the United States and Canada, which ranged from local groups with a few dozen members to those with large, and in some cases, international memberships (Apple Computer 1997a, 1997b). Most of the MUGs are run by volunteers who provide a range of services to their members. The MUGs organize product presentations, speaker meetings, computer courses, and special interest groups (such as women's groups or senior's groups). The MacKiDo Warrior, the Apple Jedi, and the Chief Evangelist (see discussion below), all consider the existence of user groups as crucial to the survival of Apple, and encourage their followers to participate in them (Kawasaki 1994).

Another social form that the Mac phenomenon has adopted is the idea of "evangelism." In fact, Apple itself has used the idea of "evangelism" and the title "evangelist" for its marketing team since the company started (Levy 1994). For instance, Guy Kawasaki, a charismatic Mac advocate who is well-known among Mac devotees, was a "software evangelist" with Apple Computer. His responsibility then was to persuade software developers to create a Macintosh version of their applications. In addition, Chris Espinosa, also a former evangelist, maintains that Apple's proselytizing approach stemmed from the Apple employees own passion for Macintosh and their desire to expand the Mac family (MacWorld 1994:120). After leaving Apple Computer, Kawasaki, as the Chief Evangelist, helped promote the idea of evangelism to the rank and file Mac users through his own listserve and Web site (Kawasaki 1997; Levy 1994). In the EvangeList and other pro-Macintosh Web sites, there are numerous testimonials from Mac loyalists about their successes in converting their acquaintances or persuading their companies to buy Macintosh computers. Here is a typical testimonial about one Mac enthusiast's successful attempt from the EvangeList archive:

> I got a frantic call from a coworker yesterday morning . . . her sister was going to buy a PC, and my coworker knew that would be a mistake but wasn't able to answer her questions about Macs.
>
> So, with my archives of the Evangelist handy, I printed half-a-dozen articles: the Cary Lu "Holy War" article, the 10 "Myths about Macs," the editorials from "Windows User" in June and July 95 where the writer, in effect, 'get a Mac' (found on one of the URL you gave out) and gave them to my co-worker. In addition, I talked to the sister who said she 'heard' that software was hard to buy for the Mac, that CDs wouldn't run on the Mac, etc, etc. I explained that most Mac software is bought via mail order ($3 over night!), that any Mac from a Plus (1986) will run CDs, subject to the color, memory, and screen requirements.
>
> I heard from my co-worker this morning: her sister and husband have decided to get a Performa! (Howe 1995)

All of the Mac users interviewed have in some way recommended the Macintosh to others. Commenting on why many Mac users, including himself, are so eager to promote Macintosh computers to others, Alan stated:

> They are excited to see them get the joy out of the computer that doesn't fight back. It doesn't fight the user when you use it. It kind of flows with you. Once you understand how it operates, the computer becomes almost transparent. That's the excitement of seeing somebody else buying a Macintosh, seeing them to be happy with it. That's part of it.

In fact, the converts themselves often give testimonials about how Macintosh computers have changed their lives for the better. For example, in a letter to *MacAddict*, a middle-aged woman shared how her Macintosh computer brought her closer with her 13-year-old son and expanded her life. "The Mac has not taken over my life," she wrote, "What it has done is expand my life with knowledge, new friends, and challenges I didn't know existed. Thank you, Apple, and thank you, Mac Addict" (MacAddict 1997a:8). To many Mac devotees, evangelism is more than persuading others to buy Macintosh computers. It is about introducing people to a philosophy of computing, or even a way of life. They believe that they are transforming other's lives through the Macintosh computer — the computer that works in harmony with its users. More importantly, the evangelizing effort is, in itself, an expression of faith that reinforces the beliefs and the identities of the Mac devotees.

## THE HIDDEN MESSAGE OF THE MACINTOSH

> Let's face it, you have to be crazy to buy a new computer from a company that is in as much trouble as Apple. You have to believe in something deeper. The purchase of a Macintosh really says something about the person who makes that commitment. It gives a sense of what that person is and where their priorities lie. (James, October 6, 1997)

All of the Mac users interviewed, including those working in a field where Macintosh is the industry standard, are well aware of their minority status. During the interviews, all except one brought up examples of negative reactions that they have encountered after other people learn that they use Macs (Inci-

dentally, this person is also the only respondent who has seriously considered switching to a PC). These negative reactions range from harmless teasing to deliberate humiliation. For instance, when Ivan worked in computer repair one summer, a co-worker would often comment to him that he was using a piece of junk. In addition, Claire recalled her experience shopping for a printer for her Classic II Mac in a local computer store:

> They were just appalled. I mean they could not believe. Some guy at the back yelled out, did she say baby Mac? Did she say Classic II? And then the guy in the front said, yeah, do you believe it? The conversation was about how silly it was using a baby Mac because it's old. They were honestly talking about me like I wasn't there. . . . I heard the guy at the back yelled out, that's a dinosaur, doesn't she know that we got IBMs now?

Most of the respondents maintained that some PC users would degrade the Macintosh computers as "crappy" or "a piece of toy," and these Mac users were upset because they perceived these comments as direct insults to their intelligence. However, while my respondents sensed a certain degree of hostility directed against Mac users, none of them considered a switch to the PCs because of it. In fact, some indicated that such hostility has urged them to stand up for Macintosh, which subsequently made the Mac community more cohesive. Furthermore, many of the Mac devotees believe that they need to stick together to facilitate mutual support among one another, to assert influence on software developers and others in the computing business, and to maintain their faith while fighting for Macintosh in this uphill battle. Comparing the status of Mac users to that of a racial minority, Alan points out that Mac users have to get together and take collective action to "get that inequality to become a little more equal."

Why would people put up with such humiliation to stick with a particular brand of computer? One explanation is that such negative experiences actually help create a sense of identity among Mac devotees. Studying adolescence and identity in the computing world, Turkle (1984:138) maintains that computers are one of the many different kinds of materials that adolescents use to construct their sense of identity:

> they integrate their computer experience into their developing identities in ways that have nothing to do with becoming computer experts. They use programming as a canvas for personal expression and then as a context for working through personal concerns. They use the computer as a constructive as well as a projective medium.

While the Mac users that I interviewed are all adults, being a Mac user has, nevertheless, become an important identity for some of them. For example, Claire told me that she likes to identify herself as a "Mac girl" when talking about computers with other people. In addition, Frank points out that his identity as a Mac user has become more important to him as he realizes that there are fewer and fewer people using Macs.

During the interviews, I asked respondents if they saw any difference between Mac users and PC users. I showed them a "Mac addict vs. Windows user" illustration taken from an article in the premiere issue of *MacAddict*. The Window's user in the illustration is wearing a suit, Brooks Brothers leather shoes, and an "imitation" Rolex. He is carrying a suitcase, with neatly cropped hair and a serious facial expression. On the other side, the Mac addict is wearing a denim shirt, jeans, and "Footlocker" sneakers. He has a "Seinfeld" hair-style (as described in the captions), a backpack on his shoulder, and a relaxed disposition. Most of the respondents agreed that there is some truth in the depiction. For instance, Jessica, an education major, who indicated approval of the picture, compared the Windows user to typical business majors in college. Similarly, Gary, an advertising major, considered Mac users as less formal and less business-like. In addition, he commented:

> I think the stuff like what's in his briefcase, the thing down at the bottom about hobbies, no time for hobbies, still trying to install system, I think that's very very true. My friend has a PC and his hobby is his computer, it's not that his hobby is, you know, other things in his life. It's like he's more focused on the technology than he is focused on doing something else. . . . I think the Mac users are definitely more, they are less worried about the traditional business look, business attire. A lot of Mac users just tend to be more casual people. Um, more open-minded for that matter too. And they're more interested in thinking than they're thinking about thinking. It's kind of an interesting duality.

Gary's remarks reveal his vision on what the relationship between computer technology and humans should be — it is not about the technology itself, but what it can do for humans. As Turkle (1984, 1995) pointed out, the computer culture in its early stage emphasized the mastery of complicated computer programming. However, she noted (1995:62-63) that a new "musical" culture of computing had developed in the mid-1990s, in which computers are seen as "the tools we use to write, to design, to play with ideas and shapes and images." Thus, a new set of intellectual and emotional associations with computers were developed subsequently.

Apple Computer played a major role in this change of the computer culture. In fact, early Apple employees regarded themselves as part of a counterculture in the computer industry. They believed that there should be a partnership between the computer and its users where human creativity could flourish. Charles Piller (1994), an editor from *MacWorld*, asserts that "the people who created the Macintosh viewed themselves as saving humanity from the mediocrity and colorlessness of other computers," and they "wanted a machine for free-thinking, discriminating nonconformists and rebels like themselves." Indeed, many Mac users share this belief and think of themselves as nonconformists. David's comments on the "1984" Apple commercial resonates with this sentiment — "I like that commercial. It says a lot about the platform that it is not for the unthinking grunts." Later in the interview, David mentioned a professor (a Mac user) who has a tattoo as an example of Mac users being non-mainstream.

Other interviewees have also pointed out that Mac users are not group-followers. For instance, Alan asserts that "certain people follow trends, certain people follow their hearts, and Mac people tend to be those who follow their hearts."

Some of the interviewees not only consider Mac enthusiasts as non-conformists — in fact, they believe that Mac users are more intelligent than the PC users because they possess the "eclectic knowledge" of a "superior" computer. Commenting on his love of Macintosh, for instance, David claimed that "in my case, it's a passion against stupidity. I tend to be very passionate when I think people make stupid decisions about things, and Mac just happens to be one of them." Thus, many Mac users take pleasure in being a member of this privileged group. As Ivan said:

> I guess I feel like I have knowledge that a lot of people don't about computers because I use a computer that most people don't know a lot about it. I know a lot about it. And, I guess I feel like I've got kind of an inside track that other people don't. . . . It's kind of like, if you had a Porsche and your neighbor had a station wagon . . . that kind of feeling. Just knowing that I have a better quality product.

To explain why Apple is not doing well in terms of market share, Alan, a firm believer of the Macintosh's superiority, used the following analogy:

> Apple's marketing has always been eclectic and far minded. I always look at this as a three-story building, and there are people occupying this building. Okay. You got people on the ground floor. People on the ground floor aren't particularly smart. They don't think deep, okay. They are not deep thinkers. You got people on the middle floor, and they are fairly intelligent. They are average, okay. They don't go through life bumbling around. And then, you got people on the top floor. People on the top floor in this building are super-intelligent, super-reasonable. Let's say when an advertiser comes in this building and try to sell Mac door to door. He starts at the first floor. These people are too stupid to understand the marketing message that he's giving them. He doesn't sell much to them. He goes to the second floor where people are a little bit smarter. He sells a couple there because there are some people that understand what he's talking about, that understand the marketing message he has. Then, he goes to the top floor. Everybody there buys products from him because they understand the marketing message, they understand what he says.

In a sense, David, Alan, and Ivan all make reference to a hierarchy based on intelligence. In this hierarchy, Mac users are on the top because of their knowledge of a superior computer. This is a contrast to another hierarchy — one that some of the other respondents compared to the racial hierarchy in the United States — that I have discussed in the previous section. These two hierarchies represent the reality in this profane world and the belief in an utopia that will arrive someday in the future. In this profane world, great business people, such as Bill Gates, who seek nothing but financial gains, are rewarded. However, the Mac devotees are looking forward to an utopia created by superior computer technology. In this utopia, people are judged purely on the basis of their intelligence and their contribution to humanity. Ironically, while

envisioning an utopia, Alan uses an analogy that resembles the power structure of this world which he despises. As Nesti points out (1990:433), spiritual metaphors inevitably reflect the hierarchical power of society.

## THE QUEST OF THE MAC DEVOTEES

> The MacMarines is a community of Mac users from all over the world who are bound together by their loyalty to the computer 'for the rest of us.' We have risen to defend our platform of choice from the oppression of untruth. We will battle lies with the truth, misinformation with the facts. . . . We are the few, the proud, the MacMarines. And we have taken a stand to fight back for the Mac. (MacMarines 1997)

Many of the Mac users consider themselves to be fighting a war against the Wintel[6] world. These Mac enthusiasts feel that they are fighting against the "industry standards," they are fighting against Apple's declining market share, and ultimately, they are fighting against a strong evil force (see previous discussion). The Mac enthusiasts, at the time of this study, were aware that they were losing in this war — sales of Macintosh computers were still low, many Mac users had defected, and the IT departments of many companies had implemented a Windows standard — in which case, Macintosh computers had been taken away from the Mac loyalists in their workplace. Nevertheless, some Mac devotees, such as the ones at NASA and Lockheed Martin,[7] have resisted successfully. And, the stories about these battles have become folklore in the Macintosh community to remind one another that they should remain hopeful and keep fighting .

Most of my interviewees promoted the Macintosh computer. And among them, Alan and Ivan remain most active in working for the "Mac cause." They both believe that their involvement in the Mac community is crucial for the fate of Apple Computer. For instance, Alan contends that:

> It's the attitude that if I don't do it, if I do not support the platform, if I do not encourage people to buy Macintosh, who will ? And it's important enough to me that I continue to have Macintoshes available to me and to have software available to me in the future. It's important enough to me that I spend some time helping other people with their technical problems or convincing them to purchase the computer.

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6 "Wintel" refers to computers that use Intel's Pentium chips and Windows Operating System.

7 Some Mac users have fought against their company's management information services department to save their Macs in their workplace. Two of the larger scale battles took place at NASA's Johnson Space Center and Lockheed Martin Missile and Space. In the year long battle against an information system manager's decision to standardize on Windows PCs, Macintosh users at the Johnson Space Center launched a highly publicized protest in spite of the fear of retribution. They eventually won the battle and were able to prevent the 3,500 Macintoshes from being replaced (Picarille 1997). Similarly, the Macintosh users at Lockheed Martin Missile and Space-mail to their top-executives and meeting with them to talk about the situation (Picarille 1995).

Ivan, who considers himself an advanced Macintosh user, has subscribed to the MacMarines mailing list and has written e-mails to people who inquire about buying Macintosh computers. Even though he is not an official member of the Macintosh user group, Ivan has created Web pages and helped some of the groups. In comparison, the majority of the interviewees are less assertive in promoting Macintosh computers, and their actions are more reactive in nature. Thus, they will defend their computer choice when somebody puts down Macintosh, they will recommend the Macintosh when somebody asks them their opinions on buying a computer, and they will speak of the advantages of using a Mac whenever they have a chance.

Nonetheless, the sense of "fighting a battle" is unwavering in pro-Macintosh Web sites and magazines. For instance, the MacMarines, who host a listserve and a Web site, have launched letter campaigns to stop state governments from standardizing on the Windows platform and to urge companies to create Mac-version software. The MacAdvocacy site provides lists of information about the advantages of the Macintosh's over Wintel machines. As well, the anniversary issue of MacAddict includes a series of articles on how to fight for the Mac. The introduction states:

> We've had enough. We're tired of Apple being carelessly labeled as lagging, failing or dying. We're tired of people maligning our Macintoshes. We're sick of the slams, digs, and taunts directed at us by know-nothing PC hacks. It will stop. NOW. We will not surrender to the 'inevitable' or passively pray for the health of our platform. No, it's time for revolution. Tell your family, tell your friends. Join us not just defending the Mac from attacks on all sides but also in an assault on the attitudes that provoke them. Join the Mac resistance (Tafel Sept. 1997).

The Mac devotion emphasizes "the quest" for an utopian future — a future about the harmonious co-existence of humans and technology. While this utopian vision remains largely unarticulated, its significance rests in the journey itself. Through their own participation in this quest, Mac enthusiasts experience at least a temporary escape from the mundane; they find spirituality that they might otherwise look for in institutionalized religion.

## CONCLUSION

> Expectations for salvation were inseparable from the technological innovations of industrial capitalism. Major inventions like the steam engine, railroad, telegraph and telephone (e.g. Pool 1983) were hailed by elites and masses as vehicles for secular transcendence. Their speed and power, it was widely proclaimed, would undermine the earthly constraints of time, space, and scarcity. In their early halcyon days, they become vessels for experiencing ecstatic release, instruments for bringing the glories of heaven down to earth. The technicians and engineers who understood this new technology were elevated to the status of worldly priests (Alexander 1990:164).

Turkle (1984) and Stahl (1999) have noted that people react to computers differently than to other machines. They react in a way as if these machines are created in the image of their own mind. And, because of it, as Turkle points out, the computer is a mirror that reflects our humanity. People seem to readily respond to computers in an emotional way, and we often shape our own identities through these human-machine relationships. As Turkle (1984:306-307) states:

> We are living in a culture that invites us all to interact with computers in ways that permit us to become intimate with their second nature [as reflective medium and as philosophical provocateur]. And as this happens, the relationships between people and machines that we have seen in the computer subcultures become harbingers of new tensions and the search for new resolutions that will mark our culture as a whole in the almost immediate future.

As represented in the teachings of the Apple Jedi and the MacKiDo Warrior, many Mac devotees are attempting to find meanings using the Macintosh computer, generating what Turkle claims is "a reflective medium." To them, Macintosh is not merely a brand of computer, but a symbol that represents their own philosophy of computing, or even their philosophy of life. While the Mac devotees are fighting for Macintosh, they are actually defending their beliefs on an utopian future in which humans and technology work in harmony. Furthermore, their devotion to the Macintosh computer helps many Mac enthusiasts create a sense of identity, and leads them to think about who they are, what they value, and where they belong. As Turkle (1984:166) points out, "A relationship with a computer can influence people's conceptions of themselves, their jobs, their relationships with other people, and with their ways of thinking about social processes. It can be the basis for new aesthetic values, new rituals, new philosophy, new cultural forms."

Furthermore, the theme of "good versus evil" is apparent in the rhetoric of the Mac enthusiasts. While Alexander (1990:167) asserts that in the technological discourse, "the computer embodied within itself both superhuman evil and superhuman good," Mac devotees have further elaborated on what is good and what is evil, and proselytize their beliefs through the Internet and other media. Those who profess knowledge of the Macintosh, as Alexander describes, have achieved a status of priesthood (for example, the MacKiDo Warrior). In summary, the discourse among the Mac addict is an example of what Cox and Foerst (1997:56) called "techno-theology:"

> Techno-theology is the mirror image of scientific creationism. Technologies have become — for some people — the new way of expressing myth. The computer as extension of our minds is a very power metaphor. It stimulates our phantasies; maybe it can be used as a tool to tell us what the future holds and then to prevent the evil events that lurk there. Phantasy and science fiction stories, in which all these projections are expressed, are in much of the world today the most popular literature. Computers are seen either as monsters (Hall in 2001) or as the omnipotent and all-loving giants and gods which will help us to create a better life.

Interestingly, Ivan, one of my respondents, told me about a year after the interview that the MacMarines (of which he is a member) have lost focus since the introduction of "iMac," a new product from Apple Computer. He believed that it was the fight against an "evil force" that created a sense of identity and maintained a sense of purpose for many Macintosh devotees. As a result of iMac's success, there are a large number of new Macintosh users who do not share the history and the strong feelings that the veteran Mac loyalists have. In fact, in a recent issue of *MacAddict*, an article discusses at length the changing strategies that Mac enthusiasts should adopt in light of these new developments. One of the strategies is to embrace the new members of the Mac community.

If indeed the Macintosh devotion, as an implicit religion, is rooted so deeply in the battle between good and evil in computer technology, it might disappear eventually with new developments in the computer industry. For instance, with the anti-trust lawsuits against Microsoft, the Mac enthusiasts are no longer the righteous few who are fighting the war against the evil empire. The meanings, the identities, and the boundaries may be lost. The bonds that were treasured by a few enlightened may no longer be sacred. Paradoxically, salvation might not be attained by Apple Computer's comeback, as the Apple Jedi anticipated. We have yet to see how the Mac devotees adapt to the changes in their community. Their journey to transcendence is perhaps on hold.

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