

Universal solution

At last, Apple has **adopted USB**. Cliff Joseph explains this 'PC technology' and what it has to offer.

Right, before any of the PC mob writes in to gloat that PCs have had USB for ages, I will freely acknowledge that Apple has been a bit slow to adopt this useful and versatile new interface technology. Still, Apple has always had a tendency to go off and do its own thing, so the fact that it has seen sense and decided to join the rest of the industry in using USB is actually quite an encouraging sign. Hopefully it's an indication of a new realism at Apple, and an understanding that it sometimes makes more sense to go with the flow of PC technology than to continually fight against it.

All this talk of USB has been prompted by the launch of the iMac. The little Bondi Blue marvel has been selling like hot cakes, and Apple UK's recent deals with Dixons, Curries and PC World should have given it a much higher profile over the Christmas period. The iMac is the first Apple product to use USB, but Apple wouldn't be Apple unless it did something to complicate the USB issue just a little bit.

It's the decision to rely totally on USB for connecting peripherals to the iMac that's causing the problem. Many common peripherals, most notably printers, are still using older parallel port connections and have not yet made the switch to USB. So, for those people who got iMacs for Christmas, I thought I'd do a short update on the availability of USB peripherals. More important, though, is the fact that Apple also plans to use USB across the entire Mac range in the future. So this seems like a good time to take a look at this new technology to see what it has to offer Mac users.

Smart move

The iMac aside, Macs all use non-standard interfaces to connect to external peripherals. They don't have PC-style parallel ports, opting instead

for an interface known simply as the Apple Desktop Bus (ADB). They do have serial ports, but, needless to say, Mac serial ports are not the same as PC ports so most peripherals manufacturers just don't bother to produce Mac versions of their products. The adoption

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of USB is therefore a pretty important step for Apple. It means that all the USB peripherals being developed for PCs can also work with the iMac and other new Macs that also have USB. The other big advantage of USB is that it provides much higher data transfer rates than conventional parallel and serial ports. This makes it really useful for connecting devices such as scanners and digital cameras which generate very large file sizes.

With digital video devices such as the popular QuickCam, the USB version can produce larger image sizes and better image quality than older parallel or serial versions. It's also easy and convenient to



▲ **NEW USB PERIPHERALS SUCH AS LOGITECH'S QUICKCAM WILL WORK BOTH WITH PCs AND APPLE'S NEW iMAC**

use USB peripherals, as USB allows you to connect or remove devices without having to turn your computer off each time.

So, USB is definitely a good thing. The problem for the iMac is that there are relatively few USB peripherals currently available, although the numbers are growing rapidly. At the moment, the only USB printer available in the UK is Epson's Stylus 740. This is actually sold as a PC printer and costs about £250 (inc VAT). To connect it to an iMac you need an additional cable that costs £6 and you also need to download the iMac printer software from Epson's web site.

Get kitted out

Hewlett-Packard hasn't yet got around to producing any USB printers, but it has produced an adaptor kit called the Printer Cable Kit for iMac. This costs £69



DUAL-PLATFORM PRINTERS

Earlier in this column I mentioned the lack of peripherals available for the Mac as a result of Apple's use of non-standard interface technology. This should be less of a problem in the future as USB is adopted by new Mac models. But right now, one of the most common questions asked by new Mac owners is, "Can I use a PC printer with my Mac?" The answer is yes, but you'll need

a little help. Macs use a serial port to connect to printers, while PCs use a parallel port. So, to physically connect a PC printer to a Mac, you first of all need a serial-to-parallel adaptor cable. Then, of course, you need a piece of driver software to control the printer itself. Some companies, such as Epson and Hewlett-Packard, do have Mac drivers for some of their

printers which can be freely downloaded from their web sites. However, those companies are the exception rather than the rule.

The solution is a product called PowerPrint, developed by GDT SoftWorks (now owned by InfoWave). PowerPrint costs about £93 (inc VAT) and includes the required adaptor cable along with a CD-ROM which contains

drivers for literally hundreds of PC printers. These include colour inkjet and laser printers, and even some old dot-matrix ones. I use PowerPrint to hook up my own Mac to an HP LaserJet 4L and it works perfectly. So, if you have an existing PC printer or you want to buy one of the many cheap PC printers now available, PowerPrint could easily save you the cost of a brand-new Mac printer.

(inc VAT) and can be used to connect an iMac to several printers in HP's DeskJet 670 and 690 ranges. Additionally, as we went to press, InfoWave was preparing a USB version of its PowerPrint package which should allow you to use just about any PC or Mac printer with the iMac (*see box, above*). We have neither a confirmed price nor shipping date for this, though, so keep an eye on the mail order advertisements for further details.

Digital pictures

One area where USB is really taking off is in the field of digital imaging. This includes digital cameras, scanners and web cams, those little cameras that are used to broadcast live video across the internet. Logitech, which now owns the former Connectix QuickCam range, has just

released a USB version of the QuickCam VC (£93 inc VAT) which runs on the Mac, and the new QuickCam Pro should be available early in 1999. Pace Micro will also be releasing a Mac version of its USB Colour Camera soon.

This USB stuff is all well and good if you've got an iMac, but there are still millions of people using existing Macs which just have plain old ADB. Fortunately there is a way of using new USB peripherals with non-USB Macs. A company

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Keyspan also produces a USB-to-ADB adaptor which allows you to connect older ADB peripherals, such as graphics

tablets and joysticks, to the iMac. Both products cost about £69 (inc VAT) and are distributed

in the UK by AM Micro which also handles products from Newer Technology. As we went to press, Newer was due to release a cheap USB-based floppy disk for the iMac (UK pricing has yet to be confirmed).

Space permitting, in this column we may cover occasional updates on other USB products, but for regular updates you should check out the iMacWorld web site at www.imacworld.com.

► **THE EPSON STYLUS 740 IS THE ONLY USB PRINTER AVAILABLE IN THE UK AT PRESENT**



called Keyspan has developed a number of USB adaptor products, including a PCI card that provides two USB connectors. Just slot the card into a free PCI slot inside your Mac, and you're free to use any USB peripheral which has Mac drivers available for it.

PCW CONTACTS

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iMac Printer Cable Kit £69 (£58.72 ex VAT) Hewlett-Packard 0990 474747

www.hp.com
Stylus 740 £250 (£212 ex VAT)
Epson 0800 220546

www.epson.co.uk

USB-to-ADB adapter £69 (£58.72 ex VAT) AM Micro 01392 426473

www.ammicro.co.uk

QuickCAM VC £93 (£79.15 ex VAT)
Logitech 0181 308 6582

www.logitech.com