

Life & times

More substance and less flash

Craig Gamble
FAST LIVING



Apple's Worldwide Developer's Conference tends to be a headline-grabbing event, though last week's version was a little tamer than usual, boasting some upgrades to its notebook lines, a new version of the iPhone, and probably most interestingly, an upgrade to the Apple operating system OSX, called Snow Leopard.

I wonder how long it will take them to run out of big cats, with Tiger and Leopard and Jaguar already roaming free – it must be saving Lion for something really good. I've been holding off writing about the new version of Windows' operating system, Windows 7, because I thought it might be useful to let it see where it places in the food chain against its major competitor, the aforementioned Apple OSX.

Comparing the two new operating systems side by side is a little premature, I admit: the final version of Windows won't be out till October and Apple won't release Snow Leopard fully until September, but there are some things we do know.

The first is that both Microsoft and Apple have used the new versions of their software as a chance to streamline and tweak what has gone before; the improvements, as commentators are fond of saying, are evolutionary, not revolutionary. With Apple, it's all about holding on to its reputation for ease of use, speed and an intuitive interface. Apple's approach to backing up data is a good example: it's not only easy but even kind of fun. Backing up is one of those tasks we all push to the bottom of the list given half the chance, but Apple's Time Machine makes it all just a couple of clicks away to set up, and Snow Leopard slashes the time it takes for back-ups by as much as half. That doesn't sound exciting, but



if you managed somehow to lose all your wedding photos off the home PC, how glad would you be that Apple made backing them up easy?

The streamlining with Windows 7 has produced something like what Vista should have been when it was launched. Microsoft has been at pains to keep the appealing visual aspects of Vista while removing the really annoying things, such as all the warnings that popped up whenever you did ... just about anything. It has worked on things such as how quickly applications launch and compatibility with printers and other peripherals, both of which were problematic with Vista. One of the main criticisms levelled at Vista was its greedy demands on both processor speed and RAM (with no payback in terms of the speed of launching and running programs).

Windows 7 is noticeably snappier than Vista, and Microsoft has gone to pains to make sure that old hardware such as printers and scanners will

continue to function with Windows 7. There is a large bunch of drivers with the installation of Windows to help this process along, and it is easier to get hold of drivers that aren't included with Windows 7.

One of the most appealing upgrades to Windows 7 is the task bar that sits at the bottom of the screen. This now works a little like the dock on a Mac, as a place where you can launch and hold (or "pin", in Microsoft's parlance) applications, as well as showing you what is running. In the demos I've seen, it works very well, though perhaps without the finesse of its Apple counterpart, which is more powerful in its ability to be customised to your own personal needs. Apple's improvements to the dock in Snow Leopard are small, but it has introduced "Expose" for docked applications. This is a way to see all open windows with a click or movement of the mouse – so clicking and holding the Word icon in the

dock will now display all the open Word windows on the desktop, making it very easy to navigate between them.

Windows 7 also includes some updated 64-bit support, which is basically a way of making your computer run faster and better by utilising more RAM, chances are any new computer already has a 64-bit processor, and if you have one, upgrading to 7 might let you make the most of its potential. To make the upgrade easier – and here Microsoft has learnt a lesson from Vista – just in the last week Microsoft has unveiled XP Mode. In essence this runs a little virtual PC inside your PC, which uses the XP operating system. XP is the version of Windows before Vista, and is generally very stable, so XP Mode lets you run programs in this older, more familiar version of Windows. Older programs you find essential and that might not run on the new version should work fine in XP Mode. It's a good work-around and it's also eerily similar to the "classic" mode Macs used to have when they first made the switch to OSX from OS9.

Apple in turn is making a lot of fuss over its 64-bit optimisation, making claims for big speed bumps in launching and running programs. Nearly every built-in application (like Mail or iCal) is now optimised for 64-bit. There's also a bit of future-proofing here: while 32-bit processing, the current standard, can only utilise 4GB of RAM at a time, 64-bit can theoretically use up to 16 billion gigabytes of memory. This means the potential for much faster computing has been hugely boosted with 64-bit, and Apple has made sure its applications are ready and waiting for that potential to be realised.

If you're stifling yawns at this point, I admit these innovations don't have the wow factor of some of the early releases from either company. Still, sometimes it's better to have a bit more substance and less flash. The improvements may not be headline-grabbing, but they will save us all a lot of PC pain in the coming years.

Rapid resolution:
Apple's Snow Leopard slashes the time it takes for back-ups by as much as half.

Be a modern-day explorer: take a walk on the city side

SLOW LIVING



Explorer Ludwig Leichhardt travelled so slowly between Moreton Bay and Port Essington that he was given up for dead – memorial services were held in Sydney in his honour.

For 14 months his party traversed country that ranged from lush forest to impenetrable scrub. There was time to describe birds, animals and geological features, to gather hundreds of samples, and more than enough time to starve.

But Leichhardt – cast alternately as bumbling fool or resourceful vision-

ary – didn't lose hope, despite running out of whitefella food well before his destination. His cohort survived on some of the slowest foods around, including strips of greenhide boiled in water overnight, and pandanus fruit baked, soaked, then roasted, to neutralise its poison.

On such a journey, "slow" living becomes careful living: it must have demanded an understanding of the landscape inconceivable to the modern city-dweller. Navigation was useless without a high lookout.

Don't attempt this kind of "slow travel" if you find yourself in the Gulf country during the wet, unless it's your country.

But if home is a city, and you've never dreamt of walking to work,

allow yourself some time, forget the street directory, and put some decent shoes on. I tried it one crisp winter's morning – stuck my head out the door and guessed the direction of "town", about 8km away. But my suburb has the word "vale" in it, so there was no distant stand of tall buildings in sight to guide me. I walked to the nearest rise and looked around. I navigated thus for an hour and a half, spotting familiar landmarks and heading on, sometimes in a straight line, sometimes zigzagging through tiny streets with only the memory of the last "lookout" to guide me.

I wandered through lush, wet parks and along arterial roads, smelled bakeries, factories and a stormwater creek, and sheltered beneath an art-



Allow yourself some time, forget the street directory, and put some decent shoes on.

deco lintel when it rained. I switched off the "map" and experienced an unfamiliar landscape in which the ground itself had a flavour, not to mention the trees. The yellow signs, red lights, smell of fuel and even the crumbling kerbing were impressed upon me by the time I reached the office. The cities we live or work in, if we slow down to notice, are our "country" and our place of exploration. "Slow" travel – for explorer and city-dweller alike – is thoughtful travel; leading us on, leading us astray, or leading us closer to "home".

Ursula Dawkins is a member of the Centre for Everyday Life at Murdoch University.