The Splintering of OS X

Is Apple going to split the Mac OS into two separate product lines?

If you've been waiting for a new Mac Pro, you were likely disappointed by the recent (minor) speed-bump upgrade—the first revision to the Pro model in almost two years. But that update is only the worst case of Apple's neglect; none of the Mac models are exactly burning rubber on the upgrade track.

It's been a year since the last Mac mini upgrade, and more than a year for the iMac. Similarly, with the exception of the MacBook Pro with Retina display (read the review, page 46), Apple's laptops have seen only minor changes in the past couple of years.

Don't expect the pace to pick up soon. In an unusual hint about Apple's future plans, Tim Cook recently told a Mac Pro customer: "We're working on something really great for later next year"—in other words, don't expect any significant changes for another 12 months at least.

Why is Apple taking so long with these upgrades? It could be a hardware matter. Maybe Apple is waiting for certain components to become more widely available. Maybe. But I think there's another possible explanation: Perhaps Apple is instead delaying major hardware upgrades while it waits for the release of the next iteration of the Mac operating system: OS X 10.9.

It's the Software

Apple's long-term strategy is clear: It wants to make OS X the functional equivalent of iOS. The transition started in Lion, but moved into high gear with Mountain Lion. Every major new feature in Mountain Lion is either already in iOS 5 or is due to be included in iOS 6. Without the iOS-related changes, there would be almost no point in releasing Mountain Lion.

How much further can Apple go with the iOS-ification of OS X? The company could be planning to implement on the Mac many of the restrictions already found on iOS devices.

While Apple might not force OS X users to get *all* of their software from the Mac App Store, it could make non–App Store apps less desirable. By limiting some OS X features, such as iCloud integration, to App Store apps, Apple is already moving in that direction. This, in turn, restricts the features of third-party software, because App Store apps must comply with Apple's sandboxing policies.

Apple could also cut off end-user access to the Mac OS (a trend begun with the decision to make the user's Library folder invisible in Lion). The company could remove Terminal and other system-level utilities from OS X. Apple could even get rid of the Finder or make it optional. Finally, it could make it impossible to run software that's used to develop software (such as Xcode).

Pro vs. Consumer

"If Apple does that," you might wonder, "how would developers create new software?" Apple could solve that dilemma by splitting OS X in two: a consumer version (with all the restrictions I just described) and a less-restricted professional version.

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A pro OS X version could simply be the consumer OS X with added features, enabled by "flipping a switch"—much the way OS X Server now works. Or they could be two entirely separate variants of OS X. In either case, I would expect the high-end Macs (the MacBook Pro and Mac Pro) to come with access to both variations, while the consumer Mac models (the iMac, Mac mini, and MacBook Air) would by default include the consumer OS X version only.

If this scenario is true, it could explain why we have to wait until 2013 to see major hardware upgrades. Apple could be planning to retool its hardware lineup in coordination with a software split.

Would there be protests about this split? Of course. Especially for the consumer OS. There have already been objections to the "dumbing down" of OS X in Lion and to the App Store limitations imposed by sandboxing. However, with hordes of users comfortable with how these things work on iPhones and iPads, and with another year to learn to accept the iOS-like changes in Mountain Lion, Apple may rightly assume that the majority of its customers will be ready for this transition.

For Apple, dividing OS X in two would offer a chance to retool the Mac in the image of iOS devices, with the added security and control that Apple welcomes. At the very least, a split would allow Apple to satisfy the extremes of both pro and consumer markets without having to make a middle-of-the-road compromise.

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