



Users in Control:

A Fresh Perspective on Accessibility

Episode 10

The Biomechanical MACHine

by Joe Barnick

Not knowing what to expect, I look upon my Power Macintosh with trepidation. This beige, non-descript, angular box is my birth into a strange, foreign digital world. The simplest tasks such as quitting an application and ejecting a CD perplex me, engulfing my being with anxiety for fear of damaging this electronic brain. Beads of sweat dot my forehead. Little do I know at this point the path I will be taken down, and the symbiotic relationship that will develop between me and this machine.

Like the origin of the universe, receiving my first Macintosh seemed like an insignificant speck in the grand scope of things, but would explode into a million endless possibilities filling out my world. Having Spinal Muscular Atrophy and averaging four hospitalizations a year forced me to be tutored at home from kindergarten through graduation. In high school, I was supplied with a computer, an Apple Macintosh, to enhance my education. Though ecstatic to be receiving a computer, I was a tad disappointed in the school's choice. Apple's growing season had apparently come to an end, as this was the darkest point in Macintosh history. Though none knew it at the time, great changes were in store for both Apple and me, changes that would graft our paths for the future.

The years passed and I enjoyed my Power Macintosh; my world expanded with educational CDs, the ability to type papers, and the internet. Eventually what once seemed like a powerhouse began to show its age as my once speedy little computer began to take longer doing

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simple tasks. I thought some more RAM might speed things along, but to my shock and amazement my school district instead provided me with a brand new machine.

A new phase of my life was about to begin and a renaissance for Apple was on the horizon. When I saw my new PowerMac G3, I had a feeling the dark night of the Macintosh was coming to an end. What once was angular and cold was now curvaceous and inviting. Its smooth lines and milky perforated plastic encasing the monitor gave it a living yet space age look. The teardrop shaped

volume buttons on the face of the machine glowed a spooky moss green, beckoning the user closer. Its speed and the dramatic changes Apple had made to the operating system amazed me. Little did I realize Apple's renaissance would come with the introduction of the iMac, and before me was its evolutionary father, bridging the old and the new, the inorganic with the organic.

This new machine opened up more opportunities, and helped shape my future as it took an even more prominent place in my life. All my schoolwork was done on it, and ultimately I secured my high school diploma. I knew that my Mac did not belong to me and would someday be returned to the district. Parting with my trusty G3 was a bittersweet moment, for it was on this machine that I fully learned the ins and outs of the Macintosh and learned to appreciate the human centric nature of Apple's products. The evangelization was complete and the evolution reached its next level.

With the school district support gone, I had to rely on my own resources. A new independent phase of my life was ushered in with the arrival of my PowerMac G4. Its imposing size and striking graphite grey Apple logo on the side embodied this change, and it was empowering. I felt that

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this machine and I had limitless potential. It was to become a part of me just as the hair on my head.

Basically everything I can't do in the real world I can do with my Mac. Thanks to this machine my education continues, as I am able to attend college not in person but in cyberspace. Libraries, stores, magazines, newspapers, film reviews and music are within a mouse click; every facet of society is at my disposal. I am connected with the infinite possibilities that the internet and my Macintosh offer me.

My hobbies are my lifeblood and my Mac is the heart pumping all the information I need to feed my passions. The shelves in my room are a testament to Star Wars, anime, films and video games. I have been able to hunt down many rare collectibles which otherwise I would not have been able to obtain. This process of seeking and finding leads me into contact with a large cross section of individuals and gives me the opportunity to interact with them.

My skills of ferreting out information on the internet have become legendary. The electric wheelchair and special controller I use are proof

of this. Another grand discovery was KeyStrokes, an on-screen keyboard that allows a disabled computer user full access to the keyboard via the mouse. Its elegance, speed, and flawless operation impressed me so that I contacted the developer,

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David Niemeijer, of the Netherlands, to thank him for developing such a wonderful application. In turn, David contacted me, inquiring whether I would be interested in beta testing future versions of KeyStrokes. Nervously, I agreed, having never done anything like this before.

Another door of opportunity and challenge opened, as this was one of the best decisions I have ever made. Corresponding with David sharpened my technical communication skills and improved

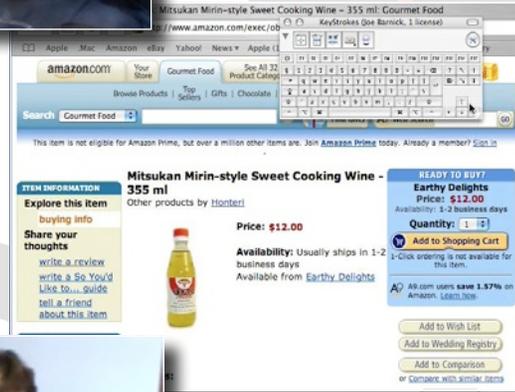
my confidence. Making a difference in the lives of disabled Mac users was a great feeling, as was making a friend in David.

With hope and great anticipation I look forward to the future, wondering what new innovation will impact my life. I live in two worlds, the physical and the digital, with my Macintosh being the medium to both. It is as if we share a common strand of DNA. Just like the universe is ever expanding, my universe continues its metamorphosis of creativity, knowledge, and potential.

Knowing what to expect, I look upon my new PowerBook G4 with excitement and awe. This sleek, metallic-silver notebook computer with its glowing white Apple logo transports me into a familiar, comfortable digital world. There is no anxiety but only enjoyment as I tackle the most daunting tasks. My brushed aluminum goddess affords me a sense of freedom knowing that I am always connected wherever I go. And so continues this symbiotic relationship between me and my machine! □



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This PDF and audio podcast is created by Mac users with physical, speech, or vision impairments. Featuring their experiences, it seeks to inform, inspire, and provide a platform for new ideas. Once a year, some of the articles appear in a PDF of the AssistiveWare Newsletter, found at www.assistiveware.com/newsletter.php. A video podcast titled "Exploring the Frontiers of Assistive Technology" that features some of the contributors is also available.

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From pursuing college courses to hunting down exotic Japanese ingredients, "Everything I can't do in the real world I can do with my Mac." To see how, check out Episode 2 of the video podcast, [Exploring the Frontiers of Assistive Technology](#).