The Mac turns 40: How Apple's rebel PC almost failed again and again

In 1984, a $2.5k computer - with a 9-inch black-and-white display, 128KB RAM, 400 KB floppy drive, and built-in networking - changed everything. Until it didn't. Then these two things saved the Mac.

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In 1984, we were listening to Prince's Purple Rain on FM radio; we were watching Ghostbusters at the drive-in movie theater; and, oh yes, we were falling in love with Apple's radical new computer, the Macintosh.

On January 24, 1984, the Mac was unveiled to the world. Priced at $2,495, or $7,366 in 2024 dollars, it featured a 9-inch black-and-white display, 128KB of RAM, a 400 KB floppy disk drive, and built-in networking. Its most revolutionary aspect was its graphical user interface (GUI) with its windows, icons, menu, and mouse-driven pointer (WIMP). This was a stark contrast to the command-line interfaces common at the time.

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Windows? It was a year away. Me? I was running CP/M, Xenix, and MS-DOS on PCs, and Sun Unix (soon to be SunOS), System III Unix, and 3BSD on minicomputers and workstations. But, thanks to Xerox PARC and <u>Apple's own Mac precursor, Lisa</u>, I already knew about GUIs, and I thought they'd be big.

I wasn't the only one. The Mac's story began not with Apple co-founder, Steve Jobs, as you might think, but with <u>Jef Raskin, an Apple employee, who envisioned an easy-to-use, affordable, less than $500 computer</u>. Jobs had a very different vision. He wanted a full-featured computer no matter what the price tag. I think we all know who won

that fight. By 1981, Jobs took over the project, infusing it with his vision of a computer for everyone.

After a misfire with the expensive Apple Lisa -- Jobs was removed from the project -- Jobs devoted all his time and energy to the Mac. With his flair for the dramatic, Jobs had a young director, <u>Ridley Scott</u>, create what would become an iconic <u>Mac Super Bowl 1984 commercial</u>, portraying the Mac as a symbol of individuality and freedom. That vision of the Mac and Apple products as rebel products remains with us to this day.

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I wasn't at its introduction at De Anza College in Cupertino, California, but several of my tech journalist friends were, and they told me that besides Jobs, other technology leaders, such as Bill Gates and Lotus founder Mitch Kapor were there and promised to make software for this new machine.

They didn't keep that promise. But it wasn't their fault. The first Mac, also known as the Thin Mac, simply didn't have the resources needed to run much in the way of software. That didn't stop a few people from embracing the Mac, but it stalled independent software vendors (ISV) from making Mac software.

Despite a strong start, sales soon slowed. There was only so much you could do with MacWrite and MacPaint on a thin Mac. Sales improved with the <u>introduction of the Mac 512, aka the Fat Mac</u>, with its 512K of memory later in 1984. But, without a hard drive, it still had a very limited audience. This led to internal fights in Apple and Jobs's departure from Apple in 1985.

But two other developments would save the Mac. First, before Jobs left, he introduced the <u>Apple LaserWriter</u>, the first affordable desktop laser printer. At about the same time, the software developer Paul Brainerd looked at the Mac, and instead of focusing on its limitations, he saw its possibilities. In 1985, Brainerd introduced a new kind of program, <u>PageMaker</u>, the first major desktop publishing (DTP) program. DTP would become the Mac's killer application.

When the Macintosh II arrived in 1987 with a hard drive and a color display, DTP ensured that this new, more powerful Mac would find not just Apple fans, but a business audience waiting for it. It was at this point that I, and many others, joined the Mac user community. While <u>Linux is my favorite platform</u>, I've been a Mac user for over 25 years now, with multiple <u>Mac Minis</u> living in my office today.

Besides all the usual things Mac fans love, one of the things that attracted me was that from the start, Apple included networking in its Macintosh designs. Today, no one would even dream of having a computer without networking. Then, on PCs, you had to buy a separate network interface card (NIC) to network with anything, and they were not easy to install or use.

The Macintosh line continued to evolve. Unlike almost any other platform, the Mac has changed its internal architecture over and over again. The early Macs ran on the Motorola 68xxx family. Then, in 1994, they switched to the PowerPC chip family. I had a small hand in this; I wrote the original PowerPC white papers for Apple and IBM. While many people worried about this chip change, I knew the new Macs would be a success.

At the same time, I was still in touch with Steve Jobs, who was then working on NeXT computers. These super high-end Unix workstations would prove to be the foundation for the web. The first web server and browser both ran on NeXT computers.

The NeXT's operating system, NeXTStep, an operating system based on the Mach kernel and BSD Unix, would become Mac's next major operating system: Mac OS X.

While Jobs was busy, Apple was declining. Today, Apple may be a trillion-dollar company, but in the late 90s, it was

a different story. When Jobs came back, first as an advisor and then as the CEO in 1997, Apple's stock was selling at 78.3 cents per share. The Mac wasn't doing much better. Indeed, the only reason Apple survived, and you may have an iPhone in your pocket now, was when Jobs talked Gates into investing $150 million in Apple.

Money's all fine and dandy, but a tech company needs more than cash. Under Jobs' guidance and with the design brilliance of Jonathan Ive, Apple introduced the iMac in 1998. This revolutionary design and its embrace of the internet revitalized Apple's fortunes. It would also introduce the "i" in Apple's products, which remains a distinct trademark to this day.

Then, the launch of Mac OS X in 2001 provided an up-to-date operating system that boasted stability, security, and a sleek Aqua interface. While there have been many changes since then, a user from 2001 could sit in front of a Mac today and get work done.

Later, in 2006, the Mac would see another hardware transition from PowerPC to Intel processors. Fourteen years later, Apple would switch its architecture once again, this time to its own M chip family.

In the 21st century, Apple also introduced a new line of laptops, such as the MacBook Pro and Air, which would bring another generation of users to the Mac.

While today, Apple users are far more likely to have an iPhone than a Mac, the Mac is still a vital part of Apple. Its importance goes far beyond the Mac. Today's computers with their GUIs all owe a debt to the Mac. While it's no longer as important to the education market as it once was, the Mac introduced many students to computing and digital creativity.

As we celebrate the 40th anniversary of the Mac, it's clear that its journey is far from over. The Mac will remain at the forefront of personal computing and creativity. The Mac stands as a testament to Apple's vision of making powerful technology accessible to everyone, changing the world one user at a time.

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