Apple Manuals   Apple][Pascal   Apple Macintosh   ][Swyft Card   Canon Cat

Jef Raskin Information

Ezra Shapiro's Cat Comments

Historically Brewed, Sep/Oct 1994

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Ezra Shapiro's Cat Comments in Historically Brewed magazine

October 1994

Here is Ezra Shapiro's letter about Jef Raskin's Cat computer as published in the magazine "Historically Brewed" issue # 7 (Sep-Oct 1994) p. 2. Shapiro's letter concerns David Craig's Cat article that appeared in HB # 6 (Jul-Aug 1994).

Ezra wrote ...

THE CANON CAT

Hey there HCS [Historical Computer Society] and HB [Historically Brewed]:

So I finally got your issue, read it, and enjoyed it! The Raskin piece did bring up some thoughts though. You have to understand that Jef at times has espoused a kind of interface fascism that has gotten him in trouble. For example, the Mac had no cursor keys in order to force users to cope with the mouse, and the Cat had no cursor keys in order to force users to learn to the operation of the leap key. While effective as a training system, this is pretty painful when you're actually trying to use the machine. Cursor keys came in with the Mac Plus, which was really the first Mac to be widely accepted by businesses. And after a long battle within Information Appliance, which were incorporated into the design of the Cat laptop (I saw it, by the way. It was a beautiful machine!). In both instances the lack of cursor keys had apparently slowed public acceptance, and I know there was a lot of public screaming.

I still think the cursor key thing was one of the major factors in the downfall of the Cat. A salesperson could not demo the Cat by showing that you could type, move around on the screen, and print. Moving around requires an explanation of the leap key, which is not easy, as you now know having tried to write about it (By my third or fourth Cat article I actually got good at it!). Take your average customer for a word processor

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Source: David T. Craig

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or a typewriter and throw search/navigation concepts at him or her, and you've got problems.

Neither Canon nor Jef wanted the Cat to be positioned as a computer, no matter what anybody has said later. This always struck me as a little odd, because out of the other side of his mouth Jef was voicing hope that people would write Forth applications for the Cat, like spreadsheets and such.

In fairness to Canon, their philosophy was typical of many Japanese firms: put a product on the market, see if the public likes it, and only if there's good acceptance do you apply advertising dollars. At the time of the Cat, Canon had *no* presence in the computer market and no computer distribution channel. It was quite logical for them to sell through the office automation channel, where they were a big player due to copiers. Admittedly, typewriter salespeople didn't know how to sell it, but I doubt ComputerLand employees would have done any better.

Take care!

Ezra Shapiro

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David Greelish (editor of HB) responded ...

Ezra,

Glad that you liked our mag and thank you for the "inside" insight. Ezra was a contributing editor for BYTE and wrote the article "A Spiritual Heir to the Macintosh", BYTE magazine, October 1987, which reviewed the Canon Cat.

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David Craig's comments (13 Feb 2000) ...

Here are a few comments that I think shed some light on the "big picture" of the Cat computer, IAI (Information Appliance Inc) and Canon. Ezra's comments are in *italic*, mine follow in plain text.

the Mac had no cursor keys in order to force users to cope with the mouse

Raskin's original Mac plans did not include a mouse and only when Steve Jobs took over Mac development was the mouse incorporated so that the Mac would function in a similar manner to Apple's mouse-based Lisa computer. Raskin in his "Mac and Me" paper says he was against the mouse and found it inefficient.

I still think the cursor key thing was one of the major factors in the downfall of the Cat ... Admittedly, typewriter salespeople didn't know how to sell it, but I doubt ComputerLand employees would have done any better

I agree completely! For small localized cursor movements the cursor keys are great since they provide direct visual feedback to users (what I'm trying to say here is you can see the arrow keys and by pressing one you know exactly what it will do, e.g. move the cursor to the left one character when you press the left arrow key whereas the leap keys required a secondary piece of information from the user, i.e. the search pattern, which is pushing non-technical people's abilities -- if people can't set the clock on their VCRs who could IAI assume they could master computer-based searching techniques?). Leap seems to me for such local movements to be over-kill.

Neither Canon nor Jef wanted the Cat to be positioned as a computer

I think that Raskin and the other IAI techno-geeks really wanted the Cat's built-in Forth environment to be publicized, but due to the Cat's positioning as an "office appliance" such publicity would have confused this positioning and most likely alienated potential buyers who would have thought something like "I'm not technical, why do I need to program this thing, is it missing something I need and which I need to add via programming?".

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It was quite logical for them to sell through the office automation channel, where they were a big player due to copiers

Very good point. In retrospect, I think Raskin and IAI found Canon's involvement in the Cat development/sales arenas a burden which was a major reason for the Cat's demise. IAI unfortunately did not have the financial resources to produce the Cat on their own, if this had been the situation then the Cat or IAI may still be around today in some form.

END

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EZRA SHAPIRO'S CAT COMMENTS

DTC - 18 January 1995

(Forgive me for the chopping that follows. . . .)

You write:

>Two examples that come to mind are the Apple Lisa
>and the Canon Cat systems. The Lisa's desktop architecture was document
>centered (docucentric?) in that its applications were not of direct use to
>users and were typically kept in a folder that the user never opened.

There have been other interesting interface experiments. The software
for the Momenta pen-based portable was a commercial application of pie
menus, for example. And there have been a number of software packages
that have tried to downplay any modes or seams (though we can argue how
successfully!). The problem is that once a product fails in the
marketplace, the ideas get thrown away with the product and we're back
with the lowest common denominator interface. I wonder if what causes
the failure is the interface or the marketing or other factors.

>I've come across several commentaries in this area which if you've not seen
>may interest you. Mr. Chris Espinosa of Apple Computer wrote a great article
>for MacTech magazine (Jan 95, p. 66) titled "It Wasn't Supposed To Be Like
>This".

I'd love to see this.

>Jef Raskin has also written on this topic in the past (Wired magazine,
>"Down with GUIs!", Dec 93, p. 122). You may be interested to learn that
>Raskin is in the process of writing a book about his ideas for post-GUI
>interfaces. Raskin also wrote a great commentary about "information
>appliances" when he started Information Appliance Inc. If you've not seen
>this paper I can send you a copy.

Obviously, I'm quite familiar with Jef and his writings. I don't need the
Wired piece. I've seen the early one, but not recently. It would be fun to
see it again.

>I am in the process of revising a paper I wrote last year about the Canon Cat
>for HCS and would like to ask you some Cat questions. This paper will contain
>more details about the Cat's workings, more history, and a list of all the
>people at IAI who created the Cat and the other "swyft" technology based
>systems (SwyftCard, Swyft, SwyftPortable).

Don't forget the chip people, at, uh, Rockwell?

>0) May I reproduce your great HCS letter in my Cat paper revision? I think
>this letter would make a wonderful contribution to my paper. I found your
>comments about the Cat's lack of cursor keys and the therefore mandatory use
>of the LEAP technolgy very astute.

May I ask what this paper is for? Academic use? Magazine article? My answer
is yes, but I'd like to know why.

>1) Do you own any Cats today? If so, do you use them? How?

Three of them, but two are in boxes and the third has been shut off for a
year or so. Sigh. I still love them, though. However, the Cat is slow by
today's standards. And I need access to more than Courier when I print.
And compatibility and layout problems are, well, problems. Bad enough
trying to get my Psion handheld to talk to my HP OmniBook and to get both
of them talking to my base Macintosh.

But I used to use the Cat for pumping out long text documents, as a free-
form addressbook/phone dialer, and to balance my checkbook.

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I find that if I go back to it, even for an hour, for the next week I keep searching for the leap keys on other computer systems.

>2) In your opinion, do you think the Cat UI design was ahead of its time?

No. I believe that everything else was *behind* the times. That's not a flip answer if you think about it.

>I'm
>asking since Raskin had indicated recently that there is now some interest in
>his UI ideas and that some of these ideas may make it into real systems.

Great!

>3) Do you have any extra copies of the Cat user's manual? If so, is there any
>way that I could obtain a copy or photocopy of this manual? I would gladly
>pay for the shipping costs of a manual and would be willing to photocopy the
>manual if you don't want to part with the manual.

I'll lend you the manuals. You can copy them, but I'd like them back, okay?
I also have the Forth manuals in two huge binders, but you'd have to send
a firstborn child as hostage.

>4) Would you like a copy of a fascinating letter I received from the Cat's
>chief engineer, Mr. Paul Baker, in which he talks extensively about the Cat's
>design and why it in his opinion failed? If so, send me a USPS mailing
>address.

Yes!

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-Ezra

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