



Tech Talk

The new MacBook

by John McCarthy

Hello and a very warm welcome once again to TechTalk. Today's topic is the new MacBook, and for a fortnight I was fortunate enough to have been lent a top-spec sample by someone from an Apple Store for the purposes of this programme. It's a beautiful piece of kit, attired in Space Grey - a metallic charcoal, anodised evenly across the entire surface. The MacBook has changed quite a lot over the years, from its early plastic versions in white and then black, to the very latest, for the first time available in three finishes: the aforementioned space grey, which many agree is the most eye-catching, the more traditional silver aluminium and also a champagne gold, which a few people I spoke to in the Store found somewhat gaudy.

You can choose from two base specifications, with 256 or 512 Gigabytes of flash storage and either a 1.1 or 1.2 Giga Hertz dual-core Intel M processor, sporting a maximum 8 Gigs of RAM, with the possibility of upgrading to a more powerful CPU at the moment of purchasing, although of course this will require reaching out to an already rather depleted wallet. First impressions are that it feels very light and perfectly balanced in the hands, and indeed it is, at just under 1 kilogram. I was also very careful when moving it around because many reviewers had mentioned that the soft metal case was easily scratched or scuffed.

As most Mac users will know by now, this new MacBook only has one socket. Well, two really, but one is reserved for headphones. No HDMI, no Thunderbolt, no Ethernet, no traditional USB... just the one lozenge-shaped aperture called the USB-C. This is the port used for all non-WiFi-or-Bluetooth contact with the outside world, and also for charging the battery. It certainly enabled the engineers to design the sleekest, thinnest and lightest MacBook today, and works either way round, so there's no more of that annoying turning round of cable as you try to insert it the right way. But this new design has also led to criticism by many experienced users of sacrificing function to form. It's easy to imagine why many will find the one port a regression, but since its early days Apple has always been a company pushing new technology onto a not-always-willing public... and indeed then depriving the user once it's become the standard norm! After all, they removed the floppy disk drive from the iMac long before most customers were ready, and of course most Macs now are sold without an optical drive.

On opening the laptop, one notices that the keyboard runs right to the very edges, so that each key is larger than on former keyboards. Another surprise on first using the keyboard is that key travel has been considerably reduced, so that when you type it feels a bit like tapping on the hard glass surface of an iPad. Each key, by the way, is individually backlit.

Then, there's the innovative Force Touch trackpad. This certainly looks like the widest trackpad ever fitted onto a laptop. Under the bonnet, as it were, in place of a regular mechanical clicking button it uses a number of strain sensors, so that with barely any movement along the glass surface, this trackpad can sense when finger pressure is applied, how hard you're pressing and then respond accordingly.

The display is Retina, a superb high-resolution screen. Text is clear and sharp, photographs incredibly detailed. In fact, it's so brilliant that it was difficult to go back to my own laptop. Equally impressive is the silence, even when working with processor-hungry software. At the heart is an Intel Core M processor, designed to be power efficient and to run cool - it has no fan and is therefore completely silent. Sheer bliss!

So much for the specs, how does the MacBook fare in the real world...?

I usually work with three Spaces or desktops. The first contains Mail, Calendar and Firefox, the second In-Design, Pages, Numbers and Keynote, and finally the heavier-duty one comprising Adobe Audition, Photoshop and Final Cut Pro. Having all the programmes open at the same time and switching between all the tabs was no problem. For 'general use', and by that I mean word processing, web browsing, emails and light photo editing, it's certainly been no slouch and in fact is rather nifty. So, for most people the MacBook will have no difficulties with their favourite software, and it's thinner, smaller and lighter than its cousin the MacBook Pro. Battery life is fairly decent and should take you through a full working day.

However, with more memory-hungry programmes that demand serious processing power, then you should look somewhere else. I use Final Cut Pro for both personal and professional video editing, and while the MacBook can handle basic sequences with simple transitions, once you start applying effects, 3-D text, etc. it can be irritatingly slow (when you're used to a faster machine at any rate) and you'll suffer problems of rendering and the occasional dropped frame. There again, this isn't what it was made for.

Most of the criticisms levelled at the new MacBook is the fact that it has just the one USB-C port. This means that if you want to plug in a mobile phone, external hard disk or any gadget, you'll have to buy a separately-sold USB adapter. The logic behind this, according to the manufacturer, is that all essential external devices can be connected to this single port. Personally, this was just a temporary irritant and wasn't really an issue as WiFi enables connection to other Network Attached Storage or external hard disks. Slightly more complicated set-ups also worked fine. Through the adapter, I plugged in a Focusrite Scarlett audio interface, in turn connected to a Golden Age microphone pre-Amp and recorded last week's Tech Talk. Everything worked perfectly, no glitches.

Final question. Would I buy one? Well, I already own a more powerful albeit older MacBook Pro, so the answer has to be no. I'm by no means an Apple evangelist, so if you're a Windows apostle the number of Core M powered alternatives is growing - some of the Lenovo and Asus models share the MacBook's traits of slimness and portability. Rumours are also rife that the Microsoft Surface Pro 4 will be released in the very near future... so if anyone would like to lend me a copy for reviewing purposes, needless to say, I'd be only too happy to oblige.

Well we've run out of our allocated time, thank you for listening and do get in touch at contact@englishwaves.fr if you have any comments or suggestions.

See you next time on TechTalk – bye for now.