

You need to lose weight

Written by Darryn Lowe

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In my last entry I spoke about NIFE and DFTSOD. Of the two NIFE is the only excusable form of design because they had the best of intentions. Of course they say "The road to hell is paved with best intentions" so I guess Microsoft's headstone would read "He meant well but he's in Satan's arms now";.

One aspect of PC design that irks me as an engineer has to do with weight. My Mac Mini with its half inch steel perimeter and its power supply laying on top weighs less than many laptops out there. WHY? The Mini is a desktop machine (yes okay it uses laptop parts) so why is it so light compared to laptops? The MacBook and MacBook Pros have all shown the world that you don't need to weigh the equivalent of a whale turd to be sturdy so why do they do it?

SFF (Small Form Factor) cases are another example although these do actually have some reasoning behind them. The reason that SFF machines are so heavy?

The MONITOR.

That's right the monitor. If you looked at the Mac, there has largely been very few weight related issues with the Mac (bearing in mind I'm not counting the Apple IIe and the like just the Mac). The reason for this is that most Mac models had built in monitors (I did say MOST). This meant that the whole case design was built around the monitor and so the structure was designed with the weight of this in mind. Even today the Macs are designed around the screen (literally in the case of the iMac) although that screen is now a hell of a lot lighter than the chunky dunk CRT.

But this has never been the case with the PC. PC cases were huge when Macs were tiny. They were inefficient so their design meant they needed to be built like a wind tunnel so their innards were more akin to the Sistine Chapel than the cosy home design of the Macs. But their huge size also allowed the weight of the monitor to be spread out over a greater area. Considering the size of some of those monsters, weight transference was sorely needed. Ever carried a 20" CRT up a flight of stairs? Imagine that weight sitting on top of a PC all day.

But then some bright spark decided to try and spruce things up a bit. Most people didn't need the case size of the big chunky tower cases and so they decided to bring in the SFF case.

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Manufacturers warned people not to put their monitors on top but stuff all people listened, or actually were told, and so the monitor on the top of the case caused many a problem. In fact I personally have dealt to many a problem of whining CD ROM drives. You'd whine too if you had tonne sitting on you. Take monitor off case, problem solved.

So the designs had to change. The CD ROM drive sits lower (still not low enough if you ask me), there's more ridging to try and support the weight, and the case is made out of stronger metal. All of which actually makes the machine heavier.

So why does this not affect the Macs? Why can Apple make cases smaller and lighter? Two reasons, one of which I've already alluded to.

1). No CRT. Apple has completely ditched the CRT. The eMac was the last CRT based machine out there. This was replaced a couple of years ago by the Educational iMac which was basically a really cheap, featureless iMac. In replacing the CRT with the LCD Apple could save weight. They also managed to bring costs down by simplifying lines, and they became much greener despite what those ecoterrorists at Green Peace say.

2). They're too sexy. Jonathan Ive and his team are to computing what Emperor Shah Jahan is to love. They want to create beauty that the world will appreciate (although the Emperor only wanted to make his missus happy). With such beauty would you be happy to sit an ugly CRT monitor on your Mac? Seriously doubt it. So Apple designed the Cinema Displays and with the two sitting side by side (or intertwined like the iMac) the two are a magnificent display of industrial design at its highest.

Who knows what we will see when the rest of the computing industry ditches that boat anchor called the CRT. Will the boxes become smaller, lighter, and better designed? Maybe, but no matter how you look at it they'll still be playing second fiddle to the Mac who did it years previous.