

FireWire Evolution Redux: January, 2006

An editorial opinion

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(I do not respond to everyone but am happy to read your comments)

15 months ago, I wrote a white paper which was entitled, 'FireWire Evolution'. The paper contained a lot of information on the history of FireWire, and delved deeply into the marketing path which Apple had taken with FireWire 800.

I probably was a little too careful in my analysis; I tried not to ruffle feathers needlessly at Apple. In any case, it's dangerous to predict the future.

This time, I am throwing caution to the wind and I will be a little more emphatic. If you are making storage decisions based on rollouts of FireWire 800 technology, your purchasing priorities are sadly out of order. Apple was the only champion of FireWire 800; a task it seemed to take reluctantly. Now, Apple is making marketplace moves that are absolving itself of FireWire 800.

One of the keen underlying technology themes at MacWorld 2006 is that Apple has begun to remove FireWire 800 from its product lineup. It was removed unceremoniously from the MacBook Pro, and I'm betting that it will soon be gone from the entire Macintosh product lineup, most specifically the desktop lineup.

No, I don't have a secret line of communication with Steve, and I have absolutely no Apple engineers whispering in my ear. And I have no axe to grind with my own product line, because we do sell lots of FireWire 800 drive enclosures and docks every day. We also have some customers who are married to FireWire 800 technology for the right reasons and will continue to be so for the foreseeable future.

FireWire 800 was the right technology at the right time, but badly marred by marketing mistakes at the time it was launched. It had a viable upgrade path to even faster versions (none of which has ever happened).

So where to from here?

Here's my thoughts as to where Apple should go:

- 1) Apple should install eSATA on future computers. It's an inexpensive, high performance solution, in full production now. It provides users with real time transfer rates in excess of 200MB/sec (that's MegaBytes, not bits!) through a single flexible cable. FireWire 800 never got anywhere close to that. SATA

transmission rates are now 3.0Ghz; FireWire 800 was 0.8Ghz. WiebeTech produces inexpensive SATA enclosures now that allow uncompressed HD editing in real time, through a simple single cable flexible connection.

- 2) Apple should avoid any thought of reincarnating FireWire in its faster versions, because there is no native drive support for FireWire. (Unlike eSATA, which can be plugged into any SATA drive without even requiring an intermediary bridge.)
- 3) Apple should pursue internal and external Serial Attached SCSI (SAS) drives, because they have many characteristics in common with SATA drives, and are amazing little speed demons. This would be the kind of industry leading technology which Apple mustered with the original FireWire spec. It would offer the benefit of bridgeless direct connections between hosts and drives; transfer rates approaching 100MB/sec per drive; robust drive networks and many more benefits.

Apple does care tremendously about the external connectivity of its products. Apple's community of users require high performance external storage. As for the MacBook Pro, Apple was likely tiring of the cost of FireWire 800 ports. (Please read my earlier paper for a full explanation of the history, <http://www.wiebetech.com/whitepapers.php>). Apple also certainly noticed that the connect rate of FireWire 800 across the entire customer base was low. (Once again, I want to emphasize that there are pockets of customers who live and die with FireWire 800 drives; FireWire 800 enclosures and ports will be available for years to come through the use of CardBus and PCI adapters).

It will be interesting to see the first desktop rollout of a MacTel platform. What external connectivity will it have?

I really don't know – but the odds of it being FireWire 800 get lower each day, while the customer drum beat for better external solutions such as eSATA only continues to get louder. And if Apple will bring SAS to their desktop lineup – (!) – they'll have storage leadership on desktop platforms once again.

WiebeTech LLC was founded in July 2000 by James Wiebe and has focused on marketing high performance, highly portable storage solutions for consumer and government markets. WiebeTech is an innovator in the marketplace, offering a variety of FireWire 400, 800, USB2, and eSATA docks, enclosures and RAID systems.

WiebeTech's website is www.wiebetech.com