

IS

ASHTON-TATE BORN AGAIN?

After repeated bouts of customer dissatisfaction and product delay, Ashton-Tate vowed to reform. Will it be true to its word?

BY CHRISTINE STREHLO

■ It was a portent of things to come. Ashton-Tate's CEO, Ed Esber, wanted to give dBase consultant Adam Green an award at a developers conference, but Green couldn't attend. So Green sent a videotape to express his thanks. In the tape, Green talked about the strength and diversity of the dBase standard. To illustrate, he filmed the planter boxes in his own back yard, one nearly exploding with colors from a wide variety of blooms; Green likened this to the dBase community in which many competing dBase dialects and tools flourish to the benefit of all. He pointed to another box, blander in appearance because it contained only one kind of flower. This he likened to a dBase world without the healthy competition of variety and freedom of choice.

Perhaps one man's blossom is another man's weed, but the following month, Torrance, Calif.-based software giant Ashton-Tate filed a "look-and-feel" suit against Fox Software (Perrysburg, Ohio), a small company that's been successful marketing a very fast dBase clone called FoxBase Plus. Apparently the cultivators at Ashton-Tate prefer the less chaotic world of monoculture.



Ashton-Tate CEO Ed Esber acknowledges that the company didn't listen carefully to its customers. "Success can close your ears," he says. But he's working hard to improve the company's image and woo dBase defectors back into the fold—while taking a tough stance against dBase clones.

In retrospect, the suit was inevitable, because for some time the weeds have been threatening to take over the garden. Early on, dBase established dominance among PC-based databases. One of the selling points was the product's built-in programming language, which fostered a subculture of developers and consultants who earned their keep customizing dBase and making it easier to use. However, Ashton-Tate was slow to introduce product improvements, preferring marketing techniques to re-search and development.

Consequently, competitors that might never have appeared have taken root in two distinct categories: first, clone products that work easier or faster than dBase and, second, competing databases designed for corporate users who want power with less programming. The former are dBase-compatible products such as FoxBase Plus, Nantucket Software's Clipper (Los Angeles, Calif.) and WordTech's QuickSilver (Orinda, Calif.) that strengthen the standard created by Ashton-Tate, although they siphon off sales. The latter are products such as Microrim's R:Base for DOS (Norwood, Mass.) and Borland's Paradox 3.0 (Scotts Valley, Calif.), which serve as complete alter-natives as Excel does to Lotus 1-2-3.

**THE SUCCESS
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Although Ashton-Tate in the past has taken a sometimes cavalier attitude toward the demands of its customers, there is evidence that in dBase IV, its long-delayed successor to the dBase standard, Ashton-Tate listened carefully, at least in the wealth of features it offers. Still, actions such as the suit against Fox Software suggest less than total confidence among company officials that

dBase IV can dominate its competition strictly on its own merits. Some business users even suggest that the suit is intended to forestall the competitors until the many small kinks in dBase IV can be worked out.

While Ashton-Tate is striving for monoculture, the vast community of database users is considering a different question. They want to know whether the company is listening to customers or just pretending to, whether it is putting sufficient resources into dBase and other products or simply continuing a long-standing pattern of late and imperfect upgrades. What these business users really want to know is whether Ashton-Tate has been born again.

Ashton-Tate is perennially the target of high emotion. A great many of its customers are developers, for whom dBase is at once the bane of their existence and their cash cow, making Ashton-Tate the company they love to hate. Chairman, President, and CEO Ed Esber is bemused by this phenomenon. While some people see Ashton-Tate as a company with a deservedly bad reputation, Esber sees a good company that's learned the hard way to listen more closely to customers. He also believes the organization is taking lumps simply because of its tremendous success—a 60 percent share of the personal computer database market, and competitive positions in such categories as word

processing, graphics, and integrated software. (See the box for information on Ashton-Tate's other products).

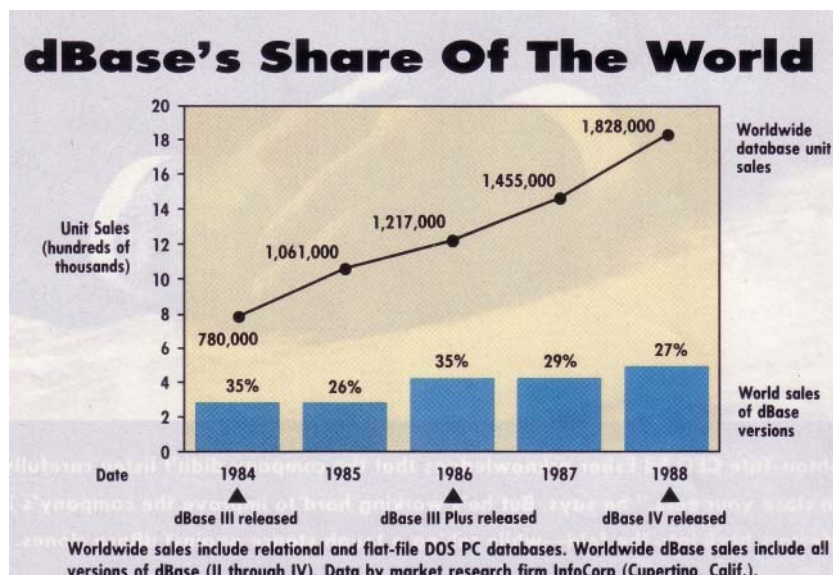
The release of dBase IV marks what Ashton-Tate officials hope is a turning point. And in fact, the response to dBase IV is crucial to their efforts. While such Ashton-Tate products as Framework, Chart Master, and MultiMate are fairly successful, dBase is the key product. In recent years, the importance of non dBase products has grown continually, at present accounting for nearly 40 per-cent of the company's income. But the strength of dBase still determines the fate of Ashton-Tate.

The new dBase IV is a massive program that attempts to satisfy the needs of a diverse group of users. The company is delivering a developer's edition that can produce a program that others can run without owning a copy of dBase, but which is otherwise identical to the user's version, i.e., easy to use right out of the box, yet powerful enough to allow a programmer to design sophisticated dBase applications. (A complete review of dBase IV follows this article.) Both versions include a built-in compiler to speed execution of developed programs. The user's version of dBase IV is easier to use than previous versions because of a powerful user interface called the Control Center, which allows access to nearly every available feature.

Finally, dBase IV is the application heart of a new gospel according to Ashton-Tate: connectivity and the SQL Server. In fact, Ed Esber sees products such as SQL Server as the foundation of Ashton-Tate's future. That future, according to Esber, will see PCs linked to a shared corporate database. Esber expresses the firm conviction that this development will get Ashton-Tate heavily involved in connectivity and minicomputer-style computing.

The key to that change is a query language called SQL, common to many databases in the mainframe and minicomputer world and now making an appearance on personal computers. SQL in various aspects is being incorporated into PC databases primarily because it is a de facto standard query language in the mainframe world, in the same way that dBase is at the PC level. Because PCs are increasingly linked to corporate min-is and mainframes, SQL capability is becoming important to PC database users.

Version 1.0 of dBase IV, however, is far short of the ultimate goal with regard to SQL. Version 1.0 includes the capability to develop applications using SQL in the program code and enables users to query their own database in SQL. But it does not permit them to use SQL at full potential to query minicomputer and mainframe databases across a network. A full implementation of SQL would allow transparent access to data, without requiring the user to know where the requested



information resides.

Version 1.1 (due later this year) will include the tools necessary to connect a PC to a central database server running the promised SQL Server; the SQL Server will provide the full scope of SQL capabilities, communicating with far-flung databases using SQL. Ashton-Tate is developing the SQL Server jointly with Microsoft Corp. and Sybase, intending the central multiuser database to be built on dBase IV. According to this scenario, dBase IV will provide an essential PC link to the database environment of the future.

Of course, some powerful companies have their own SQL religion. IBM, the creator of SQL, has built the language into its own Extended Edition of OS/2 and sees a similar future, but with its products linking PCs to the corporate mainframe database (a world where IBM has long reigned supreme).

Version 1.1 of dBase IV will also work well with a shared PC database on a network, acting as the user's "front end" to the SQL Server, and from there to the database. While most of the database processing will be done at the network server, the user will manipulate the data at will using dBase IV running on a personal workstation. Thus SQL Server is squarely targeted at the corporate environment—where many are seeking high-performance database management for work groups but don't want to move their PC users over to a minicomputer, much less squander time already invested in learning PC software. A product such as SQL Server enables companies to put existing personal computers to work in the network environment, without impeding more advanced links later on. Ashton-Tate will provide a similar product for DEC minicomputers.

The client/server architecture of SQL Server is intended to solve the performance problems networked PC databases have characteristically suffered. In this system, the server handles actual database processing while the client (the workstation) handles screen display and queries. SQL Server also provides a direct line to the corporate database from familiar personal computer applications. But such competitors as Borland with Paradox and Microrim with R:Base, having achieved increasing acceptance among corporate users, are both currently working on competitive client/server products. Borland is currently ahead of Ashton-Tate with SQL support for individual users, while Microrim is ahead of both companies with a Presentation Manager-based interface in the works.

Financial analyst Michele Preston of Solomon Brothers (New York) sees strength in Ashton-Tate's new emphasis on connectivity and believes the timing is right. Ashton-Tate, she says, will be the first on the market with a complete network database based on the client/server architecture. Preston adds that Ashton-Tate is in a good position because of the quality of its alliance to produce SQL Server. Microsoft is providing LAN Manager as the networking basis, and Sybase, long successful in SQL for minicomputers, is providing the SQL communication aspects of the product. Not only is Ashton-Tate in good company, she says, but it was also shrewd enough to garner exclusive marketing rights for SQL Server. Preston's firm is presently recommending Ashton-Tate's stock based on such considerations.

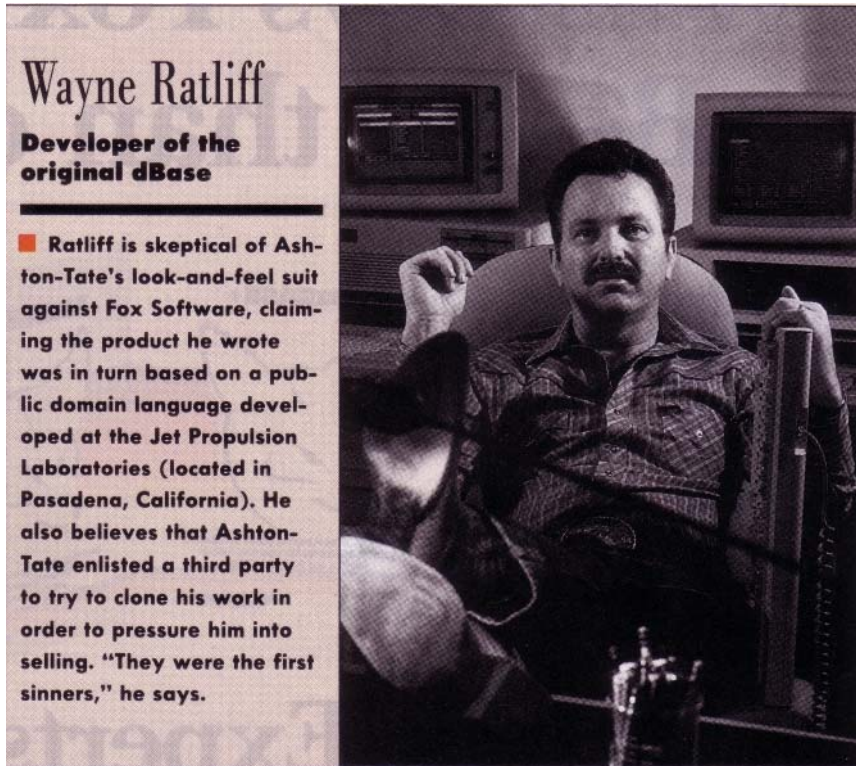
Although Ashton-Tate has done well by purchasing much of its technology (including products such as MultiMate and Framework) instead of developing it in-house, Ashton-Tate has at the same time garnered criticism for being weak in research and

development. To compensate, the company hired several experts to produce portions of dBase IV. Not surprisingly, the resulting product is complicated, the more so because of the conflicting demands for both power and ease of use from the product's stratified audience: programmers, nonprogramming power users, and data-entry people.

Implementing the new strategy depends largely on the company's ability to step beyond its reputation as a marketing-only organization.

The trouble is, Ashton-Tate has always been a tremendously strong marketing company and doesn't seem totally convincing in any other role. Even the critical SQL Server requires an infusion of skills from two other companies. Ashton-Tate has always concentrated more on acquiring

products than de-signing its own, and it puts a great deal of money and manpower into selling them through packaging and advertising. In contrast, the company has never spent more than 10 per-cent of revenue on research and development, and in the eight years from the release of dBase II to dBase IV, it has updated the product only three times.



**CONNECTIVITY
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The old strategy was all marketing, according to Hal Pawluk, the advertising man hired by founder George Tate to help sell the original product (bought from author Wayne Ratliff). Pawluk named the product, as well as the company, and came up with the first ad, which compared other data-base products for PCs to a bilge pump under the headline, "The bilge pump sucks." It was the first attempt to commercialize a sales approach for a piece of PC software and it worked. Sales took off almost immediately.

Ashton-Tate's new religion still depends on the good marketing of sound products, but the need for the flagship data-base to be excellent and unflawed is intense. Much of Ashton-Tate's bad reputation grew around its delayed update of dBase III. Two years passed before

Ashton-Tate released dBase III Plus, and the changes in the product didn't fully satisfy either developers or those who needed easier interfaces. When it finally was re-leased, dBase III Plus also contained countless little flaws that were less a problem for the developers who could code around problems than for corporate power users who lacked the time or inclination to be debugging an off-the-shelf product. So the corporate users for whom dBase III Plus was designed were left frustrated, while the original hard-core developers found their needs only partially met.



The result was migration to clone compilers and increasing corporate acceptance of alternatives like R:Base for DOS.

The lack of responsiveness went beyond dBase itself. The Macintosh database, dBase Mac, was released despite the fact that it does not use the same file format as the DOS dBase products, which left a wide opening for Fox Software, whose FoxBase Mac Plus can move files in and out of DOS with ease.

Even Ed Esber acknowledges the phenomena. "Success can close your ears," he notes. "Besides, people don't say, 'I'm going somewhere else,' They just do it. And one day you wake up and say, 'Oh my god, they went there.' "

But with the fervor of the new faithful, Esber claims that he's now listening acutely to his customers. In fact, he does admit to previously telling customers that if it wasn't already in dBase, they didn't need it. This was a major mistake, he now admits. Esber is now working hard to improve Ashton-Tate's image, and woo dBase defectors back to the fold.

To strengthen these efforts, the company reorganized, changing from task-oriented groups such as finance and marketing to product-oriented business groups, each functioning as a small company within the main entity. Just as important, Ashton-Tate is committed to hearing its customers. Ashton-Tate has an advisory panel of business users on development of the dBase language, and members agree that the company is taking their recommendations seriously.

Esber kicked off his campaign for the new Ashton-Tate at a developers conference in October of 1988 (the same one Adam Green couldn't attend), just before dBase IV was released. Esber took on the unlikely task of convincing users that the company

has decided the customer is always right. It looked and felt more like a religious revival than a gathering of dBase users. The attendees came to the conference long dissatisfied with dBase III Plus and hoping for an epiphany. Flawlessly delivering his keynote speech, Esber admitted that Ashton-Tate had not listened well enough to the dBase user. He confessed to turning away from users' requests for features and improvements, in effect forcing them to turn to dBase clones for better performance and better development utilities.

But with dBase IV, said Esber, Ashton-Tate has seen the light: The features developers asked for are there with more coming. In front of the very users Ashton-Tate had ignored over the past few years, Ed Esber, a man not known for humility, was openly apologetic. "We're sorry. We made a mistake," he said. The audience ate it up.

That's the arena dBase IV steps into. Luckily, the product does not have to devastate the competitors, precisely because the dBase standard is so strong, though the company must demonstrate firm command of the technology needed to keep the product abreast of the times. Unfortunately, the indications on this score are mixed.

dBase IV was released in much the same manner as previous versions: interminably late and laced with bugs. Many developers, tipped off by discrepancies between the documentation and the actual workings of the product, believe that some features were simply left out or disabled to allow the product to ship. Indeed, Ashton-Tate shipped dBase IV without benefit of a formal beta test, according to former Ashton-Tate developer, and now author and independent developer, Tom Rettig.

Independent consultant (and Personal Computing Contributing Editor) Miriam Liskin adds that dBase IV's features are good, but that pressure to release the product was dam-aging. She tells her customers to wait for a bug fix upgrade. The bugs are not serious, she adds, and the product is beta-test quality right now.

The non-critical bugs in dBase IV won't destroy data, but instead can freeze a display, or cause incompatibilities with dBase III Plus applications and data files. Ashton-Tate has been quick to acknowledge such "anomalies" in dBase IV, and is striving to publish the bugs it knows about along with work-arounds and fixes in later versions. According to Lydia Dobyms, vice president of marketing at Ashton-Tate, the company has had a policy of publishing all known bugs since the release of the notoriously quirky dBase III Plus in 1986.

Regardless of those efforts, the bug list is a familiar problem to Ashton-Tate customers, who have come to expect problems rather than perfection from the company's products. "Bugs are currently slowing us down," says Tim Dar Juan, database specialist for the World Bank in Washington, D.C., where 600 licensed copies of dBase III Plus are in use. "We are the guinea pigs. We report the bugs to Ashton-Tate, but we are all paying a price."

Dar Juan says he was one of the people "who wanted to bite the bullet," and purchase dBase IV early, largely because of the new features. Dar Juan is typical of Ashton-Tate's corporate users, an extremely large group that re-mains loyal to the Ashton-Tate product over dBase clones or alternative databases. Dar Juan says that World Bank developers come and go, and sometimes a new developer is charged with maintaining someone else's code. If the original

developer used a compiler, Dar Juan may run into compatibility problems if he needs to modify code. For the sake of compatibility, the World Bank has standardized on Ashton-Tate's dBase.

To the extent that the experience of Dar Juan is typical, continued loyalty to the dBase line is likely, making prospects for Ashton-Tate's continued success excellent. The dBase standard is that strong, allowing the impressive though less than perfect dBase IV the leeway it needs to remain the standard PC database. In addition, Ashton-Tate keeps broadening its scope with a solid line of additional products, and it retains a strong though loosely coordinated development team. Most important is its new faith in the necessity to respond to customers' needs. Whether the company can maintain the pace of development to these customers' satisfaction in the brave new world of shared databases and connectivity remains an open question. Like one of the reformed, the company is trying to be true to its new ideals, though it keeps sliding back to old habits. ■

LITIGATING A STANDARD

■ Because dBase is so widely used, a standard of sorts has grown up around it and products that work like it. In an attempt to keep its ownership of the dBase standard undisputed, Ashton-Tate in the fall of 1988 sued a major dBase clone maker, Fox Software, for copyright infringement. The Fox Software suit is undoubtedly the most significant legal action that Ashton-Tate has made and represents the first attempt in the personal computer industry to copyright a language that has been long considered part of the public domain.

Ashton-Tate has filed a "look-and feel" suit against Fox Software (Perrysburg, Ohio), a company that develops and manufactures the dBase workalikes FoxBase Plus and FoxBase Mac. Ashton-Tate also names The Santa Cruz Operation, a Santa Cruz, Calif.-based company that markets a Xenix version of FoxBase Plus. The suit asserts that Fox Software's FoxBase Plus, FoxBase Plus/Mac, FoxBase Plus/386, FoxBase Plus/LAN, and SCO FoxBase, the Xenix version, all in-fringe on Ashton-Tate's copyrights for dBase II, dBase III, and dBase III Plus. Ashton-Tate also seeks to prevent further infringement on copyrights in dBase IV, by restricting Fox's future products as well. Ashton-Tate is also claiming copyright protection of the dBase file format.

"If we win," says Stan Witkow, Ashton-Tate general counsel, "it will prohibit clone makers from releasing products with screens that are identical to ours, that incorporate the language, and that function identically to ours."

But because of the inclusion of Fox Software's next version of its dBase work-alike, the look-and-feel issue is questionable, according to many industry sources. The next version, the dBase IV-compatible FoxPro, uses a radically different interface, according to Fox Software President David Fulton. Fulton believes that the real motivation is to protect dBase IV against FoxPro, which he claims runs six times faster than Ashton-Tate's product. Fulton also thinks Ashton-Tate is trying to pull the dBase programming language from the public domain.

While the language isn't mentioned in the suit itself, Ashton-Tate's President, CEO, and Chairman Ed Esber has made it clear that Ashton-Tate intends to protect the

language from further cloning, and especially that it must try to prevent the clone makers from up-grading their product to be compatible with dBase IV.

Fox Software representatives claim that Ashton-Tate's long delay in actively protecting dBase effectively implies a license for use by companies such as Fox, and it has filed a strongly worded counter-suit denying Ashton-Tate's charges and charging Ashton-Tate with attempting to monopolize a market in which they already have a majority of the sales.

Fulton says that Ashton-Tate had been fully aware that Fox Software was developing a dBase clone, and even condoned and encouraged them from the start. Fox gave Ashton-Tate copies of FoxBase in 1984, and Ashton-Tate invited Fox to exhibit at a 1986 developers conference. Fulton adds that Ashton-Tate tried to acquire the product in 1987 and during that attempt to purchase the company saw Fox's source code in great detail. "From 1984 to 1988 Ashton-Tate was in a position to approve of what we do," says Fulton. "From the very beginning they encouraged everybody."

Esber contends that, from the very beginning, Ashton-Tate has expressed its intent to protect its assets. While the company has no current plans to sue the other dBase clone makers, Ashton-Tate will do what needs to be done, he adds. "We're watching Word-tech very carefully," he says.

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ASHTON-TATE'S OTHER PRODUCTS

Although dBase accounts for the bulk of Ashton-Tate's revenue, a significant 35 to 40 percent of the company's in-come is currently generated by products other than dBase III Plus and IV. In 198Z the dBase family comprised 80 to 90 percent. Many of these additional products were purchased from other companies, or were acquired when Ashton-Tate bought the company itself. Here is a chronological description of Ashton-Tate's other product acquisitions:

■ **Framework:** First released in 1984, Framework is an often underrated integrated business package incorporating spreadsheet, word processing, telecommunications, and data management under an interface based on frames of information. Data can be moved easily among the frames. It was originally developed by Forefront (Sunnyvale, Calif.); Ashton-Tate bought the entire company in 1985 and continues to support and update the product. Framework III was released in 1988 and is available in a LAN version. All versions of Framework were developed only for DOS.

■ **MultiMate Advantage Professional 3.6, MultiMate Advantage 3.6, Just Write, MultiMate On-File, MultiMate Graphlink, Business Advantage Keyboard, Communications Board.** Ashton-Tate bought MultiMate International Corporation in 1985, and has since marketed the company's full product line. The MultiMate word processors are work-alikes of the Wang dedicated word processing system; the Business Advantage Keyboard is an option that replaces IBM PC, XT, and AT keyboards and

mimics the key layout and dedicated features of the Wang keyboard. On-File and Graphlink are a list manager and graphic import utility, respectively, and the Communications Board is an adapter that enables users to exchange documents between personal computers and Wang word processors. Advantage and Advantage Professional word processors are both available in versions that work with LANs.

■ **Master Graphics Series (Chart-Master, Sign-Master, Diagram-Master, Map-Master):** Acquired through the purchase of Decision Resources (Westport, Conn.) in 1986, the Master Graphics Series is a collection of business graphics packages for DOS machines. Chart-Master, Sign-Master, and Diagram-Master are also sold in one package, dubbed the Presentation Pack.

■ **Rapidfile:** Released in 1987. Ashton-Tate developed this simplified DOS-based file manager that works with dBase files and offers users a variety of interfaces, including Framework-like pull-down menus and a horizontal menu bar like that of Lotus 1-2-3. This is Ashton-Tate's entry into flat-file data management software, competing against Symantec's Q&A and Software Publishing's PFS:File.

■ **Byline:** Originally developed by SkiSoft, Inc. (Lexington, Del.), this desktop publishing product for DOS machines was released in 1987 and updated in 1988.

■ **Draw Applause:** Originally developed by Decision Resources, Draw Applause was completed and released in 1988. The product is a tool for creating visuals and artwork either from files it generates or from imported graphics files. It imports and exports Lotus .WK1 and .DIF files, as well as metafiles (a graphics code format for importing and exporting mainframe graphics files).

■ **FullWrite Professional, FullPaint, Full Impact:** Ashton-Tate acquired the "Full..." line from Ann Arbor Softworks in 1988, while these products were being developed there. Ashton-Tate has since merged the company into Ashton-Tate's Macintosh division located in Campbell, Calif. FullWrite Professional is a word processor for the Apple Macintosh, and FullPaint is a Macintosh graphics package. Full Impact is a Macintosh spreadsheet with business presentation and report capabilities.

■ **dBase Mac:** Developed at Ashton-Tate's Glendale, Calif., facility, dBase Mac is a relational database management system for the Apple Macintosh that includes a development language and provides access to dBase files created in the DOS dBase products. Unfortunately, dBase Mac imports and exports files in ASCII and does not use the same file format as that of the dBase products for DOS, a fact that has hurt it versus products such as Fox Software's FoxBase Mac Plus. In fact, dBase Mac (released in 1988) is widely regarded as a product whose days are numbered.