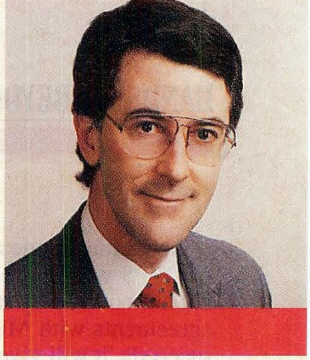


DOUGLAS A. HAMILTON

OS/2 2.0 GOES DOWN TO THE WIRE

Early this year, IBM introduced what it called the Limited Availability release of OS/2 2.0, which is distinct from the final General Availability (GA) product that should now be available. Is LA a product or just another beta version? Well, it depends on whom you ask. Is LA a better DOS than DOS, a better Windows than Windows, and a better OS/2 than OS/2? Again, it depends on whom you ask.

Different Strokes

For me, LA was the first new release of OS/2 that I did not immediately adopt for day-to-day work. I still prefer version 1.3, but I'm struck by the variety of experiences that users are having with LA. Those with the least previous exposure to OS/2 like it best. The new Mac-like Workplace Shell (WPS) is part of the reason.

IBM's human factors research has shown that new users like the object-oriented, drag-and-drop features of the WPS, and my own observations indicate that that's true. More experienced OS/2 users, on the other hand, are more skeptical. They tend to focus on specific features they've grown accustomed to in previous releases of OS/2—things that the WPS doesn't provide or does differently.

Another factor seems to be the amount of stress that you place on your system. If you have a fairly standard machine and limit yourself to well-known applications, LA looks reasonable. It's certainly better than any previous beta version of 2.0, and most things do work. However, not everything works. Although IBM calls LA a product, it's clearly beta code. More experienced users and developers running OS/2 under even slightly more exotic conditions will almost certainly encounter bugs.

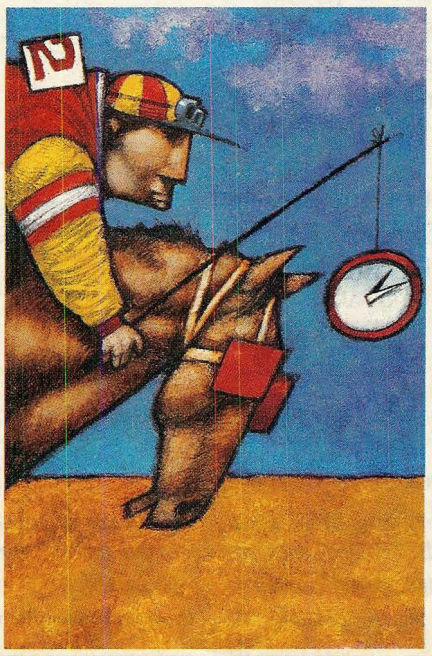
How you react to those defects depends on what you're used to. Existing OS/2 users are spoiled. They've completely forgotten what unreliable junk most of the rest of the world has to struggle with every day. I well remember how reliable OS/2 1.0 was. I just couldn't crash it. And OS/2 1.3 is nothing short of superb: It has never crashed in over a year of my daily pounding. Everything works just as designed, and it's been fast and utterly reliable for the most demanding production work. Thus, for me, a new version of OS/2 that can be crashed is a disappointment.

Those whose past experience has been with DOS or Windows will have, I suspect, a different standard of comparison. If you've been struggling with unrecoverable applications errors that crash your machine twice a day, a version of OS/2 that crashes only once a day might look pretty good.

Finally, the key advantages of version 2.0 are the multiple virtual DOS machines and the ability to run Windows applications. Obviously, these features will be of more value to people with many DOS and Windows applications. These users are, naturally, likely to be new to OS/2.

Therefore, as you evaluate reactions to the LA release, here or elsewhere, maintain a skeptical attitude. Different people may have very different experiences with LA, all valid within their own frames of reference.

A developer's reaction to the OS/2 2.0 Limited Availability release



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The OS/2 Roller Coaster

The endless roller coaster we've all been on with OS/2 for the last year makes it difficult to examine LA in any sort of detached way. At times, it has appeared that success for OS/2 was just around the corner. At other times, it has looked as though things could not get worse. Through much of last year, IBM successfully exploited discontent with Microsoft, positioning itself as the good guy. It could be trusted to stay the course and deliver on its promises.

But that wave is now coming to shore. IBM is riding it right up onto the beach. We've been standing here cheering, and it's now time for IBM to deliver. With Microsoft's NT looming on the horizon, apparently more real than many of us expected just last fall, IBM is under intense pressure. That pressure also falls on those who have bet their fortunes on OS/2.

By releasing LA, IBM has minimally kept its promise of shipping OS/2 2.0 as a product by the end of 1991. But by calling it a product, IBM has also invited some close scrutiny.

Workplace Shell a Gamble

The WPS raises some interesting questions. In its present state, it just isn't quite ready. IBM could have counted on almost certain success without the WPS, so it's fair to wonder if it should have gambled the entire version 2.0 introduction on this new and unproven technology.

continued

According to one report, IBM believes the WPS will be the one part of version 2.0 not covered by its joint development agreements with Microsoft. If the WPS succeeds, it will give IBM at least a two-year lead over Microsoft.

Whatever the reason for IBM's decision, the choice was made, and, at least in LA, there is no going back. IBM does offer tips on configuring the WPS to look similar to the old Presentation Manager (PM) shell, but the similarity is only cosmetic, not functional, and even then not very complete. (I'm told that GA may allow more complete emulation of the older interface.)

There are many reasons to like the new WPS. The desktop is easily customized with icons for your applications. The online help facility is dramatically improved, featuring a Master Help Index organized like a spiral notebook with little tabs for each letter in the alphabet. Click on a topic, and up comes a hypertext window with generally well-written explanations.

Everything is bound together with a clever drag-and-drop metaphor. To change the color of something, you drag the new color over from a rainbow palette. Changing a font is just as easy. To delete something, you just drag it to the shredder. The vision behind the WPS leads to an environment in which all sorts of tasks can be accomplished by dragging and dropping.

The Workplace Shell is more promise than reality in LA.

To fill out a form, for example, you'd drag a record out of a database and drop it onto a form.

The problem is that the WPS is more promise than reality in LA. It's not always intuitive. Ordinary operations involve various odd combinations of Shift keys and left or right buttons. A little "cheat sheet" with all the key bindings would help. Everything seems to take more keystrokes and mouse-clicks than under the old shell.

The implementation also feels fragile. A lot of the WPS "state information" is kept in extended attributes or hidden binary files with strange names. Lacking tools for repairing or even examining these structures, I worry that the slightest failure might force me to reformat and reinstall the system.

Finally, while the WPS is dramatically improved from the earlier beta versions, it's still somewhat slow and buggy. Because there's no way to avoid using it, that makes the whole system seem slow and buggy. Booting the system takes a long time, and text windows are not fully reliable. IBM has made enormous progress with the WPS since its introduction, but the question is whether there's sufficient time to fully stabilize it for GA.

DOS Boxes Overdesigned?

One nice feature of OS/2 2.0 is support for multiple virtual DOS machines. In contrast to the version 1.3 DOS box, version 2.0 lets you open as many DOS windows or full-screen sessions as you want. Each can be configured with a big memory, load

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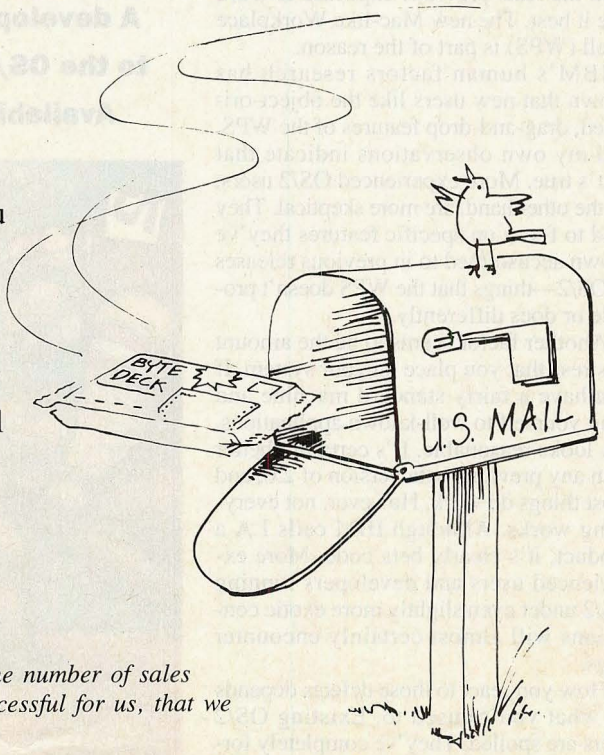

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special device drivers, and even mimic specific releases of DOS. IBM often demonstrates DOS games and other demanding software in the VDMs. Nothing in my experience with LA makes me doubt the quality of version 2.0's virtualization of DOS.

I admit, however, to a nagging concern that IBM may have overdesigned the VDMs, solving a problem that didn't really exist. Clearly, the version 1.x DOS box fell short of people's needs. Users do need extended and expanded memory, and they do want to run more than one application at a time. But how much is enough? Does it really matter whether some obscure DOS game software runs under OS/2? The world is changing, and, increasingly, it's becoming a Windows world.

A Better Windows?

Support for running Windows applications in a separate full-screen session is built into this release as the first step toward "seamless Windows" in the upcoming GA. By *seamless*, IBM means that Windows and PM applications will share a common desktop.

When I first tried the Windows support on my PS/2 Model 80, I was appalled. It couldn't even keep up with the mouse. Then I discovered that on another machine—a PS/2 Model 70—Windows ran almost indistinguishably from Windows on DOS. Eventually, I found that the problem was with the 8514/A display on my Model 80. In the DOS settings for Windows Full Screen, the default traps all the 8514/A and Extended Graphics Array calls into software; turning that off fixed the performance problem. Unfortunately, it created a different problem with screen repainting. So for now, there are still problems with 8514/A support, although I wouldn't be surprised if they'll be fixed by the time you read this.

Sources inside IBM assure me that the seamless Windows support in GA will be much faster than in LA, perhaps only 10 percent slower than Windows on DOS. They claim they've already achieved this on some of their internal versions.

Moment of Truth

On the whole, IBM might have been better off not releasing LA as a product, limited or otherwise. It's buggy, it crashes, and it's not as dependable as any previous OS/2 product release. Viewing it as a beta version, I can put these problems in perspective. But even so, I'd be more comfortable if GA weren't looming so close.

The first order of business for IBM has to be quality. An OS/2 that crashes isn't a better OS/2 than OS/2, much less anything else. Quality is and will continue to be the single biggest obstacle to gaining support from existing OS/2 users who have been spoiled by version 1.3. Businesses considering it for mission-critical applications will require rock-solid reliability.

Sources inside IBM promise me that GA will show great improvement and be all you could ask for. I trust them, I trust their judgment, and I believe they have seen internal versions that support those views. There's a good chance for IBM to achieve enormous success with a blockbuster GA release. But there's not much time left; it's going to be close. ■

Douglas A. Hamilton is the founder of Hamilton Laboratories in Wayland, Massachusetts, and the author of the Hamilton C Shell, a command processor and utilities package for OS/2. He can be reached on BIX as "hamilton."

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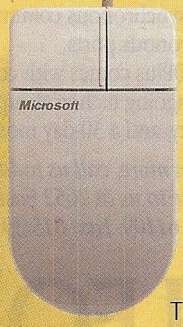

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