

But Does It Do Windows?

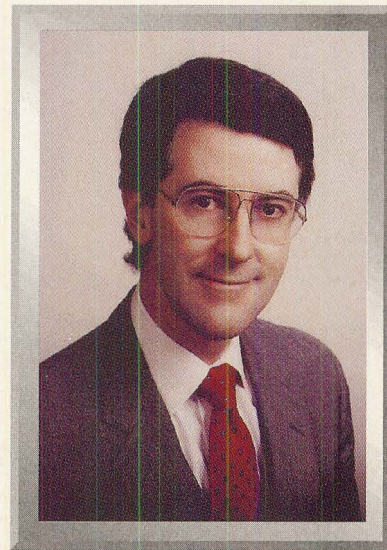
By Douglas A. Hamilton

Or perhaps we should ask, "How shall it do windows?" At very least, everyone does seem to agree that for OS/2 2.0 to be a success, it has to be able to run Windows applications.

IBM's position certainly seems unambiguous: at the New York kick-off for OS/2 2.0, IBM's Lee Reiswig made the memorable claim that it'd be "a better DOS than DOS and a better Windows than Windows" and went on to demonstrate off-the-shelf Windows 3.0 applications apparently running faster on OS/2 — right on the PM desktop — than on genuine Windows.

If IBM can actually deliver what it's promising, the success of OS/2 seems virtually assured. For example, suddenly OS/2 becomes the preferred development platform even for Windows developers. At a recent conference in New York, I listened as a number of individuals from several large banks described how they intended to move all their Windows development to OS/2 once 2.0 became available. They could develop using the better tools and environment under OS/2 and debug right on the desktop with little fear that, should their application crash, it could take down the whole system with it. From there, it seems a short step to imagine putting OS/2, not Windows, on the end-user's desktop also.

With the whole world watching, it would certainly seem uncharacteristically naive for IBM to be making these claims unless they really can deliver. Nonetheless, there are some who do remain skeptical. In private conversations with officials at the "other" OS/2 company, I've heard claims that all of us are misreading IBM's statements, that hidden in deliberately vague language of IBM's press release is the admission that IBM's initial 2.0 release will not contain Windows 3.0 compatibility. The Windows support is in a later 2.0 release. These individuals go on to claim that IBM is simply wrong: they'll never be able to get it to work.

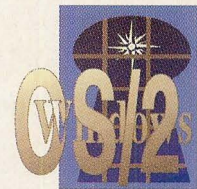


Giving the devil his due, it is true that even inside IBM, where the 2.0 beta release is freely available simply for the asking, no one outside the group actually building the Windows compatibility feature seems to be able to get a copy. According to one source inside IBM, three alternate schemes for implementing Windows compatibility are being considered and a final decision has not been made.

If 2.0 is as close to general availability as we've been led to believe, and with as large a beta program as IBM has instituted, it does seem suspicious that the Windows support is so conspicuously missing.

What is it that's so difficult about running Windows applications? According to one Microsoft engineer I spoke with, when they first began looking at building this into OS/2, they quickly discovered ten hard problems, of which only seven appeared to have solutions. An example given to me was the seemingly simple desire to have only a single cursor on the screen. Since both Presentation Manager and Windows like to draw their own cursors, it's easy to see how, if you simply tried to run Windows inside a virtual DOS machine on the PM desktop, you could end up with two cursors.

Microsoft's initial plan was to offer the Binary Compatibility Layer (BCL) to run unmodified Windows applications on top of an emulation layer that could translate Windows calls into PM equivalents. This



was to be paired with the Software Migration Kit (SMK) for help porting from Windows to a true PM application. But as the technical problems mounted and, perhaps coincidentally, as their business strategy changed to focus more on Windows as the preferred graphics applications programming interface (API), these initial plans were scrapped.

Today, Microsoft is touting Windows Libraries for OS/2 (WLO), which to me looks like what I thought the SMK was supposed to be. The idea is that a Windows vendor should rebuild his application using these libraries to run on PM.

In fairness, the final WLO release isn't out yet so it may be premature to complain about performance. But I'm going to anyway. It's miserable. To show off what can be done with WLO, Microsoft packages with it a series of "applets," including Windows Solitaire and others, all of which have been ported with WLO to PM. They're all tediously slow.

The bigger problem is simply the reality of the market, however. The whole idea is supposed to be that by providing a means for end-users to run Windows applications on OS/2, suddenly OS/2 becomes much more desirable not only because they can run any new Windows applications they buy but also they can run the ones they have.

WLO is not a way to achieve that. First, it requires people to buy new applications. If you just got through buying them only a year ago, it's not obvious to me that you're going to be happy having to buy new ones again today.

Second, and really, more important, it requires the Windows vendors to do a port. It requires them to actually sit down with OS/2 and learn it and do their



development on it. It would be bad enough if they were enthused about doing that. But let's face it: the Windows folks feel pretty vindicated in their belief that OS/2 is a big flop. As a vendor of tools for OS/2, if there were Windows vendors out there that were interested in OS/2, I think I'd hear from them from time to time. I don't. So waiting for ports to be done using WLO doesn't seem likely to produce many OS/2 applications at your favorite Egghead any time soon.

Finally, we might wonder whether Microsoft's position isn't based on something other than purely technical factors. It's been fairly widely reported that, coming on the heels of the enormous suc-

cess of Windows, they've begun to think of the Windows, not the PM API as strategic. Their upcoming portable OS/2 3.0 is expected to stress Windows as the preferred interface. Perhaps when they concluded there were insurmountable problems running Windows applications on OS/2 they just weren't trying hard enough. I can say this: my experience has been that betting something's impossible is dangerous business.

My own bet, which I place with awareness that I could be wrong, is that IBM is not bluffing: they really will deliver. Too much is at stake and, I believe, they know it. ■

Douglas A. Hamilton is the founder and president of Hamilton Laboratories in Wayland, Massachusetts and the author of Hamilton C shell, an advanced interactive command processor and tools package for OS/2.



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