Stardate 6.149

Winners, Losers, and Telling the Difference

By Douglas A. Hamilton

I have seen the future and it may not be called the Starship Enterprise, but it does run OS/2.

For the last couple weeks, I've been running IBM's latest beta release of OS/2 2.0. This build, numbered 6.149, is a dramatic improvement over the 6.123 release that Microsoft delivered in February. That February build was so dreadful, I was able to put up with it on my own machine for only three hours before giving in in disgust. It was painfully slow and riddled with grossly obvious bugs.

All those are problems of the past. The 6.149 build is virtually as solid and as fast as OS/2 1.3. If you're wondering if IBM can really deliver on their promises (and if the tape I mentioned last month didn't convince you), 6.149 should prove the point. Don't misunderstand, some things are missing still — no Windows compatibility yet, for example — but what's there is a platform of impressive quality, certainly enough to satisfy me that IBM should be able to bolt on the remaining subsystems with good assurance that it will all work.

The only bug I found was in the 8514 display driver DLL, which caused some text windowed applications to crash inexplicably. Having paid for and gotten addicted to the higher resolution, dropping back to VGA mode wasn't one of my favorite things, but it did fix the problem. And certainly, I'm satisfied this is the sort of minor problem — probably a one-line bug someplace — that will be gone by general availability.

Installation is much improved. It starts up in a text mode but switches over to a PM display after the first couple disks. All of the config.sys parameters are adjustable by pointing and clicking and online help is pretty good. You get a chance to click on the individual features — Virtual DOS machines, games, REXX, online documentation, etc. — you want loaded and there's an indication beside each of how much space will be required. As it copies files to your disk, it continuously updates a bar graph showing percent complete. The concept and general format are excellent. This may well be the best installation procedure for a complex system you or I will have ever seen.

There were some rough edges, however. One problem I had was that it complained I didn't have enough free space on my C: drive to install everything I'd requested and there was no indication of how much total space it thought it needed nor how much was available. While it does show sizes for the optional items (so you could manually add those up), it does not show how much mandatory stuff it needs to install. I found myself in a long, trial-and-error loop, opening a command window (thankfully available as a pull-down option), sloshing another megabyte or so from C: to somewhere else, hoping that'd be enough (but really having no way of knowing), trying again, and finding it was still complaining.

More annoying was to find that after the install had finished, there were still 12 megabytes available on C:! Apparently, I was not the only one who had no idea how much space it actually needed.

There's a new wrinkle to dual-booting in this build: Multiple Operating System Tool, or MOST. The idea is that you have a special one-megabyte partition holding MOST and that when you boot up, it asks which of several partitions you'd really like to boot from. That way you can select between any number of different operating systems — DOS, OS/2, AIX or whatever — or different releases of the same system.

To me, MOST seemed like a bit of a mess. The idea of having to repartition was not enticing. The documentation seemed very confusing. Under MOST, depending on how you set it up, you end up with several C: drives, only one of which is actually visible and accessible depending on what operating system you boot. You have to decide ahead of time how big each of those partitions should be. If you make one too small to hold the system you're trying to install, you're back to step one. If you make it too large, that space is wasted when you're running anything else. And since one reason I might want to boot one system is to fix up a mistake I've made in the configuration of another, not being able to access the other system's files is a drawback.

What I chose to do was to put both OS/2 1.3 and 2.0 onto the same C: partition but to have only one of them called \OS2 at a time and to dual boot to DOS to rename the directories and slosh the appropriate files in and out of the root. I admit, this is messy also, but for me it was a slightly better solution.

Once past the installation, 6.149 is rock-solid. I've had a ball, for example, running a little DOS graphics clock program on my PM desktop that draws a map of the world, showing what part is in daylight and what is in night. Not surprisingly, things do run a little slower in a window than full-screen, but not objectionably so, and, in any event, you can move a DOS application back and forth between the PM desktop and full screen even while it runs.

Performance is very good. I've done a fair amount of tuning of my 1.3 system to find the optimum cache sizes, etc., and almost no tuning yet of 2.0. Nonetheless, 2.0 consistently seemed to be at least as fast as 1.3.
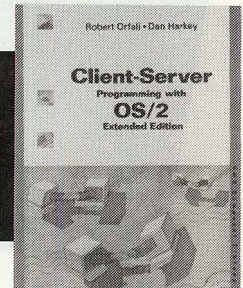
At this point, I believe those of us betting on a very successful 2.0 release this fall will not be disappointed. Yes, there is more to be done before general availability. But 6.149 certainly makes it clear IBM has some sharp engineers with a good eye for quality who know what they're doing. ◾