

Better Windows?

BY DOUGLAS A. HAMILTON

IBM Rolls the Dice with OS/2's Workplace Shell



For three years, success for Operating System/2 has always seemed to be just around the corner. Trouble is, every time IBM has turned a corner, there's been another corner.

The most recent disappointment was learning that GA (for "General Availability," IBM-ese for the date when those big stacks of 2.0 will appear in every local Egghead) slipped three more months. Actually, that was two disappointments in one, since it also meant Steve Ballmer would not be dining on diskette after all.

Those of us rooting for OS/2 could at least comfort ourselves in one belief: Even if IBM did only exactly what they'd promised and nothing more, OS/2's success was still in the bag. They'd have to really screw up right at the end to blow it. The one thing none of us could have imagined was that IBM was about to fundamentally change OS/2's whole user interface.

I was an exhibitor at an IBM tools conference in Florida. When we checked in, we each got a copy of the 6F.167 beta of OS/2 2.0. I couldn't wait to boot it, and I trust most other vendors felt the same way because people don't believe your product will be compatible with the next release unless you actually demo it. But hey, with every new beta getting better and better, how difficult would that be?

The unexpected answer was, "Very difficult, indeed" because the introduction of Workplace Shell (WPS). WPS looks very much like a Macintosh. You get things done by grabbing icons, dragging them around the desktop and dropping them on other icons. To print a file, you drag it to the printer. To edit, you drag it to the editor. To delete, you drag it to the shredder. IBM envisions a world in which the drag and drop metaphor will extend into every application.

This is powerful stuff, potentially a genuine revolution in useability. If IBM is successful with WPS, it could leave Windows gasping in the dust.

That's the promise. The reality in 6F.167 is that WPS is very, very buggy: It crashes frequently, it's not finished and a number of critical features don't work. For example, there's no way to minimize running applications to the desktop. Everything disappears, returning to the folder from which it was started, making it difficult to tell at a glance what's running.

Worse, it's not always intuitive. If you'd like to "question the machine" (ask it how it works, try some experiments, get the answer and then depend on getting the same answer next time), WPS doesn't want to cooperate. Things will suddenly and mysteriously stop

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working. Recently, for example, I suddenly found the program template wouldn't work and had to reboot to get it going again.

Jim West, IBM's marketing manager for OS/2, admits being asked by one skeptical customer, "Why are you doing this to us?" That sentiment was echoed, often in more earthy language, by many of the vendors I spoke with in Florida, who are struggling to master this system well enough to demo on it.

West's response is that this is usually just the initial reaction and that anyone who really gives it a chance should find "it's really quite fun to drive." That may be a fair appraisal. As I myself have begun to isolate some specific bugs that caused my own difficulties, I'm more inclined to concede that WPS is a better design.

Still, if "better" were all that mattered, OS/2 would have been a success three years ago. So the question is, will it not only be better, but also something people will like? And will they spend the

time (and money) to find out?

What I can say without equivocation is that this is a gutsy move for IBM. It's a reach for the stars. It's the kind of shimmering, original, fundamental rethinking we expect from a Steve Jobs, not anyone with an IBM badge.

It's also a big risk. IBM had a solid success in the bag if it did "merely" everything it had promised. My sources confirm that WPS is now the critical path item for 2.0. There's no backup. If it doesn't work, there's no fallback to an older 1.x-style interface.

Against that big risk IBM is taking, and after a lot of wresting with the question, I'm going to take my own little risk and guess that the problems will get fixed and that WPS will lead us into the next desktop revolution. ■

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