

# Better Windows?

BY DOUGLAS A. HAMILTON

## The Deadline was the End of the Year...Did They Make It?

**M**Y INFORMAL and very unscientific poll tells me there's serious disagreement about whether IBM really did achieve limited availability (LA) of OS/2 2.0 by year-end 1991.

People do seem to agree on the facts. The final 6.177H release for LA did get built by Christmas Eve. It did run DOS applications just fine and Windows applications in a full-screen standard-mode session. It did come with a short list of compatible clone systems, but no mention of specific clone parts—motherboards, display and disk controllers, etc.—that were supported. Over the New Year's holiday, IBM's systems engineers around the country were busy downloading OS/2 2.0 from IBM's mainframe network, hand-duplicating the diskettes for selected customers. Shrinkwrap versions were scheduled to come off the line by January 15.

But availability was very limited: you could not, for

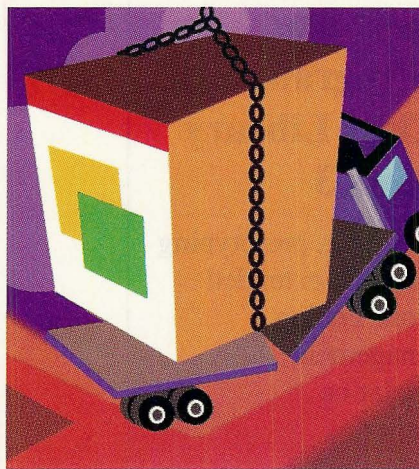
example, buy the LA release at any dealer, nor even by calling IBM's 800 number. According to IBM-ers I spoke with, the LA release was offered only to specific customers with what IBM considered to be a mission-critical need. Still, as Jim Gilliland, manager of tax systems at BP America, pointed out, it's a product, not a beta, meaning that IBM's support organization is ready to stand behind it, to accept bug reports and fix them.

So, I ask you, did they make it? Personally, I'm uneasy. IBM reps duplicating disks by hand for selected customers doesn't sound like a product release to me. And when it's not the customer who decides whether to buy, but IBM that decides whether to sell isn't my definition of "available"—limited or otherwise.

Am I being picky? Sure, but IBM management had to know—when they made repeated, unmistakable promises that OS/2 2.0 would be shipping by year-end—that the whole world was going to sit up and watch. When IBM announced the change in plans at Comdex, they had a chance to come clean if year-end availability wasn't what they meant: it's what accountants call the "Big Bath" theory—getting the bad news out all at once. But that's not what IBM did. They left the impression that anyone who wanted OS/2 2.0, albeit without seamless Windows, could have it and could get it before 1992.

IBM has surely made a Herculean effort. But I think it's only fair that observers look critically and factor what they see in to their estimates about the future. This is business, and that's something IBM must understand.

Last fall, when the 6.149 beta came out, it was tempting to compare it to the earlier 6.123 beta Microsoft had issued in the spring and to marvel over the stability and



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performance improvements IBM had made. We could imagine straight-line extrapolations out to the end of the year and expect with confidence that 2.0 would be an absolutely remarkable product, that it would arrive on time with outstanding performance and that it would be utterly reliable.

But I'm troubled about the fact that ever since the introduction of Workplace Shell (WPS) into 2.0 at the 6.167 beta, it's been difficult to see the same steady progress. I found that first release of WPS buggy and barely usable, but after listening to arguments from colleagues and folks at IBM, I decided to give it the benefit of the doubt. After all, it was just beta code—and the very first release at that. Consider the vision, I was asked, and consider also the rate at which they'd made progress up to that point.

The vision is impressive. The idea, for example, of dragging a record from a database onto a form and having all the data deposited automatically into the right

fields is almost magical. I'll stand by my past remarks—if IBM can make it work, they'll revolutionize the desktop.

But IBM also took an enormous risk by making WPS a critical path item for OS/2 2.0. To my knowledge, no one's ever said he didn't buy OS/2 because it didn't look enough like a Mac. I'm convinced that if IBM had done "merely" everything else they'd promised for 2.0, success was in the bag.

My sense is that WPS has jeopardized that. It's been such a major undertaking that it's deflected management and engineering attention away from other, more pedestrian issues. Quality has not been improving at the same steady rate. I haven't yet seen the final LA build, but I have confirmed that the immediate predecessor 6.175 build was still somewhat buggy. It crashes. Some of the bugs—e.g., in 8514 support—were known last summer and still not fixed.

Over a period of only two months, OS/2 betas went out with three different 32-bit

executable formats. Basic tools like the C compiler for the previous formats wouldn't run on the new builds of the system, and updated tools for the new formats weren't released. It became impossible to do development under 2.0. The problem is compounded for WPS, which depends on the notion of applications that cooperate in the drag-and-drop metaphor. "WPS is going to be an oddity unless there are application tools to go with it," argues Gilliland.

The installation procedure improved in some respects, but it degenerated in others. The procedure is graphical, and you can point and click on the

options you want. But 2.0 is just enormous. The LA release consists of 20 high-density disks filled with compressed files, all in one big install. (By comparison, OS/2 1.3 was 10 disks and even 6.149 was only 13.) OS/2 2.0 cries out to be split up into manageable chunks, perhaps five or six disks apiece for the base OS, virtual DOS machines, Windows support and sample applications.

Bill Langlais, OS/2 special-interest group coordinator for the Boston Computer Society, offered his own criterion for a successful LA release: "I expect this to be a usable system for an end user. Up until now, none of them have been." I think that's a fair test and a fair appraisal of all the betas.

So we come back to the question we started off with. Did IBM make it? You can imagine how desperately I'd like to answer in the affirmative. With four years of my life, all my savings and a lot of hard work invested in OS/2, I surely am rooting for IBM. But I have a queasy feeling that tells me that isn't the way it played out. ■

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