

Wayland writer for IBM

For the average computer user, a new operating system creates a lot of headaches.



Sharon Machlis
ON LINE

Should you buy the new one or stick with your old one? Will the old one become obsolete? Will your old SOFTWARE become obsolete? How much time will you have to waste learning the new system?

But for people like Douglas Hamilton, a new operating system is an opportunity.

So, when IBM launched the OS/2 operating system for its new line of PCs, he decided to create a new product for it.

"If you do something for OS/2, right now you can pick anything you want and be the only one doing it," he said. "You're not right up against the big guys."

That's a much more attractive scenario for an entrepreneur than trying to write software for the crowded MS-DOS arena.

In fact, it was attractive enough that a year and a half ago, Hamilton left his job at Prime Computer Inc. to begin working full-time in

his Wayland home on "the Hamilton shell" for OS/2.

A shell is kind of an overlay on top of an operating system. It allows users to type commands they're familiar with and make the operating system do more with fewer keystrokes. The operating system is a computer's "master software" that controls the running of other programs.

Most engineers who use workstations that run the UNIX operating system have a UNIX shell. Hamilton hopes the same will become true for technical users who opt to run OS/2.

As far as he knows, he has the only shell for OS/2.

"It looks like this product is unique," he says.

At \$350 a piece, the Hamilton Shell is not for the casual business user who just bought a new IBM PS/2 personal computer that's running OS/2. Instead, Hamilton is aiming for the technical user — particularly those who, like him, have decided to write new software for the OS/2 operating system.

That should allow success, if it comes, to come sooner, since Hamilton doesn't have to wait for OS/2 to catch on with the general public and begin pitching his product.

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Programming the OS/2 software

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uct to the masses; he merely has to wait for OS/2 to become big among software developers.

OS/2 has gotten a lot of bad press from those who claim it is clunky, bug-ridden and simply another attempt by Big Blue to control the computer marketplace. Despite that, most serious observers expect it will eventually catch on, although take longer than IBM's and Microsoft's optimistic predictions. (Microsoft authored both MS/DOS and OS/2 for IBM).

Hamilton says the OS/2 bad-mouthing is unjustified, and he believes much of it comes from people who have never actually used it for any length of time.

"OS/2 is a hell of a productive system," he says.

It is measurably faster than its predecessor, MS/DOS, he says. It allows you to have different programs and commands running at different times. And, he says it is much more stable than UNIX systems, which often crash every couple of days.

A major problem with OS/2 is that it requires so much internal memory — 2 megabytes (millions of bytes) is a reasonable starting point, when the typical PC sold today has 640 kilobytes (thousands of bytes). An unexpected surge in the price of computer memory, due to a world-wide shortage of memory chips, is hampering the public's desire to buy systems with enough memory to take advantage of OS/2. Until then, prices for computer memory — like for overall computers performance — had been dropping.

But he believes the rise in memory prices is a short-term thing, "one of those aberrations like fuel lines in the '70s."

Once memory-packed PCs be-

come more affordable again, he believes OS/2 will become the operating system of choice on "everyman's desktop for the early '90s."

For Hamilton, OS/2 offers the opportunity to have IBM help publicize his product. Because there are so few products yet that use OS/2's capabilities, IBM is eager to help get the word out about whatever is out there. That's something IBM would never have to do for MS-DOS.

Hamilton is shipping the first copies of his shell this week. He is still working at home, producing copies of his program on his own computer. Eventually, if the business takes off, he expects he'll have to rent office space and hire staff. That will be a mixed blessing, he admits, since he has enjoyed his home office.

While the average computer programmer turns out 2,000 lines of code in a year and in his best year at Prime he wrote 10,000, the software he wrote over the past 14 months contains 35,000 lines of code.

That's not only because of the greater motivation that comes from working for himself, he says, but because there have been so few interruptions. He doesn't have to write status reports, and there's no one looking over his shouldertelling him to do the project a different way.

"It's been 14 months of nothing but sitting here and typing away," he said. ...

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