

OS/2 News

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New OS/2 Beta Turns Heads At Spring Comdex

On May 23rd, 1994, IBM released to the general public the latest beta version of their strategic 32-bit operating system, the "4-meg optimized" OS/2 Performance Beta. 6 days later, it went on to win "Best

Of Show" at the Atlanta Comdex

1994. The highly unusual (and unprecedented) decision by the judges to award

"Best Of Show" to a

"beta" release has many in the industry

wondering exactly

what this beta is all about, and what it means for the future of OS/2 and

all other 32-bit operating systems.

The Performance Beta is IBM's attempt at making OS/2 an operating system for the masses, and in that regard it is a direct competitor of the yet-to-be-released "Chicago" from Microsoft. OS/2 Performance Beta has been optimized for 4 MB desktop or notebook PCs that are already running Windows 3.1, and it retains all the advantages of

Windows 3.1 while adding a host of new features. The Performance Beta installs over top of an existing Windows 3.1 setup and transforms the machine into a sophisticated 32-bit, object-oriented operating system capable of "true" pre-emptive multitasking and multimedia. Everything good you've heard about OS/2 applies to this beta (multitasking, object-oriented to the extreme, excellent Windows 3.1 and DOS compatibility), and much of the "bad"

(high

memory requirements,

poor device driver support,

clumsy install)

has been removed or

fixed. The OS/2 Performance Beta

pre-emptively multi-

tasks DOS apps (even

Doom and X-wing!),

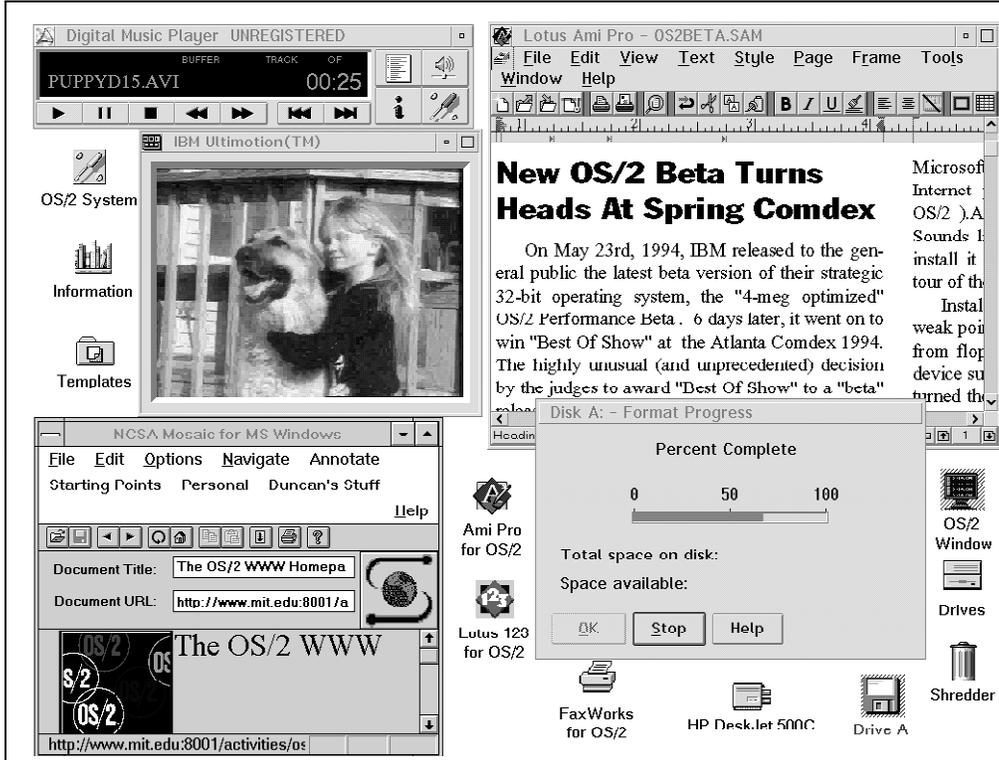
Windows apps (including the newest

Office apps from

Microsoft) and native OS/2 apps (such as IBM's Internet package and the Lotus SmartSuite for OS/2).

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Microsoft) and native OS/2 apps (such as IBM's Internet package and the Lotus SmartSuite for OS/2). All this on a 4MB machine or notebook! Sounds like a dream come true, but you have to install it first.... and that's where we'll begin this tour of the new Performance beta.

Installation has always been one of OS/2's weak points. The combination of a confusing "boot from floppy" procedure and admittedly lackluster

device support from major hardware

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vendors often turned the install into a nightmare for people with non-standard or "weird" hardware combinations. It is pretty obvious that IBM has been listening to these complaints. The Performance Beta install, although still requiring a "re-boot" from floppy, is much less confusing and has much more "built-in" support for accelerated video cards and non-SCSI CD-ROM drives, as well as an expanded list of printer drivers, including the newest ink-jets from Canon and Hewlett-Packard. This beta include full-function and accelerated 32-bit SVGA drivers for the following cards and chipsets: ATI Mach32, Cirrus 542x, Compaq QVision, IBM Thinkpad 750, S3 801/805/928, STB S3, S3 911/924, Tseng ET4000, Trident 8900C, Weitek P9000, as well as all the drivers currently available in OS/2 2.1. It also now includes built-in support for inexpensive non-SCSI CD-ROM setups such as the Mitsumi series, Creative Labs' OmniCD, the Sony series, the Phillips series, the Panasonic series and IBM's own ISA CD-ROM. In addition, a number of new SCSI drives have been added to the list currently supported by OS/2 2.1. The README that comes with the beta includes a wealth of information on configuring these drives with all sorts of sound-card/CD-ROM combinations. SCSI support for the PAS-16 SCSI connector has also been added, but must be downloaded from a BBS. The multimedia portion of the beta includes drivers for any SoundBlaster or ProAudio Spectrum (or compatible) sound card. Drivers for the Gravis UltraSound are available separately. If you are installing OS/2 on a notebook or portable computer that has APM (advanced power management) features, IBM has not forgotten you. This beta includes support for the APM 1.0 specification, which is widely implemented in the Acer, AST (Dell), Compaq, Gateway, ThinkPad, NCR, Sharp, Toshiba and Zenith brands of notebooks. PCMCIA "hot-plug" support and socket services has also been expanded to include newer models from IBM, Toshiba, AST

and others. The install program also has a new "look and feel": icons have been improved, the "path" through the options has been simplified, and it now includes an option for "previewing" CONFIG.SYS and AUTOEXEC.BAT changes. Overall, this Beta is far easier to install and configure on almost any hardware. The README is an excellent resource for any "gotchas" : IBM seems to have tested this beta to the extreme before releasing it. Also, the previous flexibility of configuring the install for "Boot Manager" or "Dual Boot" has been retained: you can easily install OS/2 and have it co-exist with your other operating systems, including Windows NT, DOS, Windows 3.x, or Linux. Uninstalling a copy of OS/2 that has been installed with either "Dual Boot" or "Boot Manager" is also easy: simply re-boot to your other operating system and delete all the OS/2-specific files.

Installing OS/2 is still not perfect. I would have liked a few more "warnings" during the install about the effect my choices were having on OS/2. For instance, if you choose not to install REXX (OS/2's system-wide macro language), the install program should warn you that many products require REXX to be installed. Also, if you check off "Serviceability and Diagnostics Aids", the program should warn that this will slow down OS/2's performance. The FDISK program that you are thrown into if you choose to install OS/2 using Boot Manager should be a bit more friendly and instructive. IBM still doesn't run any "infomercials" during the installation: these reminders to register the product and overviews of its new features are a good way to distract the installer from the monotony of the "floppy shuffle". Finally, for some strange reason, the excellent "Multimedia Mahjongg" game that comes with OS/2 still has to be installed separately. I've yet to understand why IBM hides such a fantastic part of their operating system. On the same note, the multimedia portion of OS/2 is **"This version of OS/2 runs faster on a 4 MB machine than OS/2 2.1 runs on a 8MB machine"**

still installed separately (more on multimedia later).

Once you've installed OS/2, re-boot and after a few minutes of anxious disk activity, the OS/2 WorkPlace Shell appears. The first time you boot OS/2 Performance Beta after an install, the boot seems to take a long time. However, subsequent boots are much faster, since the first boot requires extensive "building" of the objects that make up the highly object-oriented WorkPlace Shell. Once it is up, however, past users of OS/2 will notice that IBM has improved many aspects of the appearance of the WorkPlace Shell in this beta. This includes a more pleasant-looking default scheme, extensive use of new 3-D icons for many of the objects, and new drag-n-drop customization features for the sophisticated WorkPlace Shell. Again, IBM seems to have focussed on the weak points of OS/2's OOU (object-oriented user interface) while retaining its strengths. The Mac-like intuitiveness of OS/2's WorkPlace Shell, along with its extensive use of the right-mouse button and context menus, and powerful customization options for running those misbehaved DOS and Windows apps, continue to make the WorkPlace Shell a joy to use.

The Scheme and Colour Palettes, which are OS/2's object-oriented "drag-n-drop" equivalents of the Windows 3.x "Desktop" and "Colours" control panels, have been expanded to include a wider range of options and defaults. As well, the ability to customize the desktop through "drag-n-drop" operations has been extended to include operations such as changing the background bitmap for ANY folder, including the Desktop: simply "drag" the bitmap file from the Drives object and "drop" it on the Settings page for that folder's background.

So much for the cosmetic improvements. Most of the functional improvements in this beta (outside of the expanded device support noted above) involve DOS and Windows emulation. A new "Fast-Load" option has been added to the Windows 3.1 emulation settings folder. By checking off this option, you can now specify that OS/2 load a small piece of Windows code during the boot. With this "Fast Load" option enabled, Windows apps load about 75-100% faster under this beta. Although this option slows down your boot time by about 5-10 seconds, it is worth it for those users who run many Windows apps under OS/2.

A new setting for DOS sessions under OS/2 has also been added. The user can now over-ride OS/2's

system-managed priority settings for any DOS app. This setting is accessible by clicking the right-mouse button on the DOS apps icon and going into "DOS Settings". Personally, I like to let OS/2 do the multi-tasking, but for those who need this functionality, it's there.

For those users who rarely use the Adobe Type Manager support added by OS/2 to your Windows programs (in other words, if you only ever use True Type fonts under Windows), there is now a setting for turning off the ATM support. This reduces the load times of your Windows apps. Once again, this feature is accessed using the right-mouse button and the Settings notebook.

Probably the most dramatic "feature" added to this beta is PERFORMANCE! I guess that's why IBM's internal name for this beta was WARP. This beta is FAST! I initially installed this beta on a 4MB 486-25SX just to see if IBM's claims about speed improvements held any water. I was so impressed by the speed of this beta on a 4 MB machine that I toyed with the idea of selling the rest of my memory SIMMs and pocketing the difference. I don't know how IBM did it, but this version of OS/2 runs faster on a 4 MB machine than OS/2 2.1 runs on a 8MB machine. I was particularly impressed by the speed of "navigation"-type activities. Opening folders, dragging objects, launching applications, moving files: all of these activities are lightning-fast. The boot-up times are a bit faster, but not remarkably different. IBM is **"Compulsive net-surfers will be able to stay up all night with this new beta: Mosaic loaded and ran fine"**

rumoured to be changing the boot-loader to full 32-bit, multi-threaded code: this should dramatically reduce boot time.

However, if you are going to be running more than 1 or 2 applications simultaneously, and if those apps are large Windows or OS/2 apps, I would recommend getting 8 MB of memory. When I started putting the beta through its paces on the 4 MB machine, I soon realized that 8 MB was a more workable memory configuration. Beyond 8 MB, however, I didn't get the same bang-for-the-memory-buck (I tried memory configurations from

4 MB to 16 MB). Overall, if you are going to be running this new OS/2, spend enough money to get to 8 MB, and then look at other bottlenecks like CPU, hard-drive speed, and video performance.

Once I had moved to 8 MB, I was able to run through my testing painlessly and with very few crashes. The system for these tests was a 486-66 with 8 MB of RAM and a 340 MB hard-drive. It has a Mitsumi FX-001D CD-ROM and a Pro-Audio Spectrum 16 soundcard. An additional 212 MB hard-drive is attached to the SCSI port on my Pro-Audio card. The printer was a HP DeskJet 500C. All of my peripherals were detected and automatically installed by OS/2 during the install procedure. I did have to install SVGA support for my S3 video card separately, but the 32-bit OS/2 drivers were included with the beta. The only driver I had to download separately was the driver to activate the SCSI port on the ProAudio.

This is BETA code, so I expected a few weird errors and some crashes. The Performance Beta, however, surprised me with its stability. My first test involved running DOOM full-screen while downloading at 14,400 bps from a BBS connection in the background. The Performance beta ran without a hitch, transferring data at 1600 cps while maintaining smooth game-play in DOOM. Next, I loaded Excel 4.0 and Word 2.0c (I don't have the newer versions) in order to test OLE (Object Linking And Embedding) and Windows compatibility. Neither application had any problems and I successfully embedded an Excel 4.0 spreadsheet in the Word document using OLE. My next test of Windows compatibility involved running the Windows Multimedia Player in a seamless OS/2 window. Once again, no problems, although the CANYON.MID file that comes with Windows was a bit jumpy. I then tried to load the Pocket Mixer app that comes with my ProAudio Spectrum-16 card. Whoops! A GPF (General Protection Fault) resulted. At first it appeared that the entire system was halted, but after repeated CTRL-ESCs to get the Windows List, I was able to shut down the Windows session and return to the OS/2 desktop. I tried changing a few of the settings for the Pocket Recorder, but to no avail: it won't work. Strangely, the README that comes with the beta cautions that the Windows Multimedia Player won't work, yet it did. Finishing up my Windows tests, I tried

Crosstalk for Windows, Windows Compuserve Information Manager, Win Fax Lite 3.0, and Visual Basic 3.0 Pro. All of these applications performed flawlessly. It is evident that the excellent Windows 3.1 compatibility of OS/2 2.1 has been retained in this beta release.

I was a little disappointed to see that IBM has still not included Windows 3.11 and Windows For WorkGroups compatibility in this beta. The rumour on the Internet, however, is that this Beta is the first of a series, with Win32s, VxD and Windows For WorkGroups compatibility on the list for the future betas and the final release.

As was previously mentioned, DOOM ran fine under this beta. Other DOS games that I tested also ran: Halloween Harry, Raptor, Monster Bash, Xargon, Epic Pinball, and Blake Stone. Getting sound and joystick support under Raptor was a bit of a challenge: I had to settle for Music only (no Sound FX) and no joystick. I tried the OS/2 settings that Apogee includes with Raptor but it made no difference. I was unable to get Comanche: Maximum

Overkill to run under OS/2, **"This beta has a few strange yet harmless bugs"**

but I can't get that game to run under DOS without booting from a floppy. As for CD-ROM games, Iron Helix ran but Rebel Assault did not. Overall, I would rate DOS emulation under this beta as excellent. Again, this attribute seems to have been inherited from OS/2 2.1.

My final test run involved native OS/2 applications. I installed the entire Lotus SmartSuite for OS/2 (Release 1.0a) as well as Lotus Notes 3.0c.. I loaded and printed large documents under all four apps and the OS/2 beta performed without a hiccup. I also tested the "drag-n-drop" printing feature of Ami Pro: this allows you to drag the document right out of Ami Pro onto the OS/2 printer object. No crash, but quite a bit of disk activity. FootPrint Works for OS/2 loaded and ran fine, as did all my miscellaneous OS/2 shareware image-viewers and multimedia apps. Finally, I installed TCP/IP for OS/2 and loaded Mosaic for Windows (2.0a). I am happy to report that compulsive net-surfers will be able to stay up all night with this new beta: Mosaic loaded and ran fine. A word of caution though: the

latest versions of Mosaic are Win32s apps and will not run under any versions of OS/2. The last version to work is 2.0a. Happily, IBM is planning an OS/2-native version of a WWW browser.

OS/2 applications that did cause problems include the popular ZOC shareware communications program. Version 1.30 of this app hangs the first time it is launched. However, shutting it down through the task-list and then immediately restarting it seems to solve the problem. As well, Watcom's excellent VX-REXX for OS/2 (a multi-threaded, 32-bit visual application builder similar to Visual Basic) crashed occasionally under this beta, particularly when saving projects. A patch is freely available to fix this problem under OS/2 2.1, but it did not seem to work under the beta. I hope IBM and Watcom solve this problem, since VX-REXX is definitely one of OS/2's "killer" apps.

Under the heading of "General Weirdness", this beta has a few strange yet harmless bugs. The "expand" and "collapse" icons in the Drives folder sometimes become transparent, making folder navigation in the Drives folder difficult. The beta also seems to "beep" at the user occasionally. I never really figured out what it was beeping about, but it was a little annoying.

The Multimedia part of OS/2 (MMPM/2) is also part of this new beta. The multimedia extensions to OS/2 are installed separately using two diskettes that come with the beta. Hopefully IBM will integrate multimedia into the initial installation program when this version is released. Once installed, however, I was impressed with this beta's multimedia capabilities. It includes device support for all SoundBlaster and SoundBlaster-compatibles, as well as the ProAudio Spectrum series and IBM's own ACPA card. CD-Audio support and Software Motion Video are also part of the package, making this the most complete Multimedia extension package of almost any operating system. The Software Motion Video is particularly impressive. This feature allows OS/2 users to playback Indeo- and Ultimotion-format AVIs on their system without any hardware assistance (except for a sound card, of course). The Ultimotion format is superior to most other video-formats since it utilizes OS/2's multi-threading abilities to produce more reliable and "synchronized" video clip playback. Given that IBM has now made the

Ultimotion format royalty-free, and is beta-testing a Windows 3.x-compatible Ultimotion player, many AVI files in the Ultimotion format should begin to appear.

What improvements have been made to MMPM/2 in this beta? Basically, all the bug fixes that were included in the MMPM/2 CSD (Corrective Service Diskettes) are included. Overall, the performance is smoother and less prone to strange bugs. Feature-wise, the MMPM/2 part of this beta is identical to OS/2 2.1. What's missing? I would have like to have seen the ability to playback FLI and FLC files included (Autodesk format), since a free-ware program to add this format to MMPM/2 exists (and was written by an IBM employee!). Also missing is MPEG support, though separate MPEG players are available for OS/2. On the plus side, IBM's recent technology agreement with Kodak should mean that Photo-CD support will be added to the final release.

I do have a few complaints about the beta. The on-line tutorial, though comprehensive, could use an overhaul. It should include the multimedia aspects of OS/2. Given OS/2's richness of features, I would LOVE to see a "Tip Of The Day" feature that the user could enable. This feature would give random hints each time the system is booted up. What a great way to learn the all the "neat" tricks that are part of OS/2. I'd would like to see more of the 3-D icons that cropped up in this beta. IBM has to realize that people want to have a visually appealing environment to operate within. The "Productivity" applets that IBM includes with OS/2 and this beta are still a waste of disk space. IBM should realize that excellent replacements for these applications exist: shareware apps and EWS. IBM could licence the shareware for next-to-nothing (think of the vast distribution and lucrative upgrades the author would get) and the EWS is free to IBM: EWS stands for "Employee Written Software"; in other words, OS/2 apps written by IBM's own employees. Finally, and this would be a bold step forward for IBM, an "Internet Starter Kit" should be bundled with each copy of OS/2. The Internet (and its successors) are the future of computing. IBM already has excellent TCP/IP support for OS/2: it's up to the marketing folks to realize how it should be sold.

From a technical standpoint, it would be great to see the object-technology that is responsible for the WorkPlace Shell (SOM, or System Object Model, and DSOM, Distributed SOM) be extended into native OS/2 apps. OpenDoc is another emerging technology that could propel OS/2 forward. On paper, both of these open standards for distributed, "document"-centered technology are superior to any of the proprietary technologies such as OLE 2.0. However, unless IBM and its technology partners implement these standards in future releases of OS/2 and the upcoming OS/2 for PowerPC (previously known as WorkPlace OS), they are meaningless to the end-user.

The next couple of years will be interesting times for computer users, especially those of us who like to stay on the bleeding edge. By the end of next year, either Chicago or OS/2 will have won the 32-bit operating system battle. This release of OS/2, although still in beta, bodes well for OS/2. However, IBM still has many issues to address if they are ever to overcome the muscle of the Microsoft marketing machine and the tremendous FUD (fear, uncertainty, and doubt) that has been generated around OS/2's future. Ultimately, IBM must learn how to play the "vaporware" game with the same style and ingenuity that Microsoft has exhibited with Chicago and Windows NT. Perhaps if they started releasing screen shots of the alpha-level "OS/2 for PowerPC" they could convince people that OS/2 has a viable future, especially on up-and-coming platforms like the PowerPC.

If you would like to obtain the OS/2 Performance Beta and judge OS/2 yourself, it is freely available through CompuServe (normal online charges apply). Be sure to read through all the READMEs carefully to ensure trouble-free installation: this is beta code. On Compuserve, GO IBMOS2 and choose the "OS/2 Performance Beta" forum. You will be required to agree to certain terms and conditions.

To obtain the OS/2 Performance Beta on CD-ROM, call 1-800-251-2177. IBM is charging \$14.95 US\$ for the CD-ROM, mainly for shipping costs. You must pay with either Visa or MasterCard. The number is open from 8:00am to 5:00pm, Eastern Standard Time.

Internet users who would like to learn more about OS/2 can subscribe to any of the newsgroups in the comp.os.os2. hierarchy. A Gopher site is available at almaden.ibm.com. An OS/2 Homepage is available via WWW at "<http://www.mit.edu:8001/activities/os2/os2world.html>". The primary anonymous-ftp site for OS/2 is <ftp-os2.cdrom.com>. New users should read the excellent OS/2 Frequently Asked Questions list, available at <ftp-os2.cdrom.com> in the `\pub\os2\all\info\faq` directory as "faq21e.zip". Unfortunately, the beta itself is not distributed on the Internet.*

If you don't have Internet access but do have a modem, IBM maintains 3 BBS's across Canada. These BBS's are free of charge and are a hotbed of OS/2 discussion and information. In Vancouver try 664-6464 or 380-5441. In Toronto, try (905) 316-4244 or (905) 316-4255. In Montreal, try 938-3022. If you don't live in one of these cities, call your local IBM office and ask if they have local shadow of the other BBS's.

If users would like more information about OS/2 resources in the Vancouver or Toronto areas (such as user groups or OS/2-friendly stores), please feel free to e-mail the author at dstrong@sfu.ca.

About The Author: Duncan Strong is an OS/2 enthusiast who is also a student of Finance at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver. He can be reached, for comments or criticisms of this article, via e-mail at dstrong@sfu.ca.