Bus architecture

IBM phasing out MCA, turns to PCI

By Ed Scannell

LAST MONTH IBM started informing corporate accounts that by the end of the second quarter it will stop shipping desktop systems based exclusively upon its Micro Channel Architecture.

By the end of this fall, IBM is expected to reinvent its current desktop line with an aggressive series of systems that will replace the Micro Channel bus primarily with the PCI bus architecture.

This new high-performance line will formally signal the end of the eight-year era of IBM's once highly touted Micro Channel.

Users will still be able to outfit the new PCI-based systems with the older bus architecture by adding Micro Channel riser cards to their systems.

But some users who have grown comfortable with Micro Channel were concerned that IBM is yanking away dedicated Micro Channel-based systems a little too quickly.

"[IBM has] been claiming that PCI is close to being like the Micro Channel, but I don't necessarily believe that just yet," said Frank Petersmark, head of technical services for Amerisure & Companies, a large regional insurance company in Southfield, Mich.

"In a large shop like ours, where we need desktop [PCs] to interact robustly with lots of host-based systems and networks, the Micro Channel has been pretty reliable," said one technical analyst with a large East Coast bank. "We aren't entirely sure if PCI replaces it."

Some analysts believe IBM's decision to stop producing Micro Channel-dedicated systems was a technical inevitability.

These analysts also believe IBM's strategy of offering a variety of riser cards that provide EISA, ISA, and MCA support to PCI-based systems is a best-of-all-worlds strategy.

"IBM knows where the world is going and wants to show its versatility by keeping its [Micro Channel] customers happy, giving them access to the latest and greatest technologies," said John Dunkle, president of Workgroup Technologies Inc., in Hampton, N.H.

"A lot of IBM's architecture strategy is going to be based around the riser cards," said John Handy, senior technical analyst with a large utility company in Gaithersburg, Md. "They are trying to offer the right mix between MCA and PCI."

A company spokesman said that IBM fully expects user demand to shift from Micro Channel to PCI-based systems on the desktop, although not necessarily for its servers, including Intel-based systems and the Unix-based RS/6000 line.

Next goes cross-platform, buys Objective C

By Jason Pontin

NEXT COMPUTER INC. last week tried to further distance itself from its proprietary past.

At the Application Development Conference's NextStep/OpenStep Days in New York, the Redwood City, Calif.-based company announced that it had begun shipping its operating system, NextStep 3.3, for Sparc, PA-RISC, and Motorola 68000 workstations. NextStep 3.3 costs $4,999.

NextStep 3.3 for Intel platforms has been shipping since December.

Also at NextStep/OpenStep Days, Next Computer announced the following:

- the release of Enterprise Objects Framework (EOF) 1.1, a $299 multitier application development tool. EOF provides developers with an object-oriented model for separating an application's business logic from an underlying database;
- and the acquisition of all of the Shepstone Corp.'s rights to the Objective C language. Objective C is the language favored by NextStep Developer and OpenStep, Next's development environments, although both environments support C++.

"In the last couple of years we made commitments to be cross-platform; to combine relational databases with object models; and to help make Objective C become an industry standard," said Ron Weisman, Next's director of corporate marketing, describing the significance of these three announcements.

SunSoft partners with Persistence for DOE

■ Will gain DOE-Windows link

By Mike Ricciuti

SUNSOFT INC. THIS WEEK will attempt to broaden the appeal of its Distributed Object Environment (DOE) architecture by joining with a tools maker to link DOE to Windows clients and back-end corporate databases.

SunSoft is expected to announce a partnership with San Mateo, Calif.-based Persistence Software Inc. with the goal of linking DOE to the Persistence development toolset, according to sources close to both companies.

DOE is a distributed computing software layer based on the Object Management Group's Common Object Request Broker Architecture (CORBA) object model. It is designed to provide a distributed object framework that will ship as part of an upgrade to the Solaris operating system in August.

Persistence tools let users build C++ applications that also use the CORBA object model and connect to relational databases on multiple back ends.

Currently, the tool runs on SunOS, Solaris, HP-UX, AIX, and Windows NT. It supports access to databases from Oracle, Sybase, Informix, and Ingres, and later this spring will support Open Database Connectivity-compliant data sources. But an upgrade due this spring will allow developers to create Windows 3.x applications.

Sources said that SunSoft hopes a partnership with Persistence will give DOE a strong Windows-based toolset and will encourage developers to create Windows applications, using OLE and other Windows services, which will be able to communicate with DOE's CORBA-based objects residing on Solaris servers.

Analysts said the deal is also partly motivated by SunSoft's need to fight the perception that DOE is dead on arrival after more than three years in development. SunSoft has promoted DOE as a distributed alternative to Microsoft Corp.'s OLE, but so far the environment is restricted to the Solaris environment and is shipping just as Microsoft is getting its own plans in gear for Distributed OLE. (See "Microsoft takes first step to CORBA interoperability," March 20, page 25.)

Three fronts in the battle for a distributed object standard

Model	Sponsor/proponents
OLE	Microsoft
OpenDoc	Apple, IBM, Novell
Project DOE	SunSoft

DOE currently uses Next Computer Inc.'s OpenStep graphical user interface and development toolset for cross-platform applications. But early DOE developers have complained that OpenStep tools are too proprietary and don't allow developers to create client applications with the Windows look and feel.

SunSoft plans to support both OpenStep and Persistence tools after the deal with Persistence is announced, sources said.

Internet show to feature Apple's Internet server, America Online Web browsers

By Karen Rodriguez

SEVERAL HUNDRED COMPUTER companies will announce servers, publishing tools, security solutions, and business services for the Internet at the second annual spring Internet World Wide Web conference in San Jose, Calif., this week.

Apple Computer Inc. will introduce one of the first Macintosh Web-based publishing servers. Based on Apple's Power Macintosh workgroup servers, the product will be priced well below existing Unix-based Web servers, according to sources close to the company.

Apple will bundle the server hardware with Web server software and publishing packages licensed from third parties, which will be announced this week. Availability and pricing have not been set.

Also at the show, IBM will announce Web information management tools and encryption-based security for electronic commerce and electronic data interchange on the Internet.

America Online will announce that it is licensing Web browser technology from InterCon Systems Corp., a Macintosh-based TCP/IP company, sources said.

Meanwhile, AOL's Windows-based Web browser, which it acquired through the purchase of BookLink Technologies Inc., will be available on AOL's on-line service in May. It will later be sold as a stand-alone product. No availability date has been set for the stand-alone version.

▸ There are 26,000 commercial WWW sites on the Internet, according to a March 1995 Internet Society report.

InterCon will roll out at the show NetShark, an Internet access tool suite that includes a Web browser called WebShark, a TCP/IP stack, a mail program, a news reader, and automatic setup and registration utilities. A Macintosh version will ship in May, followed by a Windows version in June, according to sources briefed by the company.

"NetShark is an entire integrated package with buttons for launching E-mail, a news reader, and a Web browser, so users can bounce back and forth seamlessly between applications," a source said.

Quarterdeck Corp. will demonstrate a Hypertext Markup Language authoring tool called WebAuthor, which operates within Microsoft's Word for Windows 6.0 word processor.

The product has been shipping for two weeks and is available for a promotional price of $99.95 for 60 days; after this period it will cost $149.95. The company will also show its Mosaic Web browser, which is in beta testing and can be downloaded from http://www.qdeck.com.

A Seattle-based start-up company will announce an audio-on-demand system designed for the Internet that will enable users to integrate audio clips with other Internet applications.

Progressive Networks Inc.'s RealAudio system lets users with multimedia PCs browse, select, and play back simple audio or audio-based multimedia content in real time. The company's compression technology compresses voice streams into 1Kbps of Internet bandwidth, so users with 14.4Kbps modems will be able to listen to programs on National Public Radio and ABC, which are the first content providers using the system.

Audio files using the WAV file format require a bandwidth reservation of 14Mbps for voice streams.

"There are cool things you can do with the system for businesses that want to sell audio content," said Brian O'Connell, editor at Technologic Partners, a New York consultancy. "If you have a Web [Home] page, you can add interactive audio clips to text. This is another low-cost medium that doesn't require an FCC license."