

■ JIM SEYMOUR

PS/2s: RELIABILITY COUNTS\$



The MCA bus has taken its share of ribbing since IBM introduced the PS/2 line last April, but its design has helped make these machines the most reliable in the business.

When IBM introduced its new PS/2s almost a year and a half ago, it made some technical claims that, at first blush, seemed pretty grand.

The biggest, of course, was for the magic of the Micro Channel architecture (MCA) bus. Its arbitrated, multimaster design would make possible some amazing things, we were told, with several microprocessors chugging away out there on that bus at the same time. No longer would your PC's—oops, better make that your PS/2's—single Intel 80286/80386 have to time-slice its way through tough jobs. Instead, cards with other, additional microprocessors would be plugged into the MCA bus to handle video processing, background communications, and other jobs.

The MCA bus has taken a lot of kidding over the past 16 months. I've had my share of sport with it, calling it "voodoo technology" and "Mystery Channel architecture." Others have been much tougher still on the new design.

Chief among the other IBM promises for the PS/2s was that these were more *reliable* machines, built better thanks to a more buildable design. And that buildable design, IBM said, made them three or four times more reliable than IBM's first PCs, according to IBM's own testing.

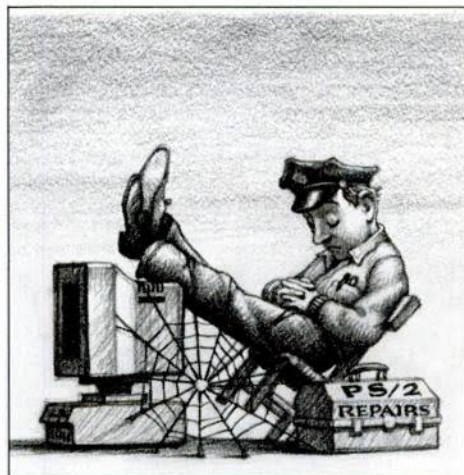
HEATH'S VIEWS Chet Heath was the principal designer of the MCA bus and has been centrally involved with the PS/2s since long before they were called PS/2s. A senior engineer at IBM's Entry Systems

Division in Boca Raton, Chet is a typical IBMer in his competence and self-assurance but a most untypical IBMer in his candor and openness.

He's intensely proud of what he wrought in the Micro Channel architecture—and not a little wounded by the slings and barbs of a skeptical press and wary customers. Chet's pride in his design work, and in his colleagues' other achievements in the PS/2s, shines through when he talks about the PS/2s as business machines built to solve business needs. If that doesn't sound much like an engineer talking . . . well, Chet often doesn't sound much like your typical computer designer.

And that's a high compliment.

I recently spent a long time talking with Chet about the PS/2s, the MCA bus, and how they've fared in the real world. Not about the number shipped and which distribution channels IBM thinks appropriate for the machines—that's not his ball-



park—but about how closely the PS/2/MCA has matched the design spec of a more useful, more reliable PC.

Chet has some very interesting views on PC-level systems reliability and, in turn, on how we evaluate PCs in the eighties and beyond. I'll be writing here occasionally about those views and how they fit with my own (and, I suspect, with many of yours) as we see competitive MCA-bus machines from Tandy, Dell, Kaypro, and others come to market.

One of Chet's most interesting points—and one I knew immediately to be true, from my own experience and that of my corporate clients—is that the PS/2s have indeed proved to be much more reliable on the job than their PC, PC-XT, and PC AT predecessors.

Though I've seen a surprisingly large number of new PS/2s come through with right-out-of-the-box problems, indicating poor final testing or, likelier, shipping problems and poor checkout by dealers, once a PS/2 is up and running, it's likely to stay that way for a looong time.

Chet points out that this positive field experience has been reflected in a recent rejiggering of IBM's on-site service agreement prices. Not only does the PS/2 Model 50 come with a 1-year warranty, but IBM has priced the service agreement at \$180 a year, as opposed to \$546 per year for the most popular PC AT configuration in business use, the famed Model 339.

PS/2 PAYS Chet goes on to calculate the savings in buying a PS/2 Model 50 rather than a Model 339 PC AT. The first year's

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warranty is free, either way. But during the second, third, and fourth years of ownership, PS/2 buyers will effectively pocket \$366 a year, the difference between a Model 50 service agreement and one for a

Model 339. In addition, of course, you get what amounts to a Video Graphics Array (VGA) adapter built into the motherboard of the PS/2s (excepting the Model 25 and the Model 30), so you save another \$400

or so on the cost of a video board.

Add that up and you've "saved" \$1,500 over the probable useful life of the computer by buying a PS/2 over even IBM's own True Blue AT. And Chet finds this a persuasive argument for why PS/2 clones—and soon, he thinks, AT clones from other vendors—will find tough sledding in the marketplace: their real cost is too close to the real thing.

This argument makes some substantial assumptions, of course. First, that you're going to buy a service agreement for either machine. Second, that you consider the PS/2 the functional equivalent of a PC AT. And third, that you buy the idea that the machine really has proven that much more reliable in service.

As I mentioned, in my experience, without exception, the latter case has prov-

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■ The PS/2s have indeed proved to be much more reliable on the job than their PC, PC-XT, and PC AT predecessors.

en true: clients with collectively tens of thousands of PS/2s, many now in use for a year or more, have found Model 50s, 60s, and 80s substantially more reliable than the other PCs they've put in over the years, from IBM and other vendors.

And you should remember that even if you consider service agreements lousy ideas, not buying one is in effect self-insuring: if something goes bump in the night, fixing it comes out of *your* pocket.

The PS/2s' low-cost service agreements, which reflect IBM's confidence in their reliability, should make you feel a little better about their record . . . even if you're as frustrated as I am that the MCA bus, as full of promise as it may be, still hasn't been used to any meaningful extent by commercially available hardware or software products. And thus hardly constitutes a reason to buy one of these newfangled machines.