■ **JOHN C. DVORAK**

INSIDE TRACK

SAA, CD-ROM, and other slow movers get the needle.

Is Systems Application Architecture (SAA) **dead already?** That's the indication from various IBM watchers who tell me the users aren't interested in it. SAA, as you recall, is the unified IBM interface standard designed to unite the micro/mini and mainframe world. "It's just not happening," I'm told. There are too many programs that would need re-coding for SAA to make an impact. Besides that, it's taking too long to implement, making it look like **IBM is dragging its feet.**

To me, the loudest **bad signal** was IBM's signing up with Steve Jobs's NeXT, so that IBM could use his NeXT interface for its AIX/Unix machines and possibly for some others, too. This "Macintosh" interface is as far away from SAA as imaginable. It's obvious that besides not being able to afford dinner (see "My Dinner with IBM"), IBM can't make SAA happen. It's already **hedging its bets.** We have to assume that there is **internal bickering** or sudden cold feet. If we ever see SAA, then expect it to have the impact of *TopView*—a previous **ballyhooed flop.**

The Never-Ending CD-ROM Saga: Meanwhile, industry types are interpreting Microsoft's recent **dissolution** of its CD-ROM group and the movement of its projects into the **Microsoft Press division** as a sign that CD-ROM isn't happening either. While it makes sense to me that the book people should do the disks, that's not the way others see it. This is compounded by the fact that Microsoft has **moved its CD-ROM conference** out of Seattle and down to Anaheim "because it's too big for Seattle." The cynics say it's **an attempt** to back away from the CD-ROM scene because of new developments.

The new developments are CD-XA (CD-extended architecture), CD-I, (CD-Interactive), and DVI (a fantastic video-on-CD technology recently purchased by Intel from GE/RCA). This means that CD-ROM is quickly becoming a **dead-end technology.**

I know for a fact that **Bill Gates** is a big believer in the potential of CD-ROM technology. So am I. But its slow start in its current form (plain-vanilla CD-ROM) isn't encouraging. Perhaps **Microsoft is partly to blame.** The MS-DOS CD-ROM extensions are part of the problem. I don't know who wrote the code, but the installation process is from 1976. If you lose the **confused** written documentation, there is no way you can install these drivers.

Worse, the extensions **simply don't work** on fast machines. This is ironic since this is a futuristic technology. On a 20-MHz 386 machine I had to run it at 6 MHz to get the CD-ROM to work. I have yet to get the CD-ROM working on my newest 25-MHz 386, despite the fact that all the other software I use works fine.

I was told that the problem is Hitachi: the main OEM supplier of the CD-ROM drive hasn't kept its part of the bargain and isn't telling Microsoft everything it needs to know about the drives. I accepted this at first, but after looking at the **confused combination of techie-nerd CONFIG.SYS and AUTOEXEC .BAT loaders** dreamed up by Microsoft, I have to conclude that this finger pointing is nonsense. Hey boys, look at the *Super PC-Kwik* cache program to see how to do a driver right and get a hardware guy to look at the thing too!

I've had nothing but trouble with my CD-ROM system and I'm about to give up on it. **I don't recommend** you spend your energy with this technology unless this mess gets cleared up.

Other New Technologies Dept.: Want to be an overnight millionaire? Well then sit down and produce a $499–$999 **optical character recognition** software package that does it all. It should be able to read *any* typeface, tell a row from a column, read mixed fonts, and do it all fast.

Why no one has produced this has mystified me for years because every software writer I talk to says it's easy. Of course, they're all personally "working on a spreadsheet that is better than Lotus" and therefore haven't the time. The fact is that this is a project that has eluded everyone because it's **too darn hard.**

A **recent product breakthrough** in the Macintosh arena, though, may change all this. A $995 product called **TextPert** from CTA Inc. (866 Second Ave., New York, NY 10017; (212) 759-6201) will, when used with a Macintosh and a scanner, read text at a 99.5 percent hit rate. This approaches the current state-of-the-art devices from **Kurzweil,** whose systems are hardware-software combinations and cost $10,000 and up. Kurzweil was recently acquired by Xerox, a company known for acquiring healthy firms and letting them **flounder,** so I figure Kurzweil will be out of the running in no time.

As yet another aside, I love to tell **my Xerox story** about *Ventura Publisher* (a Xerox acquisition). I wanted to review the thing, but instead of getting a review copy I got a lengthy legal document to sign. In it I had to **sign away my rights** to sue Xerox if the software somehow killed or injured someone. Why Xerox felt it necessary to make me sign an indemnification clause is still a mystery. I figured if this **software was that dangerous,** I best not look at it. Fact is, Xerox is hopeless and typical of a company that ran as a monopoly for too long. So the OCR market is wide open.

Finally: Is there any **big oafish company** I haven't offended? ▣