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The Channel's Longhorn Concerns

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Channel partners are interested in how Longhorn stacks up against Mac OS X and Linux, and they're also concerned about how well Longhorn will deal with legacy hardware drivers.

Microsoft spent a lot of time at WinHEC touting Longhorn, but was the big push mainly a defensive move against Mac OS X and Linux? Some channel members think so. Observers also predict problems—either major or minor—with driver support for Microsoft's next release of Windows, which is now targeted at release next year. However, channel partners do not agree about Longhorn—not by a long shot.

During conference sessions at WinHEC, Microsoft reps revealed new graphics card and driver requirements for Longhorn. With the new OS, Microsoft will apparently stick with a "three-tier" user experience, first unveiled at WinHEC 2003.

Microsoft's "Classic Experience" will be equivalent in capabilities to Windows 2000 with software rendering. Also according to last year's roadmap, the "Aero Experience" will deliver "minimum hardware acceleration," whereas the top-end "Aero Glass Experience" will bring even tougher requirements for hardware acceleration, in support of 3D graphics and animation.

This year, though, Microsoft has raised its hardware acceleration requirements still further, while also stipulating that Aero and Aero Glass will need special drivers, written specifically for Longhorn.

Also at WinHEC, Microsoft announced that the client and server editions of Longhorn will now enter beta hand-in-hand, for tighter integration between the two.

James Nicholas, principal at JE2000 LLC, is one Microsoft partner who senses real difficulties ahead on the driver side. "That always happens when there's a new OS, anyway. There have been tons of problems with Windows XP drivers, especially modem and audio drivers," said Nicholas, who is a Windows reseller, Web hoster and networking consultant based in Connecticut.

As Nicholas sees it, however, the Windows XP driver issues have been outweighed by XP's advantages over earlier editions of Windows.

"XP is particularly popular among customers' end users. No more 'fatal

exception' blue screens,'" he maintained.

The Microsoft partner, though, is far less pleased with Microsoft's server platforms. "Quite honestly, the only reason I'm using Windows servers is that I can charge more for Windows than Linux. With Linux, there are fewer viruses, and you can fit more domains on a server."

In Longhorn, Nicholas hopes mainly for better client/server integration. "Faster is always better," he said.

Next page: Major headaches for Microsoft.

Marty Connor, on the other hand, firmly believes that Mac OS X and the emerging Linux desktop are giving Microsoft some major headaches these days.

In addition to heading an open-source project known as Etherboot, Connor runs a network consulting business in Cambridge, Mass. Most of his customers are in the graphics design and publishing industries—just the sorts of businesses that might be drawn to Aero Glass, for instance. "Right now, my customers are typically running mixed implementations of Windows, Mac and Linux," he said.

Connor is also convinced that Microsoft's competitive worries are contributing to the promotion of Longhorn. For one thing, Connor points to growing interest in Linux and Mac OS among developers.

"Microsoft has the cachet of being the 800-pound gorilla. The barriers to Windows entry are costly, however. With either Macintosh or Linux, on the other hand, you have an OS that invites people to fill in the gaps. Plus, Apple is working really hard right now at raising the profile of its OS, and at courting developers," he said.

"Microsoft didn't realize that Linux would evolve as quickly as it has," Connor added. "Now, though, Novell has acquired SUSE Linux and is putting a lot of effort into the Linux desktop. Novell has been in the OS business for a long time, anyway."

Connor also cites discontent among Microsoft users over ongoing viral outbreaks, as well as emerging requirements by software vendors for "activation" on Windows platforms. "With activation, you never really get to 'own' your software," he said.

Connors reasons that Apple might be better positioned than Microsoft to deal with driver incompatibilities, since Apple owns its own hardware platform. Still, he suggests that competition from Mac OS X and Linux will be a bigger problem for Microsoft than Longhorn driver support in and of itself.

"Microsoft needs to remain compatible with lots of third-party hardware. The main question is, 'How much legacy hardware does Microsoft need to support in order to stay compatible?' If I had hardware that wasn't supported by Longhorn, I might be tempted to switch to another platform," he said.

Taking a different point of view is Peter Gheddissi, chief designer at Allied Media, a Web design outsourcing firm in Southern California. Gheddissi, in fact, can hardly wait for the release of Microsoft's next OS.

Gheddissi doesn't foresee any big problems with driver support, either. "Companies that make the hardware are going to provide the right drivers," according to the outsourcer.

Gheddissi's customers include several major medical organizations. In his Web design work, he uses a combination of Mac OS and Windows. "Most good designers today use both environments. I use OS X for film and video editing, as well as some graphics tasks. For Web design and most graphics, I use Windows XP, Microsoft FrontPage and Adobe PageMaker," he explained.

"Windows is a little sloppier, but it's also more flexible [than OS X] and easier to use. Windows is supported by a lot more vendors. Just as importantly, most end users have Windows, not Macintosh," said Gheddissi, noting that a doctor at one of the medical facilities still uses "a very early version" of AOL.

"As a designer, I need to know how what I've created will look to users."

Unlike some other observers, Gheddissi doesn't think Microsoft is reacting to its competitors with Longhorn.

"Windows and Macintosh are very different markets," Gheddissi contended. "It's a good idea for Microsoft to come out with a [more graphics-oriented] product. I predict that Longhorn will be a success if it's done right."