IBM’s OS/2 Warp 4.0 focused on Java: A 25-year-old perspective

A quarter century ago, Java’s platform independence offered a way to compete against Microsoft’s Windows platform.

by Alan Zeichick

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[In the mid-1990s, I was cofounder and editor of OS/2 Magazine, an independent publication for users of IBM’s now-long-deceased OS/2 operating system. Recently, looking through my old print magazines during a fit of nostalgia, I found this column from late 1996. I hope these 25-year-old thoughts about the brand-new Java platform bring a smile. —Ed.]

The Java launch

San Francisco, September 25, 1996—At a gala event at the city’s Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, IBM launched its newest Intel-based desktop operating system: OS/2 Java 4.0. Or was that Java Warp 4.0? Java Netscape 4.0? Silly me. The announcement was for OS/2 Warp 4.0, formerly known as Merlin. IBM is excited about the platform’s built-in VoiceType speech recognition, as well as its support for Sun’s Java language.

OS/2 Warp 4.0 plays strongly to IBM’s vision of network computers, able to run Java applications across the Internet and corporate
intranets. OS/2 Warp 4.0 is also strategic for IBM because you can run Java applications not only within Netscape's Navigator 2.02 for OS/2 (coming soon) but also directly on the desktop. OS/2 Warp 4.0 brings IBM forward in its support of important industry standards, like Java, OpenDoc, and Open32 (Microsoft's Win32 API set).

IBM chose not to use this occasion to clearly define the importance of OS/2 Warp 4.0 itself as a strategic platform. Instead, executives like John M. Thompson, senior vice-president of the IBM Software Group, used this opportunity to discuss their vision of "network computing," that is, Java. Mr. Thompson only mentioned OS/2 once, in passing, during his carefully scripted presentation and didn’t take questions from the assembled reporters. (A senior IBM press-relations person later told me that it wasn’t Mr. Thompson’s job to talk about OS/2.)

Instead, IBM used this event to talk about how each of IBM’s four operating systems (OS/2 Warp, AIX, MVS, and OS/400) will be Java-enabled by the end of the year. It’s fair to surmise that IBM’s software group is betting the business on Java.

From its anti-Microsoft perspective, Java is compelling, because Java applications are truly platform-independent, as long as you have a browser or operating system that supports Java itself.

In theory, Java could make Microsoft’s Windows 95/NT hegemony irrelevant—if developers choose to stop writing applications to the Win32 API set and adopt the Java APIs instead. The fact that OS/2 Warp 4.0 is the first Intel-based operating system to have built-in Java support is, therefore, very important.

But what will happen when Microsoft adds Java to Windows? And if the client operating system is unimportant, why choose OS/2 instead of its competitors? IBM never discussed that issue. So, we will. Here’s one compelling reason to choose OS/2 Warp 4.0: VoiceType. It’s too bad that it was treated as a novelty, a gimmick. Rather than showing how voice recognition will enable whole new classes of applications, or how the microphone will bring computing to workers who lack the ability to type, we heard, “Imagine sitting in your favorite chair, TV remote in one hand, soft drink in the other, navigating the Web using voice commands." Hmmmm. Strategic?

The low point of the OS/2 Warp 4.0 launch was Lotus’ demo of prerelease Freelance and WordPro code; I remember seeing alphas at Lotusphere last January. Lotus promises those products will be finished by the end of the year. What about 1-2-3, Approach, and Organizer? The latest commitment is for some time in the first half of 1997. Hey, the 32-bit SmartSuite for Windows 95 began shipping in November 1995. Are we supposed to be impressed? Get Lotus off the stage until it actually delivers on its promises.

The high point was the brief demonstration of Citrix’s WinFrame support of 32-bit Windows applications under OS/2. WinFrame is a modified Windows NT server that runs all 32-bit Windows apps, such as Microsoft Office 95. With the Citrix client running in a Win-OS/2 session, you can run apps that reside on the WinFrame server inside the Workplace Shell.

Thanks to Citrix, one of the biggest criticisms of OS/2 Warp—that it can’t run Windows 95/NT applications—has been circumvented. Don’t try this at home: Citrix’ WinFrame license costs $6,000 for 15
concurrent users, plus $200 for each additional user—but it’s just what the doctor ordered, if your business needs a particular Win32 app.

Now, that is strategic.

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P.S. Did we mention that OS/2 Warp 4.0 supports Java?

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