

Troubled firm pinning its future on Rhapsody

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Despite the big splash Apple Computer Inc. is making over the latest revision to its Macintosh operating system, insiders know the company is pinning its real future on Rhapsody, the company's next-generation operating system.

An operating system is the fundamental program that controls the workings of a computer. Macintosh computers run one or another version of Mac OS that are still based, in part, on the system Apple shipped with the first Macintosh in 1984.

Over the years, Apple has made a series of modifications to Mac OS, adding support for hard disks, color, speech, multitasking, and even the Internet. Nevertheless, the fundamental Mac has evolved little since the late 1980s.

Commentary

Rhapsody will change all that. The new operating system, which won't be ready until next year, is based on NextStep, which Apple took possession of last December when it bought Next Software. Next Software was founded in 1985 by Apple's cofounder Steve Jobs, shortly before Jobs left Apple. Next's computer and software received rave reviews, but failed to catch on.

In 1993, the company became a software-only vendor, selling versions of the NextStep operating system that would run on standard Windows-Intel personal computers and on more powerful workstations from Sun Microsystems and Hewlett-Packard.

Apple's Rhapsody will actually be four operating systems in one. At its heart, Rhapsody will be based on Unix - popular in many universities and high-tech businesses, but which has a reputation of being difficult to use. It will also support current Ma-

intosh programs; programs written in Java, a Sun programming language gaining popularity among Internet users; and programs written for the NextStep.

Earlier this year I spent a weekend playing with two versions of NextStep - one for Windows, one for Windows NT - that Apple had distributed to developers to help them prepare to write software for Rhapsody. OpenStep in 1997 was largely the same operating system as the NextStep that I had run from 1991-1993. Artistically the operating system is a masterpiece: The controls and icons were all created by the veritable graphic designer Keith Olfs. The operating system is rock solid, impossible for me to crash no matter what I threw at it. And the system is fast.

OpenStep designers paid marvelous attention to graphical detail and ease of use. There is a color chooser that allows you to pick colors from

photographs, from elsewhere on the screen, by specifying RGB values, or by choosing PANTONE number. Once you have a color, you can drag it into a special "color well," or you can put it on the cut-and-paste board.

OpenStep uses Display PostScript to put images on the screen, which means that what you see on the screen is exactly what prints. You can "tear off" any OpenStep window and assign your own keyboard commands for any menu command. And there is a full multimedia e-mail program called NextMail that is one of the best mail programs ever.

I had similar success with OpenStep Enterprise. I loaded it up onto my Windows NT system and within about 15 minutes was writing programs with Next's Interface Builder application.

Apple hopes to use OpenStep Enterprise as the key to bringing

application developers back to the Macintosh fold. Developers will be able to write a program once for OpenStep and have it run on both Rhapsody and Windows NT.

Some developers are definitely excited about Rhapsody. "I'll be the first person in line," says Kenny Carruthers, a computer consultant from Quebec who is attending MacWorld.

"In a lot of ways this is Apple's version of Windows NT," says Daniel-Ari Feinberg, head of development at Dionis, a prepress firm in Boston. But Feinberg is worried that the cloud hanging over Apple will affect many people's attitudes toward Rhapsody. "I think too many people are frightened away because of the turmoil. Even if Rhapsody works technologically, it may not matter."

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