

Developers expect DOS to diverge

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"What will Microsoft and IBM do to DOS?" asked those who attended the West Coast Computer Faire in San Francisco March 26-29. IBM has since announced its next-generation operating system (see p. 86), but Microsoft remains quiet about its plans for MS-DOS, the most-used operating system in personal computers.

The new microprocessors and the recent availability of graphical operating environments promise (some say threaten) to split the IBM-compatible world between 8088- and 80286-based PC XT-like computers and 80386-based multitasking machines and between traditional command-driven interfaces and graphical environments.

The computer fair devoted two sessions to the question, but discussion continued on the exhibit floor and in sessions on other topics.

The question of what DOS to develop for repeatedly occurred in a session on RAM-resident programs. "The IBM PC and the clones were never developed to be what is becoming a multitasking environment," said Bill Higgs, director of software research services for Info Corp., a Cupertino, Calif., company. Despite Microsoft's assurances that its new MS-DOS (variously called ADOS, DOS 5.0 and New DOS) will handle memory conflicts between resident programs, software developers will find new ways to create problems, he said, and will have to wait a couple years before the new DOS is available, much less a standard.

While environments like Windows were offered as potential replacements for MS-DOS, "the world's going to be living in the current DOS world for quite some time," said Spenser Leyton, vice president of sales and business development at Borland International.

However, because Microsoft is pushing its Windows environment while also working on a new DOS to address the 80386's protected mode, break the 640K-byte addressable memory limit, and allow multitasking, panelists were divided about which operating system developers would have to write their applications for.

Because Microsoft is keeping quiet about its plans and because it is involved in the various potential divisions, speakers and attendees alike could only agree that the current MS-DOS environment would probably fracture into several subenvironments.