

■ THE EDITORIAL VIEW

What's NeXT for Apple?

New OS Strategy Leaves More Questions Than Answers



With the disclosure of Apple's new operating-system strategy (see [1101MSB.PDF](#)), the company has finally begun filling the strategic vacuum created when Copland was abandoned last year. Apple's plan deserves credit for being bold and innovative, but it also means Mac applications will never have the full benefit of a protected, multitasking operating system unless they are rewritten (though Apple is working on tools to ease this transition). The new OS, code-named Rhapsody, is not an enhanced Macintosh but rather a new platform that offers Macintosh compatibility.

The success of the OS plan is also a critical issue for PowerPC: with Windows NT on PowerPC all but abandoned, the volume desktop future for PowerPC lies entirely with Apple's software. Unfortunately, the new OS strategy is unlikely to lead to significant market share growth for Apple. Furthermore, applications written for Rhapsody will be easily ported to other operating systems and processor architectures, reducing the proprietary lock PowerPC has had on Macintosh applications.

What does this mean for Mac users? For the next year and a half—or longer, if, as seems likely, the software schedule slips—Mac OS will continue to lack key modern OS features. Starting in mid-1998, Mac users will have the choice of staying with the old OS or moving to Rhapsody.

Rhapsody is sure to have far greater memory requirements than Mac OS; NextStep currently requires 32M, and it would not be surprising if Rhapsody requires significantly more to run well. This means the vast majority of the installed base of Macintosh systems will require memory upgrades to handle the new OS. Education and home users, long the core of Apple's market, may find the increased memory requirements to be onerous, if not prohibitive. Rhapsody will also require new drivers for peripherals, such as scanners and backup devices. Users with devices from companies that have disappeared, or that have dropped Mac support, may find they can't use these devices under the new operating system.

Most Mac OS applications will run within the so-called compatibility box, but all the limitations of the old OS remain. For example, any application can crash the entire compatibility box. The only improvement from the current situation is that just the compatibility box, rather than the entire system, would need to be restarted. Apple claims applications will run at least as fast in the compatibility box as under the native Mac OS, due to the faster underlying I/O structure and kernel.

To get the benefits of Rhapsody, applications must be written to the OpenStep APIs. OpenStep offers a very nice development environment, including a powerful set of Web development tools, but it is far outside the mainstream and has had little success outside of large corporate in-house developers. Apple hopes its evangelism and higher volumes will make OpenStep a far bigger success, but this remains to be seen. Apple is fragmenting its already modest market share into two APIs; developers targeting Rhapsody will have, at least initially, only a fraction of the already small Macintosh market share available to them.

The user scenario for switching to Rhapsody will be similar, in many ways, to the switch to Power Macs. At first, users will run most applications in the compatibility box and gain little benefit from the new platform. In time, more software (especially high-end applications, such as publishing and multimedia development tools) will become available in native Rhapsody versions. The big question is how long this transition will take—and indeed, whether the majority of applications will ever be ported to Rhapsody.

Apple has committed to supporting Next's existing products, which provide the OpenStep APIs on top of Windows NT and various flavors of Unix. If Apple continues to support OpenStep as a cross-platform API, it could increase developer appeal by enabling developers to support Windows NT and Rhapsody with the same effort. However, this would leave Rhapsody's applications undifferentiated. Apple could add features to Rhapsody without offering them in the NT version of OpenStep, which would provide differentiation for Apple but weaken the developer proposition.

Mac developers and users facing the tumultuous, multi-year transition to Rhapsody are likely to look more intensely than ever at shifting their efforts to Windows. Even if many applications move to the OpenStep APIs, users probably will have the option of running most of those applications under NT. Users of OpenStep applications will have a choice between an x86 system running NT, with the additional bonus of Windows applications, or a PowerPC system running Rhapsody, with the additional bonus of Mac applications.

Apple is, in essence, allowing Mac OS to slowly fade away while building its future on the Next platform. Although this strategy may enable Apple to build a sustainable niche, it pushes today's Macintosh even further into the fringe. □