PRODUCT REVIEWS

DOWN TO THE WIRE • NICHOLAS PETRELEY

Sibling rivalry: time to speak out and choose between evil OS twins

On the approaching anniversary date for Windows 95, the question of the hour for many people is, "Which of the two do I choose?" Before I address the question, let me ask you non-Windows users not to launch an e-mail campaign about other OSes. Call it good business sense or outright stupidity, practicality or office politics, you're more likely to get the world to agree about abortion than to convince a Windows user that there are other choices.

A tangled Web

Having said that, the choice between the two alternatives is not as evident as one might think. Windows 95 has some clear advantages over Windows NT.

Windows 95 makes an excellent platform for a corporate Web server, for example. I haven't actually tested this assumption, but I know it must be true. The Microsoft Corp. license agreement limits the number of TCP/IP connections in NT Workstation to 10 to protect us from crashes that could occur. Conversely, Microsoft doesn't limit the connections in the Windows 95 license because more connections present no danger.

Windows 95's behavior is also easier to predict than Windows NT's. For example, I predicted it would become progressively unstable as you install applications that replace key system libraries with versions that are buggy or incompatible with other products.

Simply put, install Windows 95, and the expression "unexpected system crash" eventually becomes and oxymoron. No, hold your applause. The thanks really go to Microsoft for building a Windows 95 system architecture that is backward compatible with Windows 3.1. NT Workstation 4.0 is far less predictable. Only once was I able to get Windows NT to tell me I needed to reboot when I changed screen-saver settings. And if you're looking for the place to install a driver or change a system setting, NT keeps you guessing even more than Windows 95.

The best thing about Windows 95, of course, is the mountains of software designed specifically for it.

There are programs to compress memory, recover a damaged registry, remove the heaps of unneeded files Windows accumulates, tune sluggish performance, and undo a few of the many problems that can occur when installing new software, to mention but a few. There is even software designed to intercept system faults to improve your chances of saving your work before you reboot.

Money for nothin'

Although Windows 95 is a gold mine for utility programmers, Windows NT should spur a rise in hardware sales. You need at least 32 MB of RAM to run NT Workstation comfortably, for example. And many will undoubtedly buy entire new Pentium Pro systems, built around

Intel Corp.'s silicon dream, the Natoma chip set, which is magically tuned to run Windows NT (but no other 32-bit operating systems) at optimal speed.

Intel's motherboard sales will take off too. I use an Intel Pentium motherboard at home, and Windows NT Workstation 4.0 won't even finish loading without fatal crashes (the dreaded "blue screens"). Fortunately, the crashes go away if I disable the external CPU cache. To be fair, it *is* a hardware problem. I noticed the Linux C compiler gracefully reported hardware errors with the cache enabled, too. (Windows 95 doesn't seem to care either way.)

In its favor, Windows NT will give Windows 95 users hours of pleasure reliving the experience of installing and configuring all their applications. As a bonus, they'll first have to reformat the disk or remove some of their applications. The Office 95 shortcut bar, for example, crashes constantly when I install Office 95 over the copy I installed in Windows 95.

On the downside, Windows NT doesn't have Plug and Play. Frankly, I don't miss it, because Windows 95's Plug and Play doesn't work. (But as someone once pointed out, we should all applaud Microsoft for the effort.)

The Windows 95 logo requirements plan (the one that ISVs earn if software runs on both Windows 95 and Windows NT) is exceptional. That is, Microsoft has a list of qualified exceptions, so vendors can earn the logo even if the soft-

ware won't run on Windows NT.

As for the danger of replacing system libraries, time will tell. I do know that applications will not bring down the whole system as often with Windows NT. I speak from personal experience. Because Windows NT Workstation doesn't come with Sound Blaster AWE32 support, I had to download and install the latest drivers from Creative Labs Inc. Once they were installed, the control panel crashed twice when I tried to customized the sounds. But the OS stayed up through the whole experience.

Of course, you must pay for this protection. (It is rumored that the business model for NT was fashioned after the policies of Al Capone.) Windows NT Workstation is almost triple the cost of Windows 95. Add in the cost of hardware to support Windows NT, and, for this price, you get fewer system crashes, faster performance with more RAM, fewer features and conveniences, less driver support, illegal Web server support, worse backward compatibility, with DOS and Windows 3.1, and the chance that your Windows 95 logo-cer-

tified software won't work.

However, if you buy the right utilities, install only Microsoft Office and an email package (preferably Microsoft Exchange), avoid custom applications and administer each system to restrict users from installing new products, Windows 95 won't crash much.

I think the choice is clear. Send email to nicholas_petreley@infoworld.com, or visit my forum on InfoWorld Electric at http://www.infoworld.com