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Be gets boost from Intel, Hitachi

July 29, 1997: Be OS to debut on Intel chip

BY TOM QUINLAN
Mercury News Staff Writer

LAS VEGAS -- Operating system start-up Be Inc. unveiled a new version of its BeOS at the Comdex trade show here -- along with support from Intel Corp. and electronics giant Hitachi Ltd., which will start bundling the multimedia rich software on a new line of systems next month.

Intel's support comes in the form of cash, Be said, confirming in a press release that the Santa Clara chip company was a major contributor to the $25 million in venture capital that Menlo Park-based Be acquired earlier this year.

``I'm not one to ever downplay the importance of money," noted company founder and CEO Jean-Louis Gassée, ``but the importance of this announcement is that we needed a partner, and Intel has been and will continue to be a very important partner for us."

But the relationship could soon go beyond Intel simply investing in Be as part of its vast and growing venture capital fund.

According to sources familiar with discussions between the two companies, Intel is considering using BeOS as the operating system of choice in a number of intelligent information appliances such as dedicated Internet access devices and cable television set top boxes.

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The BeOS was developed primarily to offer users the ability to manipulate multimedia data, such as video, audio and 3-D graphics, in real time, making it possible to easily and inexpensively watch digital movies or download music from the World Wide Web.

By enabling the operating system to work with multiple processors and perform multiple tasks simultaneously from the start, the BeOS is better equipped to handle intensive multimedia tasks far better than existing operating systems, Gassée noted, without the assistance of expensive hardware peripherals.

Pat Gelsinger, vice president and general manager of Intel's Business Platform Group, stressed that, while important, the relationship between Intel and Be was currently limited to the investment the chip company has made in the OS provider.

``We like any software that demonstrates the power of our processors, and the BeOS does that very well," Gelsinger said. ``But we support a number of operating systems on our platform, and we don't bundle any of them with our products. It wouldn't be in our best interest."

Gelsinger didn't close the door on a closer relationship with Be in the future.

``One of the needs that these low-cost appliances have is that they will need a real time operating systems that does what the BeOS does, and as those appliances come out we may do something different," Gelsinger said.

That could make the BeOS -- already equipped with an integrated browser and e-mail capability -- a formidable challenger to Microsoft's Windows CE operating system, which is being sold into those markets already.

Even if the relationship with Intel doesn't evolve into a closer partnership, Intel's public support and Hitachi's use of the BeOS as a complementary operating system to Microsoft Corp.'s Windows 98 should increase the company's visibility and viability, analysts noted.

The Hitachi Flora PC's will start up both operating systems simultaneously in what's known in the industry as a ``dual boot," letting users switch between the two as needed.

No pricing was announced for the Hitachi PCs.

Be's focus is on providing a rich multimedia environment that current windows technology simply can't match, Gassée said.

``Microsoft's (multimedia extensions) do as good a job as possible in adding multimedia support to an operating system that was designed to run office productivity applications, but it just can't give the users the rich multimedia environment that the BeOS can," he added.

Many of the improvements in BeOS 4.0 were designed to let the operating system work more efficiently with the Windows environment by adding support for the Windows file system -- the way data is organized when its stored in a PC -- and the capability of working with Microsoft's networking technology.

``We don't want to compete directly with Microsoft to be the only operating system on the PC," Gassée noted, ``but we can be complementary."

Analysts at least gave Be a fighting chance of succeeding in that strategy.

``Microsoft has had trouble bringing out its multimedia technology in a timely fashion," said Richard Doherty, founder of the market research firm Envisioneering Inc. in Seaford, N.Y. ``With new OS and Hitachi putting it on their systems, this could show software developers and PC manufacturers that there's a better way to handle

multimedia data."

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