Free NCs for Online Gamers!

Ramblings by Michael Dortch

Here's the next industry-shaking announcement I'd like to see. Details to follow below.

AmOL DROPS THE "HAMMER" ON THE ONLINE GAMING INDUSTRY

SOMETIME SOON, Northern California - Ambrosia Software Online (AmOL), a division of the popular purveyor of shareware game and utility software, today announced NC Hammer(tm), a new program designed to attract thousands of online gamers to the company's offerings. Under NC Hammer, any game enthusiast willing to pay $120 up front for a year of unlimited access to AmOL will receive a Java-based network computer (NC) optimized for online gaming at no cost.

"The business model we're following has successful antecedents from Minitel in France to the celluar-telephone and paging industries here in the United States," AmOL said in a prepared statement. "By porting all of our games to Java, we've not only made them even more network-ready, but made them accessible to anyone with a Java-based NC. And by providing our users with free NCs, we help persuade them to stick with our games first and foremost, and begin building a community of users receptive to future networked offerings from us or our industry partners," AmOL added.

Ambrosia Software, AmOL's parent company, is launching an all-out marketing blitz to bring its new program to the public. Ambrosia will be sponsoring a national concert tour, featuring the safe-and-popular "rapper/entertainer," "The Artist Formerly Known as MC Hammer," as well as "The Red Hot Chili Peppers." This will be the second comeback/reunion tour for the Peppers' third configuration, and the band will end each performance with a special remix of their hit from the early 1990s, "Give it Away." During the song, coupons for the free NCs and discounted order forms for the NC Hammer service will be dropped on the audience, along with balloons and confetti. "Despite the light weight and rugged nature of our NCs, we determined the coupons and forms were easier and safer to distribute this way," AmOL said.

Corel, makers of the WordPerfect office suite, are already developing a Java version, according to Scott MacNealy of Sun, creators of Java. [Ed Note --   At the time of writing, Corel hadn't canceled WordPerfect Office for Java yet.] MacNealy said the suite will occupy about 6 megabytes of space, as opposed to the 250 megabytes of space occupied by Microsoft Office - which is also rumored to be moving to a Java platform, as amazing as that may seem.

Moving games to Java makes at least as much sense, if not more. Not only does it make them easier to network, but it means developers will have access to all kinds of features, developed by folks all over the world. The ability to play Macintosh-quality games on any platform from

anywhere thrills the heck out of me, and I'm not even a serious gamer.

Eventually (and probably sooner rather than later), the first company to combine online games with free NCs will draw industry partners who want to advertise or offer additional services to the same community. This will annoy some users, until they realize it's keeping the price of their habit almost ridiculously low, and bringing them access to services they don't need America Online or even a full-blown Web account to get. (Schedules and tickets to local concerts or gaming conventions, anyone?)

So, expect to see some online gaming company adopt a strategy something like this one Real Soon Now. We can only hope it will be a company more like Ambrosia than like, say, Time Warner or Microsoft. Even if it isn't, though, there's still hope. Amazon.com doesn't seem to be sweating the online presence of Barnes & Noble, for example ...

Ed Note -- Michael Dortch has been thinking, talking and writing about computing, networking and The Real World for more than 20 years. He welcomes your reactions to his opinions via e-mail to medortch@aol.com.