Go your way

A flurry of new developments suggests that computing is emerging from the one-size-fits-all syndrome

You use Windows. The girl next door uses Windows. And so does just about everyone else. Sanitised conformity, rather than daring innovation, seems to have become the keyword in the Operating System marketplace.
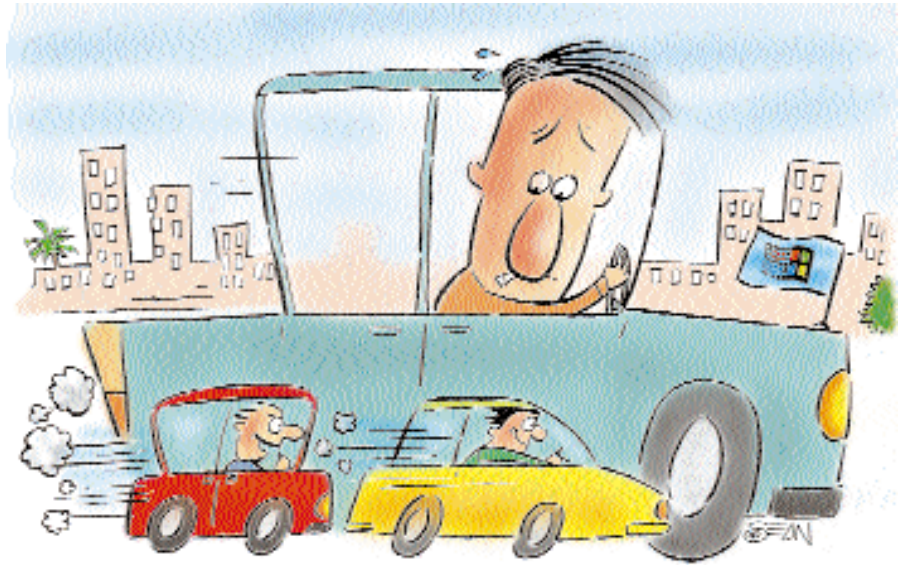
Thankfully, rays of rebellion are breaking through. Tired of peering through the same 'Windows' as everyone else, adventurous PC users are preparing to travel back to the future. The mid-80s computing universe comprised ahead-of-their-time Amiga boxes, go-against-the-grain Macs, stolid-but-stable Unix machines, and multi-flavoured PC clones. Windows was something of an oddity, and though used by some computer gaming fans, it was ignored by the world at large. But the next five years witnessed a reversal of fortunes. Unix fragmented and fizzled out, Apple made too many strategic blunders and IBM's OS/2 wilted under the Windows onslaught. The result—domination of a single operating system on the desktop.

But this might change sooner than we think.

The potential rivals

Amiga, a hallowed name of the 1980s, is preparing to battle the forces that caused its premature demise the first time around. Slated for release in the near future, the fifth version of the Amiga OS is being co-developed with QNX Software Systems Limited and will use its RTOS (Real Time Operating System) architecture. Expected to be an amazingly compact 4MB in size, the Amiga OS is expected to take the lead in the graphics-performance stakes.

It will have a serious challenger—in the form of BeOS. Founded by Jean Louis Gasse (who was till 1994 the Chief Technology Officer at Apple) the BeOS appears to be an interesting alternative, especially for visual computing professionals who require graphics-intensive performance from their PCs.

The company that introduced GUI into the computing lexicon is not sitting idle either. With Steve Jobs at the helm; and the recent success of its G3 processor, Mac OS 8.5 and the iMac; Apple is clawing hard for a toe-hold in the OS stakes. Fortunately, remnants of its loyal fan-following still exist.

But the OS battle is getting even more interesting—yet another contender is Unix, which has emerged in its new avatar—Linux. Still rough around the edges, Linux has nevertheless become a serious challenger to the ubiquitous Windows, even on the desktop. Geeks are united in their support for this brash son of Unix. A spate of manufacturers and software developers have announced support for the 'new' platform and almost daily we hear of yet another Windows application being ported to Linux.

Fighting back

Microsoft might be running scared and hiding it pretty well, but those who predict its demise in the short term might be underestimating the strengths of this multi-billion dollar company. They are going to fight this battle with the same ferocious tenacity, that has seen them triumph over countless adversaries.

What is clear however, is that the evolutionary avatars of Windows will certainly not serve all our computing needs in the next millennium. Twenty years ago, there was really one accounting application and really only one design program. Today, dozens of discrete applications come within the broad ambit of drawing. The only reason this did not happen in Operating Systems was the requirement that applications be written for a particular platform.

The initial success of any one company would virtually ensure that the rest of the computing world was 'locked-in' to that system. Choose another, and you would struggle to find applications for it.

But with the increasing willingness of software developers such as Corel, Oracle and even Microsoft to port their applications to other operating systems, there is hope once again for those who choose to think different.

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