



SHOWTIME! - Part 3

by Wayne M. Krakau

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It's back to the trade shows, again. This time I'm covering the remainder of Spring COMDEX 2000 plus the recent Chicago Internet World 2000.

The major buzz in the Linux half of COMDEX was that Corel had the best Linux package. This is an observation on my part, not a technical opinion. There was also an underlying worry about the rumors, now confirmed, about financial problems at Corel. For the hobbyists and enthusiasts in the crowd, the idea of committing to a Linux vendor now, only to be forced to switch later was annoying, but not really that daunting.

Business users and their technical staff colleagues, however, have a lot more worries - like their jobs. For smaller businesses or departmental managers, the lack of in-house technical support could make a major change very expensive. For the corporate folks, whose LAN/PC support teams are typically too understaffed to handle the day-to-day running of the network, a corporate-wide conversion could be just as impractical. Hey, who ever said that business computing was easy? Besides, there seems to be a rather large personnel shortage in the food service industry. Would you like fries with that?

The most impressive bit of hardware technology at COMDEX was also the smallest. It's called the ThumbDrive, from Trek 2000 International, Ltd. (www.thumbdrive.com). The idea for this device is so clever and so handy that I'm surprised that nobody else has thought of it before. It consists of a small DIP-style (Dual Inline Package) chip embedded in a plastic housing with a male USB (Universal Serial Bus) connector sticking out one end. That connector is plugged into a USB socket on any recently manufactured desktop or laptop computer, either directly, or via a USB hub.

Once you've stuck the ThumbDrive into a USB port, what have you got? You've got an ultra high speed "disk drive" holding from 8MB to 256MB of data (with 512MB available soon), depending on the model, in a finger-sized device that is practically indestructible, based on normal office and travel handling. In principle, it should be impervious to most low and medium level electromagnetic interference. (Just, don't try to use it in place of a spark plug!) In terms of physical durability, you would probably have to stomp on one to break it.

All you need to make the ThumbDrive work is Windows 9x and the small device driver provided with the product (and also downloadable). After that, anytime you plug in the device, it immediately shows up as an additional drive within Windows Explorer. Unplug it and the drive letter disappears.

The ThumbDrive is made specifically for data transfer. Since each one cost more than an entire Zip Drive (\$399 for 128MB), they are not practical for general purpose storage. However, their simplicity and durability make them ideal for transferring files between computers.

I have to admit that much of the allure of the ThumbDrive is its geek-appeal. For a gadget-freak like me, a tiny, durable, hard drive-equivalent, with a catchy name, and literally the size of a thumb, is almost irresistible. Besides, you can plug 16, 128, 265, 64 and 32MB ThumbDrives, respectively, into a five-port USB hub and pretend you are in the Outer Limits episode (the original series, not the current one) about the fugitive with the computer hand with removable fingers!

Well, how about Internet World 2000? My general opinion can be summarized in one word - yawn. How many times can you see a booth claiming to be the best and (naturally) most technologically advanced method of [Fill in the blank: e-commerce site hosting; e-commerce software; e-commerce consulting; e-commerce payment software; e-commerce payment services; Web site hosting; Web site design; etc.].

To be honest, the fact that all of these solutions looked identical (at least within their own categories) may be more a matter of weak marketing skills than actual quality. It seems that marketing folks, unlike computer types, aren't that willing to work themselves nearly to death for a combination of minimum wages (if that) and the promise of (currently worthless) stock.

What's worse is that many booths had such generic displays that I couldn't figure out what they did! I know that cars have been marketed with commercials showing nothing more substantial than scenes of rolling hills without actually displaying a car, but a computer trade show is not the place to get so esoteric that the attendees aren't motivated to investigate your exhibit.

The only truly innovative product that I saw was a collection of wearable computing devices by Charmed Technology (www.charmed.com). Innovative - yes. Useful for any of my clients - no. Useful at a high-tech pirate-themed costume party - possibly, due to the eyepatch-looking monitors their models were wearing.

My final impression of the show was inspired by the three models at the Charmed Technology booth. They kept getting together and whispering among themselves. In my warped imagination the conversation went like this:

First Model: Wow! Get a load of that geek over there.

Second Model: Yeah. Isn't he just the worst nerd in this kingdom of nerds?

Third Model: Hey! I recognize him. He's one of those Internet millionaires.

First Model: He's mine - I saw him first!