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Sun Cranks Up The Heat

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Sun Microsystems is leading the development of an open-systems competitor to Microsoft .NET, Bill Gates' sweeping initiative to deliver software as a set of services over a wide range of Internet-connected devices. Gates claimed in June to be betting his company on Microsoft .NET, a move he deems as important to Microsoft as the transition from DOS to Windows.

At the core of Sun's counterplan is StarOffice, the Microsoft Office competitor that Sun acquired one year ago. But Sun's success also depends on its ability to forge relationships with key members of the open-source community, which can help supply additional technology and create an infrastructure for developers to continue improving it.

"Microsoft .NET is bigger than the Win32 application programming interfaces--it's the biggest thing Microsoft has ever done," says Marco Boerries, who founded StarDivision as a teenager in Germany and became Sun's VP for Web-top and application software after Sun acquired his company. "If Microsoft .NET wins, Microsoft will take over the Internet. It's a bit of a revival of what they tried to do with MSN."

Boerries has made a career of battling Microsoft and claims to spend "several hours a day" studying Microsoft .NET. He already has revealed some pieces of his own plan but says there is more to come. Last month, Sun promised to make StarOffice available under the GNU Public License (GPL) on Oct. 13. Unlike Sun's Community Source License, the GPL is well-accepted by open-source developers and appears to have boosted Sun's credibility as an "open" vendor. "I'm very optimistic," says Michael Meeks, a principal with Helix Code, which is working with Sun.

Sun also named several Linux and PC vendors as distributors and OEMs for StarOffice, and last week donated parts of StarOffice to the Gnome Foundation. The Gnome Foundation is attempting to deliver a single-user interface across Linux and Unix, much in the way that Windows 98 and NT share the same user interface.

Boerries says Sun considers Gnome technically superior to the KDE Linux desktop and also will make Gnome the Solaris desktop. Sun expects Gnome to stave off Linux's inroads into Solaris market share and also improve the usability of Sun's workstations, which Boerries says is still a large and profitable business.

Will Sun Rise Above The Challenges?

Observers applaud Sun's moves but say the company faces challenges. Dan Kusnetzky, a VP at International Data Corp., calls Microsoft .NET Gates' latest attempt to "embrace and extend" the Internet in reaction to the rise of browser-based applications, which threaten to render much of Microsoft's software irrelevant. He also expects Microsoft to hit snags converting its revenue from packaged software sales into software rentals.

Nevertheless, Kusnetzky says Microsoft's superior tools and its integrated products are an advantage. "Microsoft will tie things together into one environment with point-and-click, and with the linkage to Windows 2000, you'll get it all," Kusnetzky says.

Boerries believes Sun and its allies have three years before Microsoft releases a good working version of Microsoft .NET. "Microsoft will pursue this and eventually get it right-we see them as a strong player, but we don't want them to be the only player," he says.

Boerries no longer urges customers to dump Microsoft Office for StarOffice; he encourages them to try both, expecting to win converts by designing software for the Internet and giving much of it away to stop Microsoft .NET in its tracks.

Pieces Of The Puzzle

The Gnome cross-platform software push includes:

- Mozilla browser technology
- GNOMEOffice from openoffice.org (StarOffice)
- SashXB (tools) from IBM
- Nautilus (file manager) from Eazel
- Graphing and financial data handling from GnuCash
- Evolution (calendar and messaging) and Bonobo component model from Helix Code
- Frameworks and services for Internet devices using Linux with help from Compaq
- CORBA, support for distributed software from RedHat
- Printing, internationalization and accessibility technology from Sun