Hybrid PC plans put on hold

BY JAMES A. MARTIN
CW STAFF

EVERETT, Mass. — Two months after announcing what was said to be the first microcomputer featuring both the IBM Personal Computer AT and Micro Channel buses, Microdirect, Inc. said last week it has put plans to provide Micro Channel architecture compatibility on hold until the fourth quarter of this year or early next year.

Instead, the company will ship a system in volume next month with a proprietary bus that is not Micro Channel architecture compatible.

Meanwhile, Wells American Corp., located in West Columbia, S.C., reportedly will formally unveil this week Compustar, a modular backplane-designed system that can be configured as either a PC AT compatible or IBM Personal System/2 Micro Channel architecture compatible, or both.

Although the two systems use different technology approaches, both are said to appeal to the user who is undecided between the two bus architectures, according to the company.

Apathy to blame

Microdirect blamed the delay in shipping a Micro Channel architecture-compatible PC on lack of interest among potential customers.

The firm showed a prototype of its Microdirect 386 I/O Express, a hybrid AT Micro Channel architecture PC at Comdex/Spring '88 [CW, May 2].

"There will be a PS/2 and OS/2 market, but the promise isn't there yet,"

claimed Jon H. Hardie, Microdirect's chairman and chief executive officer. "The demand for 286 products has remained stable at a time we expected the 386 to take off, and the 386 is taking off in areas where we thought the PS/2 would be a winner."

Microdirect is still negotiating with IBM regarding patents, but the process is progressing "at a porcupine's pace," Hardie said.

Wells American developed a proprietary cabinet design that uses snap-in modules for its Compustar system, according to product manager Mike Hoyle.

With this design, the systems can be configured with one of four interchangeable Intel Corp. microprocessors: the 8086, 80286, 80386 and 80386SX.

Wells American will offer users the opportunity to trade in AT modules with a 100% refund toward PS/2 modules, Hoyle added.

In theory, the Compustar would be competitive with Microdirect's 386 I/O Express system, a microcomputer that features three bus architectures: the AT, the Micro Channel architecture and Microdirect's proprietary I/O Express bus.
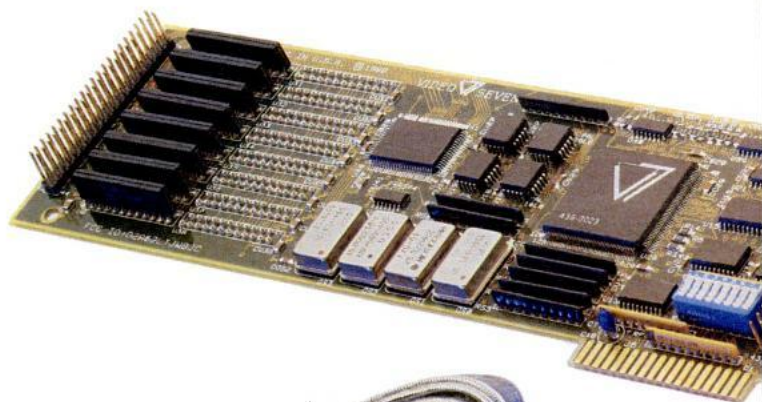
First of its kind

While the backplane-modular design is not unique, Wells American's product will be the first to utilize that approach in the PC market, according to analysts.

"It's a nice concept, an idea that's just now coming to the surface" in the PC market, said Tim Bajarin, executive vice-president at Creative Strategies Research International, Inc., a consulting firm in Santa Clara, Calif. "But we've found that 60% of PC users who buy a 286 system live with what they have."

While faster speeds and more powerful processors are attractive to users, he added, "most are not going to go out and pay extra money for it."

Wells American will release pricing information this week. The systems can be configured for as little as $995 retail, the company said, for an 8086-based AT compatible and increase to $35,000 for a fully loaded system, including optical drives and other peripherals.

Unix unaffected by Posix delay

The IEEE Posix standard, expected to be ready last month, has been delayed until October, according to Kevin Lewis, a spokesman at the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers, Inc.

The delay, however, should have little impact on the Unix industry, which has been working with draft versions of the Posix specifications for some time.

"This time lag is kind of moot," said John Williams, chief of the Unix Task Force at General Motors Corp. "We have to wait for the vendors, but they're not just sitting on their thumbs. I understand they are moving ahead with what they have."

According to Lewis, the specification had "some loose ends" when it was voted on last month, although it received a 90% acceptance ballot. "I understand what remains are not big issues," Lewis said. "So if all goes well, it should be approved no later than October."

Posix, a set of specifications to define operating system interface standards, is intended for any operating system. However, it is most closely tied with the Unix community, which intends to use the Posix specifications as the basis for a Unix standard.

"At this point, the difference between the [trial and full-use] drafts is minimal," said Steve Carpenter, a strategy manager

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