Unfazed, IBM pumps Power chip program

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On Wednesday, IBM announced that 11 new members have joined a consortium of Power processor users. It also released specifications and software to make it easier to build computers using the forthcoming Power-based Cell processor that IBM, Toshiba and Sony developed. In addition, Big Blue has new customers in medical imaging and in defence, said Nigel Beck, chairman of the Power.org consortium.

And on a new section of its Web site, IBM makes the case that most growth in the processor market is taking place with servers, game consoles and mobile devices--markets where Power is used -- not personal computers. IBM disclosed the site in a filing with the Securities and Exchange Commission on Wednesday.

Apple has been one of the highest-profile customers for Power processors, buying PowerPC chips from IBM and Motorola spin-off Freescale Semiconductor since 1994. That changed on Monday when Apple announced its 2006 shift to Intel processors, chips it disparaged for years.

But IBM, far from being daunted, instead set the stage for a showdown with Intel by declaring just how ambitious its Power plans are: "IBM's strategy is to spread its open chip technology and establish Power Architecture as the dominant industry standard," Big Blue said on its Web site.

On the one side, Apple's departure tarnishes the image of the group and its related "Power Everywhere" marketing campaign, said Illuminata analyst Gordon Haff. "This certainly takes some of the sheen off of it," he said.

On the other, for burnishing the Power image, the arrival of Cell should offset the departure of Apple. "We believe opening hardware and software specs for Cell will likely expand interest in Power.org," Pund-IT analyst Charles King said in a report.

Though Apple's move won't hurt IBM's Power processor manufacturing business much, there are direct effects elsewhere in its business. The company is trying to make Linux useful on its PowerPC- and Power5-based servers, but Apple's move left in the lurch two allies in that effort. Terra Soft Solutions and the Fedora PowerPC project both use Macs in their efforts to develop Linux for Power-based computers.

Terra Soft, which sells Yellow Dog Linux and Macs with the operating system already installed, said it has options to survive Apple's switch to Intel processors. In a statement, CEO Kai Staats said the company doesn't plan to switch its product line to Intel chips but that it still plans to sell its Y-HPC version of Linux for high-performance computing clusters, which can be used on systems such as IBM's JS20 blade servers. And, Staats added, "Things are already in motion to enable a world of greater Power Architecture diversity."

Colin Charles, a lead programmer for the effort to bring the Fedora version of Linux to PowerPC chips, pledged future support for the project.

"I'm not going to back off the project, even if it means that its real use will only last another two more years, and after that, it'll just be for big iron IBM (computers)," Charles said. "IBM hardware will always still exist, though consumer Apple stuff is going away in about two years, sadly -- I think it's a big mistake."

IBM's response is to fight back with numbers, calling out In-Stat statistics forecasting that the game console market will grow from 3.5 million units this year to 33.5 million in 2008.

Two nongaming customers are using Cell, Beck said, though he wouldn't name them. One is involved in medical imaging, and the other is tapping the chip for military use in image recognition and targeting, he said.

Eleven new organisations joined the 16 existing members of the Power.org consortium.

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