The Second Annual Software Shoot-Out in

BY ANNETTE WEST, CMA

Reviews of accounting software packages in *PC Magazine* and *MacWorld* are useful, but they don't always answer the questions working accountants might have. For this reason IMA's Raleigh Chapter offered accountants and controllers the chance to find out which financial software packages make their jobs easier.

Last October, national accounting software systems representatives came to Raleigh, N.C., to demonstrate their software in the Second Annual Accounting Shoot-Out. The Shoot-Out was quite a roundup of accountants and software industry representatives, with more than 50 attendees scoring Dynamics LAN, Macola Progression Series, and M•A•S 90® EVOLUTION/2™ accounting software systems on a number of features. Free admission to the Information Technology Expo allowed those attending the Shoot-Out to see the latest in computing technology during breaks.

Both the software vendors and the Raleigh Chapter board of directors formulated the tough list of accounting issues we asked these packages to address (see sidebar). As each software representative demonstrated how his or her system handled a particular task, the audience ranked the system's ability to perform. At the end, we tallied the scores to determine which system best met the needs of the accountants and controllers in the audience. The winner: Dynamics LAN from Great Plains. (See Figure 1 for a breakdown of the results.)

Dynamics earned *PC Magazine's* Editor's Choice for Windows™-based, multiuser accounting systems (reviewed in the October 10, 1995 issue).[1] As a result, it came as no surprise to the readers of *PC Magazine* that Dynamics won the Shoot-Out by a comfortable margin.

How did the packages stack up? Dynamics is a native Windows application. Macola, on the other hand, has a Windows front end for all modules and is in the process of releasing true Windows accounting software. M•A•S 90 is in beta testing for a Windows system manager and general ledger, so it showed its DOS product.

M•A•S 90 screens were character-based, while Macola offered the Windows graphical user interface (GUI). Despite the differences in look and feel, Macola and M•A•S 90 virtually tied for second place. It appears that features are as important to accountants as are GUIs. As *PC Magazine* noted in its accounting software review, all major accounting software vendors are working on a Windows product, but progress toward a Windows platform has been slower and more difficult than most vendors anticipated. For this reason, the attendees/judges were asked to ignore any technological irregularities (system crashes).

L.-r., Cheryl May, Chris Lewis, and Todd Bishop look over the configure the computer to keep score during the Shoot-Out.

There is one important factor to note regarding the tie for second place. Due to changes in the structure of the Shoot-Out, Macola was asked at the last minute to participate and did not have as much time to prepare for the event as the other vendors.

ABOUT THE COMPANIES

In the first question, we asked vendors to discuss their company: the number of installations, number of years in business, size of companies

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QUESTIONS

VENDOR INTRODUCTIONS:

Tell us about your company: number of installations, number of years in business, size of companies using the software, corporate philosophy and goals.

DATA ENTRY:

Post an employee's time, spread it to multiple payroll departments, AND post to these different departments in the General Ledger.

Show how to enter beginning A/R balances and customer history.

How do I identify and track transactions per data entry operator? Demonstrate online audit trail features.

FINANCIAL INFORMATION:

What do I need to do if I want to change the chart of accounts AND financial statement layout in the middle of the fiscal year?

How does your product handle querying for various criteria, for example, all departments over budget by 10% or more?

SYSTEM-WIDE FEATURES:

How will your software address the year 2000 date?

What is your migration path to 32-bit Windows 95 architecture?

Open architecture—Elaborate on tools available for:

1. Getting information out of the database (report writer),
2. Getting data in (language libraries),
3. Database server options.

Discuss modules (your own or third party) that address:

1. MRP II,
2. Engineering design,
3. Contact manager/lead analysis.

MAINTENANCE PLANS:

What are the technical support options, code enhancements/updates policy, customization ability, and annual maintenance fees as a percent of module price?

Raleigh

using their software, and corporate philosophy and goals. The highest score was awarded to M•A•S 90. Tom Bemiller, field sales representative, used color graphs and a computer-generated slide show to introduce State of the Art and the M•A•S 90 product line. Dynamics was ranked second. Ken Stewart, senior CPA account executive for Great Plains Software, made the presentation. Macola was represented by a local vendor, Francie Miller, director of financial services for Computer Decisions, Inc.

Next we asked each vendor to post an employee's time, spread it to multiple payroll departments, and post to these different departments in the general ledger. Again M•A•S 90 scored the highest with virtually identical scores for Macola and Dynamics. All three systems appeared to handle this challenge easily.

Showing how the programs entered beginning accounts receivable balances and customer histories was next. Again M•A•S 90 scored the highest with the scores for Macola and Dynamics being virtually identical. All three systems had no trouble with this request.
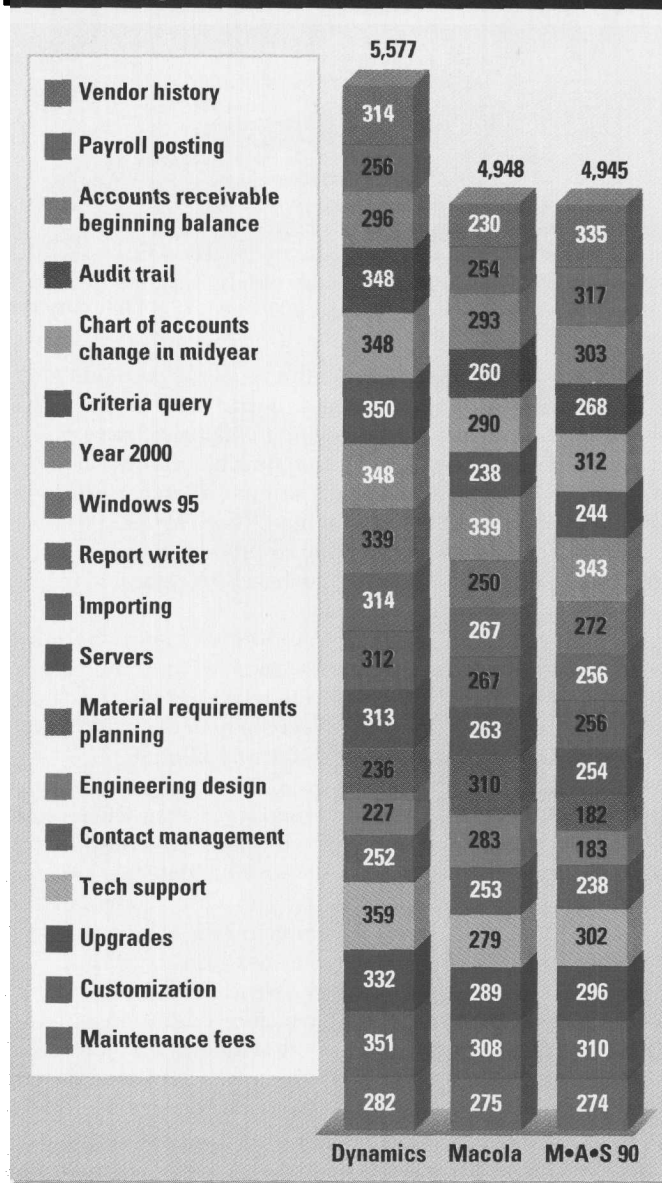
Next we queried how one identifies and tracks transactions through the data entry operator, including a demonstration of online audit trail features. Dynamics excelled in this area with its transaction drill-down feature and ability to perform cross-module zooms (lookups) with the click of a mouse. The audience clearly preferred the on-screen lookup capabilities of Dynamics to the transaction tracking reports offered by the other vendors.

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FROM THE CONTROLLER: CHANGING THE ACCOUNTS

A controller's question was considered next. "What do I need to do if I want to change the chart of accounts and financial statement layout in the middle of the fiscal year?" Dynamics allowed the most flexibility in the account struc-

Figure 1. SHOOT-OUT RESULTS

	Dynamics	Macola	M•A•S 90
Total	5,577	4,948	4,945
Vendor history	314		
Payroll posting	256		
Accounts receivable beginning balance	296	230	335
Audit trail	348	254	317
Chart of accounts change in midyear	348	293	303
Criteria query	350	260	268
Year 2000	348	290	312
Windows 95	339	238	244
Report writer	314	339	343
Importing	312	250	272
Servers	313	267	256
Material requirements planning	236	267	256
Engineering design	227	263	254
Contact management	252	310	182
Tech support	359	283	183
Upgrades	332	253	238
Customization	351	279	302
Maintenance fees	282	289	296
		308	310
		275	274

ture, with a 20-digit alphanumeric field and up to 10 user-defined segments. M•A•S 90 offered a nine-digit alphanumeric field and up to three user-defined segments, while Macola offered a 15-digit numeric field and up to three user-defined segments. None of the vendors recommended changing the account structure in midyear but instead suggested that new numbers be added during the year. New financial statements could be produced in three ways by Dynamics: the Quick Financial Statements, the Advanced Financial Analysis feature, or the Report Writer module. M•A•S 90 also scored well

Robin Woodlief (l.) and Kay Rowe discuss business ideas as the Shoot-Out gets under way. Both women work for Clintrials, based in Research Triangle Park, N.C.

Ken Stewart, Great Plains Software vendor, celebrates winning the Shoot-Out after being awarded the victor's headgear.

because of its ability to merge accounts and re-number accounts, both those in the current year-to-date file and in historical records.

How does your product handle queries for various criteria, for example, all departments over budget by 10% or more? Both M•A•S 90 and Macola's answer was to produce a report using a third-party tool such as F9. Dynamics' response was that reports are not always the answer. The audience overwhelmingly agreed with Dynamics and clearly appreciated the on-screen query capabilities that software offered.

Our next question was a nonissue for the vendors: How will your software address the year 2000 date? As evidenced by the close scores, all three accounting systems are ready for next century dates.

We then asked about the vendors' migration path to 32-bit Windows 95 architecture. Dynamics outscored the other systems because it already is a 32-bit native application. M•A•S 90 for Windows earned second place because when the product ships it will be a 32-bit native application. Macola was third because the system will be redesigned for 32-bit architecture as soon as the system compiler is 32-bit.

OPEN ARCHITECTURE AND TOOLS

Open architecture and tools available for getting information out of the database (report writer), getting data in (language libraries), and database server options were discussed next. Again Dynamics' score surpassed the other sys-

tems due to the Dynamic Data Exchange (DDE) demonstration that showed a graph of sales commissions in Excel accessed from a user-customized "work" button within Dynamics. Dynamics also offers three built-in report writers—Quick Financials, Advanced Finanical Analysis, and a system-wide Report Writer—along with compatibility with F9 and other third-party report writing tools. For importing, Dynamics offers both the Software Development Kit (SDK) to create Data Dictionary Files (DDF) and its source code, written in a proprietary, cross-platform development tool called Dexterity. Finally, Dynamics is available for a wide variety of database servers, including Btrieve NLM, Btrieve NT, Faircom Server (UNIX), and Microsoft SQL Server 6.0, which are available now. Sybase is scheduled for future release.

For architecture and tools, M•A•S 90 scored slightly higher than Macola by offering four ways to extract information from the system. Exporting data is possible through the custom general ledger report writer, the system-wide report writer, a third-party tool such as Crystal Reports (system wide), or by using F9 (for general ledger information only). Importing can be done with the Import Master Module, which addresses nine different file formats. M•A•S 90 for Windows will use a Watcom Database and be available on UNIX, Windows, and Windows NT platforms.

Macola includes Data Dictionary Files (DDF) with its software. Therefore, in addition to offering F9 and the EIS Report Writer module, almost any third-party program such as Microsoft Access, Borland's Paradox, or Powersoft's Powerbuilder can access data in Macola. To import information, the user can create tables in Microsoft Access or any other program that can read Macola's DDFs or use the Macola ASCII text import utility. Macola uses Btrieve NLM for its database and plans to offer a SYBASE database in the future.

Next, vendors discussed maintenance plans, focusing on technical support options, code enhancements, and update/upgrade policies. Readers requiring the full details of each vendor's maintenance plan should contact the vendor directly. The audience was very impressed with Dynamics' on-call offering of 30-minute response time from the technician assigned to the account, on call 24 hours a day. The audience also seemed impressed with M•A•S 90's forum on Compuserve and three-volume CD-ROM technical reference support guide. Annual maintenance fees, as a percent of the module price, varied from 50% of the module price for the Dynamics on-call technician down to 13% for M•A•S 90's lowest-priced support option.
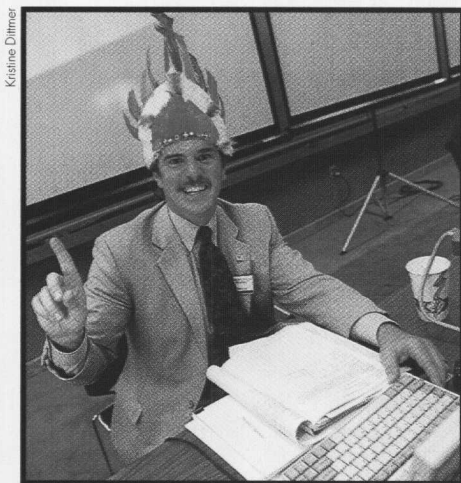
The ability to customize each system was addressed next. Dynamics offers many user-customizable features such as field names, the work button, user-defined checklists, and routines. M•A•S 90 also offers the ability to set up user task menus and to add items to existing menus. Macola's Designer Developer module allows menus to be rearranged, options to be hidden from users, and field names to be changed.
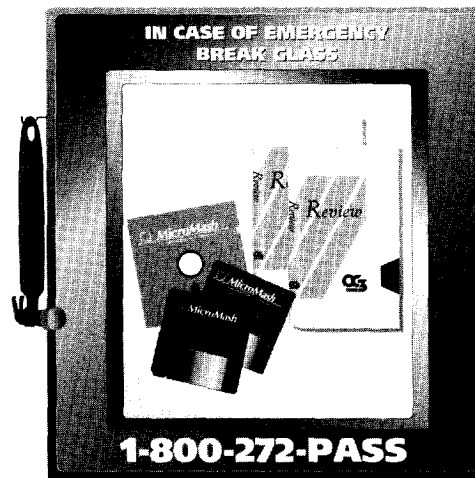
BEYOND CORE ACCOUNTING

We focused next on issues beyond the core accounting area to determine how each system addressed Manufacturing Resource Planning II (MRP II), engineering design, and contact manager/lead analysis. Macola bested the others with a fully integrated suite of modules designed for both the light manufacturer and the full MRP user, offering bill of materials, master scheduling, interfaces for AutoCAD, and plans for an engineering design module in version 7. Despite the fact that it is not an MRP II system, M•A•S 90 took second place because it does offer bill of materials and material requirements planning modules for light manufacturers. Dynamics came in third with its strategy of focusing on core accounting solutions and letting third parties address other needs.

Regarding contact management capabilities, Macola edged out Dynamics by one point, and M•A•S 90 came in third. M•A•S 90 currently links with Telemagic, while Macola offers a link to Telemagic and MarketForce. Dynamics also links with Telemagic. A third-party developer has written a contact management system in Dexterity that has the same look and feel as Dynamics, enhancing its ease of use and reducing the learning curve.

FROM THE AUDIENCE

After the vendors answered our prearranged questions, the audience got its turn. Two questions were especially interesting: the number of users and the average price for a four-user system with general ledger, accounts payable, and accounts receivable. Dynamics LAN has more than 3,000 users, with 40,000 total customers of all the Great Plains products. Macola has fewer than 1,000 users on its Windows product, with 17,000 total customers. M•A•S 90 has 70,000 customers on its DOS and UNIX products. The average price of the systems ranged from $3,000 to $6,000.

As the day ended, laptops were unplugged, and the smoke slowly cleared. Left standing above the rest was the high plains drifter from Great Plains—clear winner of the Second Annual Shoot-Out in Raleigh. ∎

Annette West, CMA, CPA, is a certified ABRA trainer. She is a member and past president of the Raleigh (N.C.) Chapter and can be reached at (919) 833-6020.

[1] Solomon IV for Windows also was Editor's Choice. Solomon declined to attend the Shoot-Out, as did last year's Shoot-Out winner, Platinum software.