RIM out to rev up BlackBerry with sexy new apps

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Co-chief executive Mike Lazaridis opened a major RIM developers conference here with a humble acknowledgement that the company stumbled with a recent BlackBerry service outage and quickly shifted to talk of an upbeat future.

"The worldwide outages we experienced were unfortunate," Lazaridis said during an opening presentation at the BlackBerry DevCon Americas

gathering.

"We restored full service as quickly as we could," he said. "Now, we are focused on making things right for our more than 70 million BlackBerry users."

Lazaridis then unveiled a next-generation BlackBerry BBX platform designed to let developers build rich, quick applications to run on RIM smartphones and its PlayBook tablet computers.

RIM has sold 165 million BlackBerry smartphones and more than a billion applications have been downloaded from RIM's online App World, according to Lazaridis.

The launch of the new BlackBerry 7 line of handsets was touted as the best in the company's history.

Lazaridis said that BBX, named in tribute to its combination of BlackBerry and QNX Software Systems technology, provides a powerful new platform for developers for programs focus on anything from work to games.

"BBX is a single unified platform for the entire world -- phones, tablets, and millions of inventive devices we use every day of our lives," said QNX chief executive Dan Dodge.

"You get reliability and security; our architecture is safe by design."

Noticeably absent from the presentation were clues to what RIM has in store regarding handsets that will run on the BBX operating system.

The company is on record saying that it plans to release new smartphone models early next year.

Demonstrations at DevCon were done on PlayBook tablets with seven-inch (17 centimeter) screens boasting multi-touch control capabilities.

"Just like we revolutionized wireless email we are transforming the tablet experience," Lazaridis said of PlayBook, which was released this year and has posed little challenge to Apple's market-ruling iPad.

Known for serious, work handsets as compared to sleek Apple or Android smartphones tailored for Internet-on-the-go lifestyles, RIM showcased game applications.

Science fiction action game "Dead Space" and racing title "Raging Thunder" were demonstrated on PlayBooks, along with a playful "ToFu" that involved firing virtual soy-based goo at targets.

Marmalade president Alex Caccia joined Lazaridis to show off a "Laura Croft" game built for BBX by Square Enix using his company's software engine.

"The performance is fantastic," Caccia said as he tilted a PlayBook to control an on-screen action film character.

"It's not an elbow waver you get with some of the larger tablets," he said in a slight jab at bigger screens on other tablets, notably iPads and Android devices.

RIM prompted applause with vows to streamline processes for making applications for its devices and getting software onto App World's virtual shelves.

In another sign that RIM is intent on shedding the "business-only" image of its devices, the company is building on freshly released BlackBerry Balance technology that lets work and play applications exist in harmony

on handsets.

Balance, which will ship with every BlackBerry device, keeps company programs walled off from personal apps loaded onto handsets, according to RIM software vice president Alan Panezic.

"We think our users don't want one or two apps; they want hundreds," Panezic said.

"They want access to Facebook, Twitter, personal email and their corporate email," he continued.

Balance hosts company programs and data on RIM's network, requiring people to sign in with passwords if they want access from BlackBerry handsets.

Secure communications and encrypted email are at the foundation of BlackBerry popularity with company's and governments.

"We are investing in our future," Lazaridis said as he opened the three-day conference. "Our team is very strong and laser focused on one platform, BBX."

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