AL - Windows Application Launcher

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1. Overview

AL is a Windows utility that allows you to quickly and easily launch all your most used Microsoft Windows 3.1, '95, NT, DOS, and OS/2 2.1 applications. AL eliminates the need for double-clicking though group icons and hassling with sizing, scrolling, and moving windows around in the Program Manager while searching for the desired application icon.

The AL window is divided into three sections. These sections contain the three types of AL buttons. The top section contains the Bank buttons, the middle section contains Text buttons, and the lower section contains Icon buttons. An optional clock and system resource meters can be displayed below the icon button (see System Parameters).

Bank buttons allow you to group your applications together in some logical order. Buttons could be grouped by function, by what Program Manager groups they fall under, or by any other criteria. There are two styles of Bank buttons that you can select: Panel and LED (see System Parameters). Panel style Bank buttons light up when a given bank is selected. LED style Bank buttons have a simulated LED on them that lights when the given bank is selected. You can also assign a font to a Bank button. The text on that Bank button and all the Text buttons under it will use the font that you select. If you don't want to group your Text and Icon buttons under banks, you can "turn off" the banks by setting Bank Button Rows to 0 in the System Parameters.

Text buttons actually launch, or run, applications when they are pressed. AL only displays the text buttons that are assigned to the current bank. If you were to select another bank, the Text buttons of that bank would replace the Text buttons of the previously selected bank. Text buttons are used mainly for applications that do not have icons such as DOS applications, batch files, AL functions, and applications that are better described with text. Text buttons are necessary for applications that reside on removable media such as floppy drives or CD ROM. Icon buttons should not be used for those types of applications because AL may not be able to access the application icons on start up.

Icon buttons function in the same way that Text buttons do, except they display an icon rather than text. You do not have to use the default icon that comes with an application. You can select any icon from any file for each icon button. This allows you to create Icon buttons for applications that don't have icons. A couple good places to get icons from are PROGMAN.EXE and MORICONS.DLL, which should be in your Windows directory. As mentioned above, don't create Icon buttons for removable media applications. Icon buttons take longer to load when AL starts up. If it takes a long time for AL to load, you may want to convert some of your lesser used Icon buttons to Text buttons. This should not be a problem on 386DX systems or better (unless you get really carried away creating buttons!).

If you have more Bank, Text, or Icon buttons defined than will fit on the screen, Scroll buttons will appear. Pressing the Scroll buttons will allow you to move forwards or backwards, so that you may access all of the buttons that you have defined. Each time

you press a Scroll button, you will advance or back up the number of buttons equal to the number of spaces for those buttons on the screen. Scrolling though Text or Icon buttons will only allow you to access the Text or Icon buttons that you have defined for the current bank.

The number of buttons of any type that you can create, is limited only by your system resources. There is also no limit to the number of Text and Icon buttons that can be in each bank. You can also independently change the color of each button. Buttons can be linked to .WAV files so that you can add sound effects to your applications if you have a sound board. AL also has useful built in functions that you can execute like any other application.

2. Getting Started

AL comes with a pre-made button data file called AL.DAT. The setup program created the AL icon with a command line that will load the sample AL.DAT. This will give you a base of buttons that you can modify to meet you needs. By default, AL attempts to load AL.DAT from your Windows directory when it is started. You can specify a button data file on the command line so that AL reads its button data from another file. Example:

C:\AL\AL.EXE C:\AL\BOB.DAT

When started, AL will read the button data from BOB.DAT. The purpose behind specifying a button data file is to allow you to set up multiple configurations of AL. If different people use the same computer system, they will be able to have their own set of button data. You will have to set up icons in the Program Manager for each configuration so that each person can run their own copy of AL. Please note that if you do not specify a path, AL will try to load the button data from the Windows directory.

Any changes you make to the buttons are automatically saved by AL

AL also comes with a program called PM2AL that will create an AL button data file based on your current Program Manager groups and icons. It will save you a lot of time entering initial button information. After using PM2AL, you may go in and edit the buttons, customizing AL to your needs. See the section on Program Manager to AL for more information.

3. Program Manager to AL

AL comes with a utility called PM2AL that reads Windows group files and creates AL buttons based on the information it finds. You can create new button data files, or add buttons to existing ones. You can also select whether you want to create Text, Icon, or both types of buttons for each application that PM2AL finds. PM2AL works with both Windows 3.1 and '95.

Follow these steps to use PM2AL:

1) Run PM2AL by double-clicking on its icon.

2) Enter the button data file name. If you are going to use the default button file, enter AL.DAT. NOTE: PM2AL only works on button data files in the AL directory.

3) Select whether you want to create Text buttons, Icon buttons, or both types of buttons for each application PM2AL finds. You can always delete the ones you don't want later.

4) Select whether you want to Overwrite or Append to the data file. If you are initially creating a button data file, select Overwrite. If you wish to add buttons to an existing button data file, select Append. If you wish to delete all the buttons from an existing button data file and create new ones, select Overwrite.

5) Enter the path of the directory that contains the desired .GRP files (This may not always be C:\WINDOWS!), and press ENTER.

6) Select the groups you want converted to buttons from the Groups list box.

7) Press Start.

PM2AL will quickly create the new buttons for you. If your group files exist in different directories, you can start out in one directory using the Overwrite or Append option, whichever the case may be, then go to the next directory and create buttons using the Append option. When you are finished, press Exit to leave PM2AL.

4. Configuring Buttons

You can create, edit, delete, or change the position of the button in the AL window. There are two ways of performing these tasks. The first way is through the Edit Buttons dialog which is accessed by selecting Configure->Edit Buttons... in the AL menu. The second way is through the button menus.

4.1. The Edit Buttons Dialog

The Edit Buttons dialog contains controls that allow you to create, edit, delete, or change the position of Bank buttons, and configure the Text/Icon buttons assigned to a given bank. Below are a list of controls and their functions (note that some controls act on the bank that is selected in the Bank List):

New Bank   Add a new Bank button
Edit Bank...   Edit the currently selected bank (see Editing Bank Buttons)
Delete Bank   Delete the currently selected bank
Text Buttons... Access the Text buttons assigned to the currently selected bank
                          (see Text/Icon Buttons dialog below)
Icon Buttons...   Access the Icon buttons assigned to the currently selected bank
Move Up   Move the currently selected bank up one position
Move Down   Move the currently selected bank down one position

4.2. The Text/Icon Buttons Dialog

The Text/Icon Buttons dialog contains controls that allow you to create, edit, delete or change the position of Text/Icon buttons. Below are a list of controls and their functions (note that some controls act on the button that is selected in the Button List):

New Button   Add a new button
Edit Button...   Edit the currently selected button (see Editing Text/Icon Buttons)
Delete Button   Delete the currently selected button
Move Up   Move the currently selected button up one position
Move Down   Move the currently selected button down one position
Copy Button   Copy the currently selected button to other banks (see Copying
                             Buttons)

4.3. The Button Menus

You can also access all the button configuration functions through the button menus. Simply right-click on any button to bring up the button menu. If you wish to edit one of the buttons, this is a much quicker way to access the edit dialog for that button.

You can also right-click on a blank area of the AL window to create a new button. The type of button that is created depends on what part of the AL window you right-click.

5. Editing Bank Buttons

Bank button characteristics are changed through the Edit Bank dialog. See the section on Configuring Buttons for information on accessing the Edit Bank dialog.   The following is a list of controls and their use for the Edit Bank dialog:

Title
The button title is the text that appears on the button. It is also used to identify the button in other dialogs (i.e. button lists).

Sound File
If you have a sound board, you can link a sound to AL that will play whenever a given bank button is pressed. You can either enter the pathname of the desired .WAV file directly into the Sound File edit box or press the Browse... button next to the Sound File edit box to use the file browse dialog to select the sound file.

Color
You can select a color for the Bank button in the Colors list box. Note that if you have selected Panel buttons in the System Parameters, only the dark colors are listed here. This is because AL uses the corresponding light colors to show button illumination. If Panel buttons are not selected in the System Parameters, you can choose a color from the whole list of colors.

Font
If you wish to change the font for that button and all the text buttons under it, press the Font... button next to the font name. A selection dialog will appear that you can use to select the desired font. AL screens all available fonts and only lets you select from the fonts that will most likely work on the Bank and Text Buttons. Still, some of these fonts may not be correctly displayed due to the way Windows will substitute fonts if a desired font pitch is unavailable.

Use default configuration
If you check Use default config., AL will use the default screen configuration set up in the System Parameters when this bank is selected. If not, it will use the screen configuration information found in this dialog. This is useful if you have some banks that contain all Text or Icon buttons. You can configure those banks to show only the necessary number of button rows for each type. That way you do not end up with large blank areas in the AL window. Though this option, you can customize how each bank is displayed. See System Parameters for more information on configuring AL screens.

Password
Password brings up a dialog that allows you to assign or change the password associated with a given bank. Please read the section on passwords before you press this button!!!

6. Editing Text Buttons

Text button characteristics are changed through the Edit Text Button dialog. See the section on Configuring Buttons for information on accessing the Edit Text Button dialog.   The following is a list of controls and their use for the Edit Text Button dialog:

Title
The button title is the text that appears on the button. It is also used to identify the button in other dialogs (i.e. button lists).

Program
This is the action to be taken when the button is pressed. It can either run a program, execute a special function, or nothing at all. To run a program, type in the pathname of the program you wish to run. It can be an .EXE, .COM, .BAT, or .PIF file. You can also use the Browse... button to search your system for the desired program. If you wish to execute a special function, simply drop down the list and select the desired function. See the section on special functions for more information. You may wish to leave the program edit box blank to create a button that just plays .WAV files when pressed.

Arguments
The Arguments edit box lets you specify command line arguments. For instance you could set up NOTEPAD.EXE in the Program edit box and WISHLIST.TXT in the Arguments edit box. Pressing that button will run Notepad and automatically load WISHLIST.TXT. You can also use the *PROMPT keyword in your command line arguments. Before AL launches an application, it checks to see if the *PROMPT keyword is used in the command line arguments. If so, AL will prompt you to input a parameter for each *PROMPT that is found. Suppose you want to use Notepad to edit one of many text files in the C:\DATA directory. You can specify this command line argument: C:\DATA*PROMPT.TXT. Al will prompt you for the name of the file you wish to edit. Note that the *PROMPT must be in upper case letters. The rest of the command line argument text may be in either case.

Sound File
If you have a sound board, you can link a sound to AL that will play whenever a given bank button is pressed. You can either enter the pathname of the desired .WAV file directly into the Sound File edit box or press the Browse... button next to the Sound File edit box to use the file browse dialog to select the sound file.

Color
You can select a color for the button in the Colors list box.

Password
Password brings up a dialog that allows you to assign or change the password associated with this button. Please read the section on passwords before you press this button!!!

7. Editing Icon Buttons

Icon button characteristics are changed through the Edit Icon Button dialog. See the section on Configuring Buttons for information on accessing the Edit Icon Button dialog.   The following is a list of controls and their use for the Edit Icon Button dialog:

Title
The button title is only used to identify the button in other dialogs (i.e. button lists).

Program
The Program edit box works the same as in the Edit Text Button dialog. See Editing Text Buttons for more information.

Arguments
The Arguments edit box works the same as in the Edit Text Button dialog. See Editing Text Buttons for more information.

Sound File
The Sound File edit box works the same as in the Edit Text Button dialog. See Editing Text Buttons for more information.

Color
You can select a background color for button in the Colors list box.

Icon File
The Icon File is where AL gets the icon from that it displays on the button. In most cases, the contents of this edit box will be the same as the contents of the Program edit box. If you wish to use an icon from another file, you can specify the pathname of that file here. You can use the Browse... button to search for a file. This alternate icon file is useful for creating Icon buttons for applications which do not have icons, such as batch files and DOS applications. Two Windows files with a lot of icons are PROGMAN.EXE and MORICONS.DLL. These files should be in your Windows directory. If at any time, the icon of any icon button is not shown, it means that AL was not able to load the icon for that button. This can be caused by either deleting or moving the file that contained the icon.

Icon #
Some files contain more than one icon. Using the Next and Prev buttons allow you to step through the icons that are available from the file specified in the Icon File edit box. You will know when you hit the end of the icons when no icon is visible. You can have AL display any icon from the icon file.

Password
Password brings up a dialog that allows you to assign or change the password associated with this button. Please read the section on passwords before you press this

button!!!

8. System Parameters

        The System Parameters dialog allows you to configure how AL looks on the screen. It contains the controls for setting up the number of buttons shown on the screen for all three types, the style of Bank buttons, the system password, etc. You access the System Parameters dialog by selecting Configure->System Parameters from AL's menu. The following is the list of controls in the System Parameters dialog:

Background Color
        You can set the default background color by selecting a color from the Background Color list.

AL Size
        The size of the buttons in the AL window is user selectable. Selecting Normal, displays normal size buttons. Baby AL changes the AL window to 75% of the normal size, Big AL changes it to 150%.

Caption
        Type in the text you want displayed on the title bar of the AL window.

Button Columns
        The Button Columns parameter specifies how many columns of Bank or Text buttons you desire. Every button column is equivalent to three columns of Icon buttons. You can create from 1 to 4 button columns.

Bank, Text, and Icon Rows
        The Rows edit boxes select the number of rows of each type of button you wish to have on the screen. If you want all your Text and Icon buttons in one bank, you can set the Bank Rows to 0. No bank buttons will be displayed. Likewise if you want AL to look like a button bar, you can set the Button Columns to 4 and both the Bank and Text Rows to 0. Only the Icon buttons will be displayed. Note that if you do not wish to use multiple banks, you still must create at least one Bank button to group the Text and Icon buttons under.

Panel Style Bank Buttons
        Check the Panel Style Bank Buttons checkbox for panel style buttons. If this is not checked, the Bank buttons will be displayed in LED style buttons. Note that changing the style of Bank buttons may change their color also.

Display Digital Clock
        Selecting this causes AL to display a digital clock and calendar under the Icon buttons.

Display System Gauges
        Selecting this causes AL to display a set of available system resource gauges under the Icon buttons. You can use these gauges to monitor system resource usage by

open applications.

Set Position

Push this button to save the current screen position of AL. The next time AL is started, it will be displayed in this position.

System Password

The Password button sets the system password. Read the section on passwords before pressing this button!!! Press exit to save your changes and leave this dialog.

9. Passwords

AL supports three levels of password protection. The different password levels prevent the user from changing banks, activating Text or Icon buttons, changing the system configuration, or altering any of the buttons, without the password.

All passwords are changed by using the Change Password dialog, which is available from many places within AL.

Passwords are set by first activating the Change Password dialog from one of many places within AL. Enter the current password in the Enter current password: edit box. If there is no current password (i.e. initially setting the password), do not enter anything. Press Tab and enter the new password. Notice that AL does not display the characters you are typing. This prevents onlookers from learning your password. Press Tab and enter the new password again. This is a safety precaution to prevent typing mistakes. Press OK to save the password change or Cancel to exit without changing the password. If you wish to remove the password, enter the old password in the current password box and leave the other two boxes blank.

The system password is set in the System Parameters dialog. It prevents the user from bringing up the System Parameters dialog or the Edit Bank Buttons dialog. The user cannot add any new button banks to the system or change the screen configuration without the password.

The bank password is set in the Edit Bank Buttons dialog. It prevents the user from activating that bank, and bringing up the Edit Text Buttons or Edit Icon Buttons dialogs for that bank. When in the Edit Bank Buttons dialog, the user cannot update or delete that bank without the password.

The Text and Icon Passwords are set in their corresponding edit dialogs. The user cannot launch an application without the password for that button, if a password has been set. When in the appropriate dialog, the user cannot update the button, delete the button, or double-click on the button to see how the button is configured, without the password.

If you perform some action that requires a password, AL will bring up a small dialog that will ask for the password. Enter the password and press ENTER. The characters you type will not be displayed for security purposes. If you enter the wrong password, an invalid password message will appear in the dialog. You can correct your entry and try again. If you do not know the password, use the system menu for the password dialog to exit.

Do not forget your passwords! If you do, you may have to delete the old data file and re-enter all the button data.

10. Copying Buttons

There are two methods of copying Text or Icon buttons in AL. The first is to hold down the CTRL key and left-click on a button. Notice that the cursor changes to a button cursor. While holding down the left mouse button, move the cursor to a Bank button, then release the left mouse button. A copy of the button will be made in that bank. Note that you can only make of copy of the same type (Text or Icon) in the destination bank with this method.

The second method is through the Copy Button dialog. See the section on Configuring Buttons for information on how to access the Copy Button dialog. The copy button dialog allows you to copy a button as a Text and/or Icon button into any number of banks in one shot.

Once you have the Copy Button dialog up, select the banks you wish to copy the desired button to. Next select whether you wish to have Text, Icon, or both types of buttons copied to each selected bank. Press OK to copy the buttons or Cancel to exit without copying the buttons.

This dialog is useful for creating buttons that you want in more than one bank. You can create the button the first time, then use this utility to create copies of the button throughout your banks in either text or icon format.

11. Special Functions

AL contains some special functions that you can access through Text or Icon buttons. To set up a special function, simply type the name of the function in the Program edit box of either the Edit Text or Edit Icon Buttons dialogs. Note that all functions are in upper case and begin with an asterisk.

*DOSSHELL - Execute a DOS Shell.
This function reads the COMSPEC system variable and starts a DOS Shell.

*LOCK - Put AL into Lock Mode.
This function puts AL into Lock Mode. In Lock Mode, you cannot activate any Bank, Text, or Icon buttons without entering the system password. This overrides any previous passwords that the buttons may have had. Note that this only affects activating the buttons. All passwords for editing the buttons, if any, remain the same. The idea behind this function is to immediately impose a password on all the buttons if there is a need to do so. Use the *UNLOCK function to restore the original passwords, if any, to the buttons. This function is not very effective if you do not already have a system password set up.

*PROMPT - Enter a command line.
This function will allow you to enter a text command line, with arguments if needed, which AL will attempt to execute. This is different from the *PROMPT used in command line arguments.

*QUIT - Quit AL.
This function saves AL data, then quits to Windows.

*REBOOT - Reboot the system.
This function saves AL, then reboots your computer as if you pressed CTRL-ALT-DEL. It would be a good idea to assign a password to this function if you use it.

*RESTART - Restart Windows.
This function saves AL, then exits and restarts Windows. It would be a good idea to assign a password to this function if you use it.

*RUN - Run an application.
This function brings up the program browse dialog that is used when creating Text and Icon buttons. Double-click on the application you wish to run, or select it and press OK. AL will execute the application you select. This has basically the same function as the Program Manager menu function File->Run. You can use it to run applications that you do not wish to create a Text or Icon button for.

*SECURE - Put AL into Secure Mode.
This puts AL into Secure Mode. In Secure Mode, all of the AL controls are disabled and the cursor cannot leave the AL window. To leave Secure Mode, you need to

enter the System Password. Press mouse button 1 to bring up the password prompt dialog. Secure Mode is useful for when you leave the computer and don't want anyone else to use it.

*SHUTDOWN - Exit Windows.
　　　This function saves AL, then exits Windows. It would be a good idea to assign a password to this function if you use it.

*UNLOCK - Take AL out of Lock Mode.
　　　This function takes AL out of Lock Mode (see *LOCK).

12. Other Features

AL also has other features, which are described below.

12.1. Drag and Drop Button Creation
As a shortcut to button creation, AL allows you to create buttons by dragging them from the File Manager. Simply select a program in the File Manager, and drag it to the AL window. Programs dropped in the Icon button section of the AL window become Icon buttons, programs dropped above the Icon button section become Text buttons. You can also drag and drop data files that are associated with an application. Example: If in the File Manager, you have .TXT files associated with NOTEPAD.EXE, the button created will run Notepad with the file that was dragged as an argument.

12.2. Always on Top
You can force the AL window to be displayed on top of all the other windows that are open regardless of who has focus. To do this, simply select Always on Top from the AL system menu.

12.3. Menu Bar
If you have all your buttons created and the AL window customized to your needs, you probably won't be needing to use the menu bar very often. To save screen space, you can remove the menu by de-selecting Menu in the AL system menu.

12.4. Replacing the Program Manager
AL normally runs along side the Program Manager, but it is possible to use AL as a Program Manager replacement. Although AL was not written to replace the Program Manager, AL should work for normal day to day application launching. It is not recommended that you install software or perform other unusual activities without the Program Manager running.

Here is how to set up AL as a Program Manager replacement:

1) Copy your button data file to AL.DAT in your Windows directory if is not already.

2) Edit your SYSTEM.INI, which is located in your Windows directory, and change the line that reads:

   shell=progman.exe
   to:
   shell=[drive:][path]al.exe

3) Run or restart Windows.

Replacing the Program Manager with AL will free up global memory, user memory, and GDI resources. You can also do this to limit users access to certain applications. Note

that programs that communicate directly with the Program Manager may not work. This feature works in Windows 3.1, but has not been tested in Windows '95.

12.5. FastLoad
When you have a lot of Icon buttons set up, you may notice that it takes longer for AL to load. This is because when AL is started, it has to load all the icons it is going to use on the buttons. If this is a problem, you can specify the FastLoad option on the command line.

Example: C:\AL\AL.EXE /F C:\AL\AL.DAT

When FastLoad is enabled, AL does not load any icons on startup, instead it loads the icons when they are needed. In other words, AL will load the icons for a given bank the first time that bank is selected. There will be a small noticeable delay the first time that bank is selected, but subsequent selections of that bank will be displayed at full speed.

13. AL and OS/2 2.1

AL will run under WIN OS/2 like any other Windows application. You can use AL to launch all your other Windows and DOS applications as you normally would. However, AL cannot read the OS/2 icon format, so all OS/2 applications that you set up in AL must be set up either as Text buttons or Icon buttons using Windows application icons. AL will run most OS/2 applications, but there are always exceptions to the rule. So far, AL will run all the utility programs that come with OS/2. Due to the fact that AL is a "Microsoft Windows" application, any OS/2 limitations are not supported. The fact that AL "works" under OS/2 2.1 was not planned by the author, but was a nice bonus.