Theme Creation

I've received numerous requests on how to make a theme. Well, to tell you the truth, I wish there were a comprehensive tutorial when I first started making themes. Since there is no real complete how-to guide on the Internet for making themes, I thought I would write one.

First of all, what is a theme? Microsoft rushed to release Windows 95, so it did not contain all of the components the developers had created. So a few months after the release of Windows 95, Microsoft Plus! Was released. It contained some fancy add-ons, but the most interesting add-on was the idea of Desktop Themes. A desktop theme is nothing more than a set of instructions that specify your current wallpaper, icons, sounds, screensaver, and system colors. For instance, if I wanted to create a Cindy Crawford theme (Hey that sounds like a good idea!), I would create the wallpaper with her picture on it, icons, etc and bundle them up with instructions that tell Windows to use these objects. These instructions are saved in a theme file with a .theme file extension (ex: Cindy.theme).

You could change your wallpaper, icons, etc. manually within the Control Panel, but this would be time consuming. The theme file is a convenient way to change wallpaper, icons, sounds, etc. all at once. There are many themes out there on the Internet. They range from all types of topics, from people to movies. You can download some themes that I have created here You will need Microsoft Plus! Installed on your system to use desktop themes. However, if you do not have Microsoft Plus!, there is a shareware program called Desktop Themes that allows you to use themes without having Microsoft Plus!. Go ahead and download the program and check it out!

I have broken the tutorial up into different 8 different steps:

Step 1 - Gather Multimedia
Step 2 - Icons
Step 3 - Startup and Shutdown Screens
Step 4 - Wallpaper
Step 5 - Cursors
Step 6 - Sounds
Step 7 - Theme File
Step 8 - Distribution

Step 1: Gather Multimedia

The first thing to do is gather as much multimedia as possible. For instance, if I am making a Cindy Crawford theme, I would search the Web for all the pictures and sounds I could find. One good source for multimedia are webrings. A webring is a collection of web pages with a common theme or topic. A lot of Cindy Crawford web pages would link to one another to form a ring. At the webring homepage, you can search for webrings that interest you. These are great pages for mutimedia. Also, you can always search for multimedia on major search engines such as Yahoo, Infoseek, and Excite

I want to address copyright laws. Technically it's illegal to steal multimedia from web pages and use it for your own creations. However, often times, web authors steal images and try to put their own copyright logo on their web pages. Very often, web authors do not create their own graphics. If there is any question, I suggest asking the web author if you can use the images or sounds on their web pages. Most will allow you to use their multimedia if you ask, as long as you give them some type of credit.

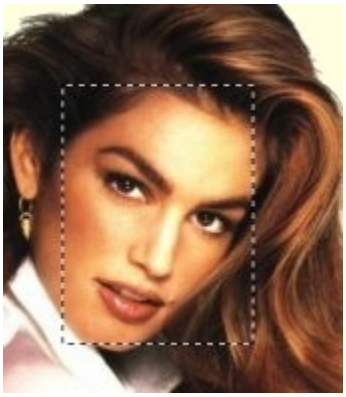
Once you find the images you want, right click on them and choose "Save as" and save them to your hard drive.

Go to Step 2

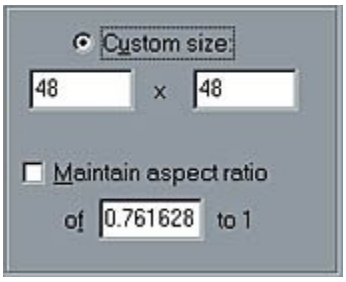
Step 2 – Icons

First, you will need to download an icon-editing program. I recommend downloading a program called Microangelo. Also, you will need a graphics program. Go ahead and download a shareware program called Paint Shop Pro.

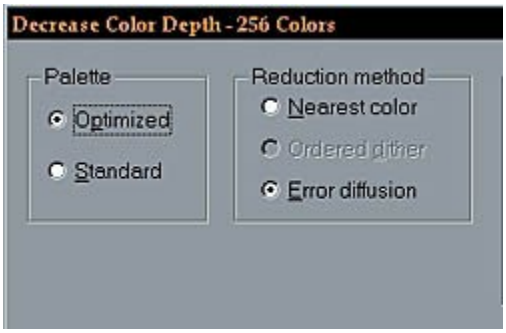
Once you have Paint Shop Pro installed, start the program up and browse though the images you gathered in Step 1. The best images for icons are close ups of the face or logo, etc. The smaller the image, the better. I chose a close up of Cindy's face. Once you have chosen the image, click on the select tool. Now move your cursor to the top left position of the person's face or logo and click the left mouse button and hold it down.



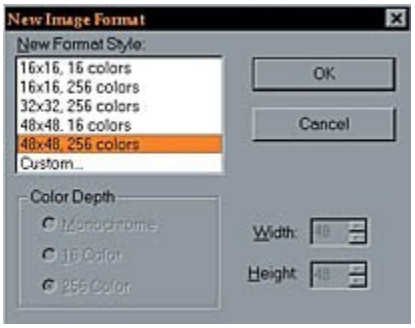
Now draw a box around the face or logo by dragging the cursor to the bottom right position of the face. Release the left mouse button. Now you should have the person's face included in the rectangle. Don't try to fit their whole head in the box, just include the majority of the face. Now click on the IMAGE menu and then hit CROP. This cuts the excess away from the image.



Now click on the IMAGE menu and hit RESAMPLE. This brings up the resample dialog box. Make sure the box that reads "Maintain aspect ratio" is NOT checked. Enter in the dimensions 48 X 48 and hit OK.



Now click on the COLORS menu and click on DECREASE COLOR DEPTH and choose 256 colors. This brings up the color changing dialog box. Click on the "Optimized" option under Palette and click on "Error Diffusion" under Reduction Method and hit OK. Now click on the FILE menu and choose SAVE AS. Give the image a filename and save it as a Bitmap image with a file extension of BMP.



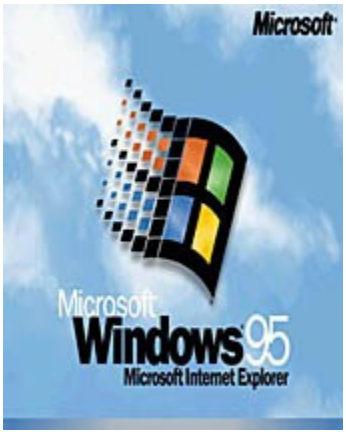
Start up the Studio utility in the Microangelo suite. Click on the "New Image Format" button located on the far right side of the toolbar. This brings up the new icon dialog box. Choose 48 x 48, 256 colors as the new image format. Click on the EDIT menu and then choose the option that reads OPEN BITMAP AS IMAGE. Locate the 48 x 48 bitmap file you created earlier in Paint Shop Pro. Select that file and hit OK. This should import the image you save earlier into the Microangelo Studio utility. Now simply click on the FILE menu and click on SAVE AS to give the new icon a filename.

You will need to repeat this icon to create multiple icons. You generally need 4 desktop icons. These include the My Computer icon, Network Neighborhood, Recycle Bin – full, and Recycle Bin when it is empty.

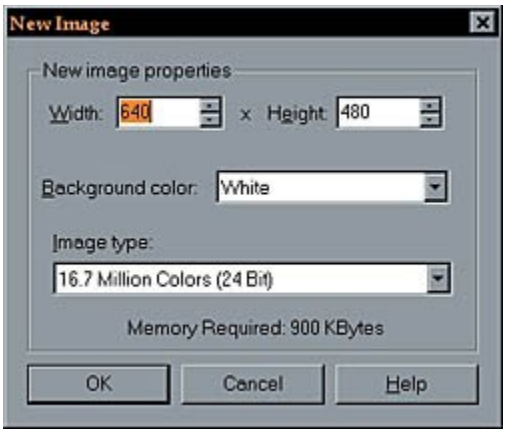
Go to Step 3

Startup Screens

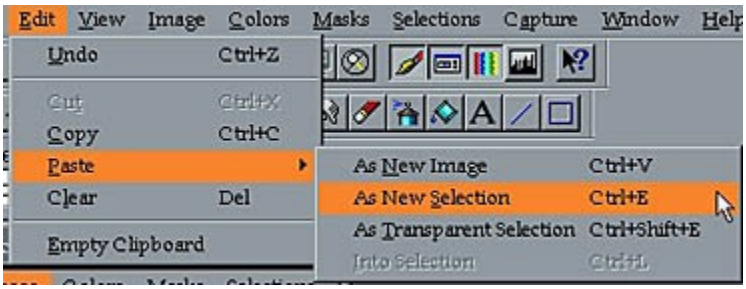
Step 3 – Startup and Shutdown Screens



Startup and Shutdown screens are a nice way to customize your computer. These screens are displayed when you first turn your computer on and when you shut it down. The standard Windows 95 startup screen has a light blue background, a large Window, and reads "Microsoft Windows 95". The Shutdown screen has a black background and reads in orange lettering, "It's now safe to shutdown your computer".

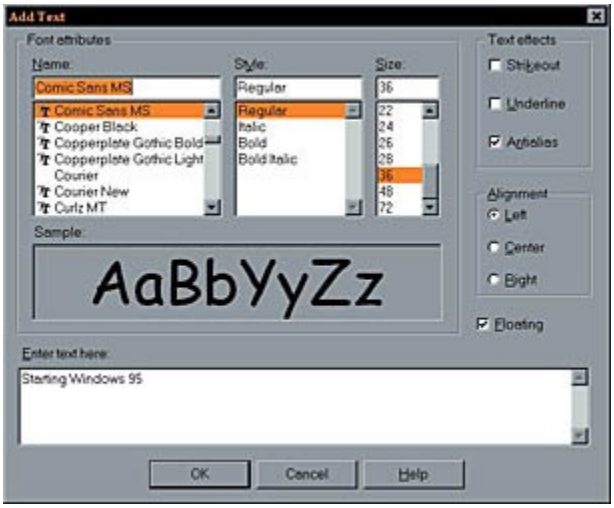


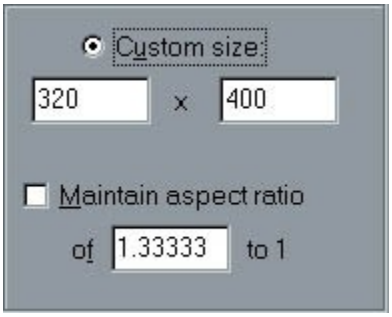
Start up Paint Shop Pro. Now browse through the images you collected in Step 1 and find one you like. Open that image up with Paint Shop Pro. Click on the SELECTIONS menu and then SELECT ALL. Now click on the EDIT menu again and choose COPY. Then, click on the FILE menu and then NEW. This brings up the new file dialog box. Enter in the dimensions 640 x 480 in the dialog box and click on OK.



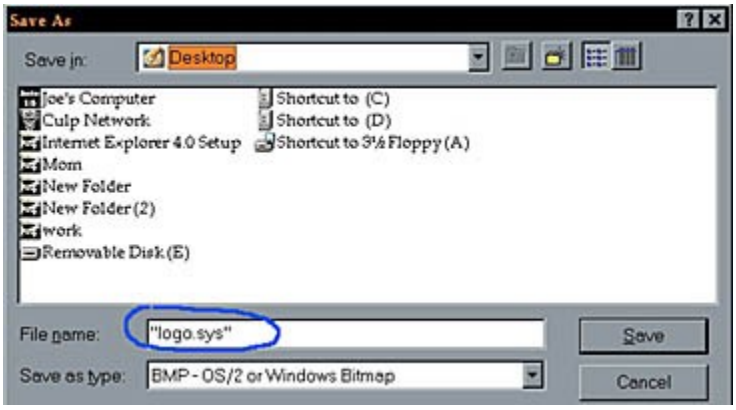
Click on the EDIT menu and choose PASTE INTO and then as NEW SELECTION. Move the image into the desirable position and click once with the left mouse button. This will paste the image into the new file you created.

Now for the lettering. Move the cursor over the color palette in the far right side of Paint Shop Pro. The cursor should change into the shape of a dropper. Click on a desired color for the lettering. Now click on the type tool, which is in the shape of a letter A on the toolbar. Move the mouse over the new image and click where you want the words to appear. This brings up the type tool dialog box. Choose a font and size and enter in a phrase such as "Starting Windows 95" in the lower left box and hit OK.

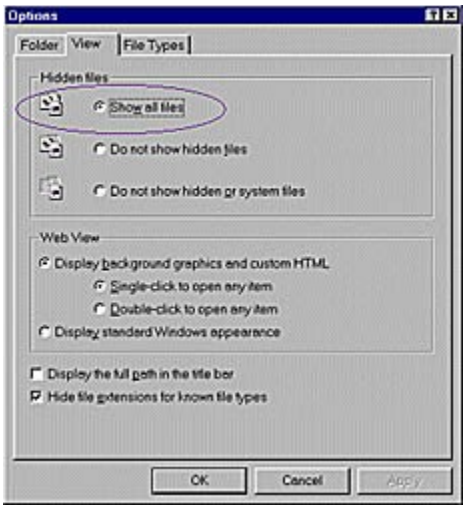




Now click on the IMAGE menu and click on RESMAPLE. This brings up the resample dialog box. Make sure the box that reads "Maintain aspect ratio" is NOT checked. Enter in the dimensions 320 x 400 and hit OK. Next, click on the COLORS menu and hit DECREASE COLOR DEPTH and choose 256 colors. This brings up the color changing dialog box. Click on the "Optimized" option under Palette and click on "Error Diffusion" under Reduction Method and hit OK.



Now all you have to do is save the file. Click on the FILE menu and choose SAVE AS. In the Save As dialog box, click in the white rectangle at the bottom and type in "logo.sys". You must include the quotes around the filename. This forces Paint Shop Pro to save the file with a SYS extension. (The file should also be 126 KB in size).



You now have a startup screen. You need to repeat this process 2 more times to produce a wait screen and a shutdown screen for a total of 3 startup and shutdown screens. You should have noticed that we used a SYS extension above for the startup screen. All of the startup and shutdown screens have a SYS extension. However, by default, Windows 95 hides system files, with SYS extensions, from the user so you will not accidentally delete them. So, in other words, you may not be able to find the startup screen you created earlier. So, double click on My Computer located on the desktop. Then click on the VIEW menu and choose OPTIONS. This brings up a window with three tabs located at the top: Folders, View, and File Types. Click on the View tab and select the Show all files option and hit OK. This forces Windows 95 to show all files to the user including system files such as startup and shutdown screens.

As we have already noted, the startup screen has a filename of logo.sys and must be placed in the C:\ directory. The wait screen must have a filename of logow.sys, the shutdown screen has a filename of logos.sys and both of these files must be placed in the C:\Windows directory. Once again:

Logo.sys -- Start-Up screen located in C:\
Logow.sys -- Wait screen located in C:\Windows
Logos.sys -- Shut off screen located in C:\Windows

Finally, it's a good idea to include a readme.txt file with your theme if you plan to distribute it over the Internet. This file should include instructions for the installation of the theme. It's also a good idea to include the above information in the readme.txt file so the user can install the startup and shutdown screens. We will discuss the readme.txt file in more detail later.

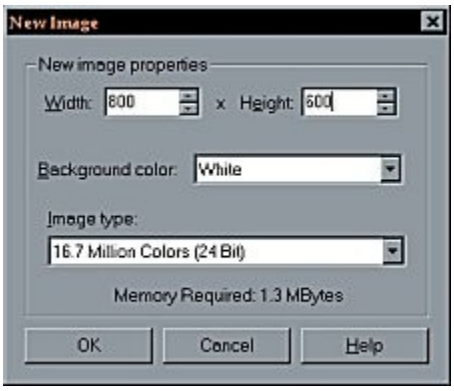
Go to Step 4

Wallpaper

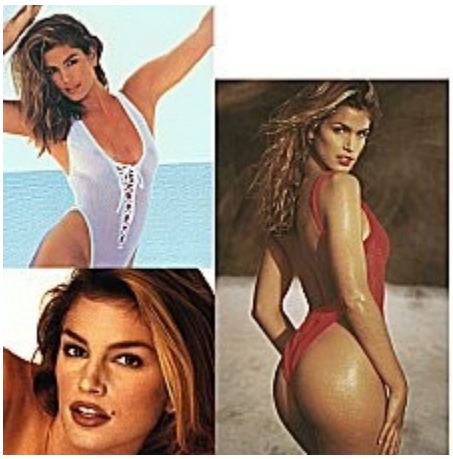
Step 4 – Wallpaper

A cool wallpaper can make or break a desktop theme. The easiest way to create a wallpaper is to use a large image that you gathered in Step 1 and then apply some slight modifications. I chose a picture of Cindy that was 1100 x 900. Open the image you want to use for your wallpaper with Paint Shop Pro. If the image is a large one, around 900 pixels wide or 650 pixels tall, I suggest just applying a filter to the image and then resize it to use as wallpaper.

Once you have a large image opened, click on the IMAGE menu, SPECIAL EFFECTS, and then choose BUTTONIZE. This brings up the Buttonize dialog box. Enter 25% for the Edge Size and make sure the option that reads "Transparent Edge" is checked. Hit OK. This produces a fading out effect for the wallpaper image that is easy on the eyes. This is just one of the filters you can try out. I suggest clicking on the IMAGE menu and then choose FILTER BROWSER and just run through all of the many filters you can apply to your image. You will be able to preview the wallpaper before comitting to the changes.

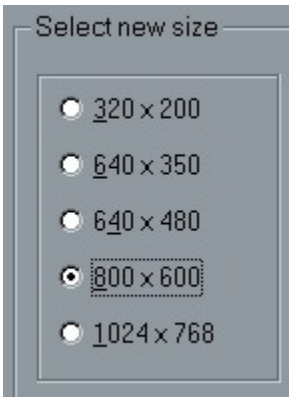


If you do not have one large image to use as wallpaper, and you have a few smaller images, you can alwasy make a collage. Click on the FILE menu and choose NEW. Enter in 800 x 600 for the dimensions and hit OK. Now open each smaller image individually and hit the EDIT menu and choose COPY. Now switch back to the new image file you just created and click on the EDIT menu and choose PASTE and click on AS NEW SELECTION. This will paste the smaller image into the large file you just created.



Move the image to the desired position and click once with the left mouse button. Repeat this process with each smaller image and overlap the images to form a collage.

Now once you have created your wallpaper the final step is to resize it. Most computer users have their monitors set at a resolution of 800 x 600. So, once you have your wallpaper looking good, click on the IMAGE menu and hit RESAMPLE.



This brings up the Resample dialog box. Click on the option on the left side of the dialog box that reads "800 x 600" and hit OK. Now save your wallpaper as a JPEG file with a JPG file extension. Windows usually looks for Bitmap files with the BMP file extension for wallpaper, but Windows 95 also offers support for JPG files to be used as wallpaper. The reason why we save the wallpaper as a JPG file, it's file format can be compressed to a smaller size versus the BMP file format. This means it will reduce the overall size of our Theme components if we use a JPG file.

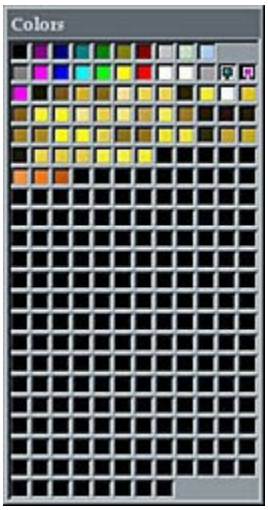
Go to Step 5

Cursors

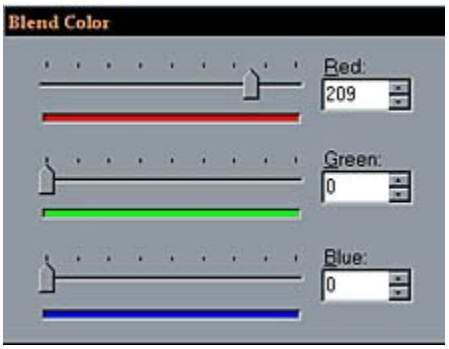
Step 5 – Cursors

The easiest way to make cursors is by using a template rather than creating them by hand. For instance, I usually use a cursor set and just change the color of each cursor to match my theme. You can download a cursor set to use as a template here. Again, we will be using Microangelo to modify the cursors.

Download the template cursor set and use a compression utility such as Winzip to extract the cursors. The template cursor set includes 10 orange cursors. We will change the color to match our theme. So pick one color you want the cursors to be. This color should stand out when the cursor is set against the wallpaper background. For example, if our wallpaper is red, we do not want red cursors, because the cursors would blend in with the wallpaper and will be difficult for the user to locate.

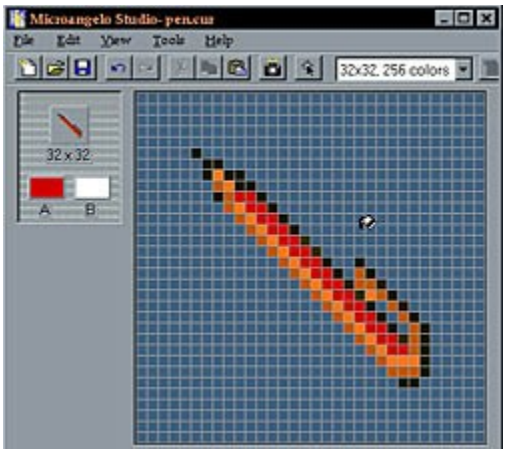


My wallpaper is white so I will use blue for the cursors. Start up the Studio utility in the Microangelo suite. Click on the FILE menu and choose OPEN. Open one of the template cursors you downloaded earlier. Now click on the VIEW menu and then click on COLOR BOX. This brings up the Palette box. Double click in one of the black boxes at the bottom of the Palette box.



This brings up the color dialog box. Each cursor contains 3 shades of color. So, if I want a red cursor, it will contain a light red, a medium shade of red, and a dark red. So, use the red, green, and blue color sliders to produce the desired light shade for your cursor and click on the OK button. Now double click on another one of the black boxes in the Palette box. Use the color sliders to choose a medium shade for your cursor. Repeat this procedure to specify a dark shade for your cursor.

Move the cursor over the light shade you specified in the palette box and click once with the left mouse button. Then, click on the VIEW menu and click on TOOL BOX. This brings up the Tool box. Click on the paint bucket tool. Move the cursor over the image of the template cursor (the cursor should change into the shape of a paint bucket) and replace the light shade of orange with the light shade you chose by clicking one with the left mouse button. Repeat this procedure for the medium and dark shades you chose. Then perform this procedure on every cursor in the template set.



Go to Step 6

Step 6 – Sounds

Sounds can be associated with certain events such as opening and closing a program. Therefore, sound events should be short in length. If I am closing a program, I don't want to hear a 60 second excerpt from a Pink Floyd song. Here is a complete list of events you can associate sounds with. The descriptions are pretty self-explanatory.

Asterisk	Critical Stop	Default Beep
Exclamation	Emptying Recycle Bin	Menu Item
Program error	Starting Windows	Restore up
Maximize	Minimize	System Default
Exiting Windows	Question	

If you need to edit the length of some of the sounds you gathered in Step 1, you can use the Windows 95 Sound Recorder. If you did not gather sounds from the Internet, you can always use a microphone to record your own.

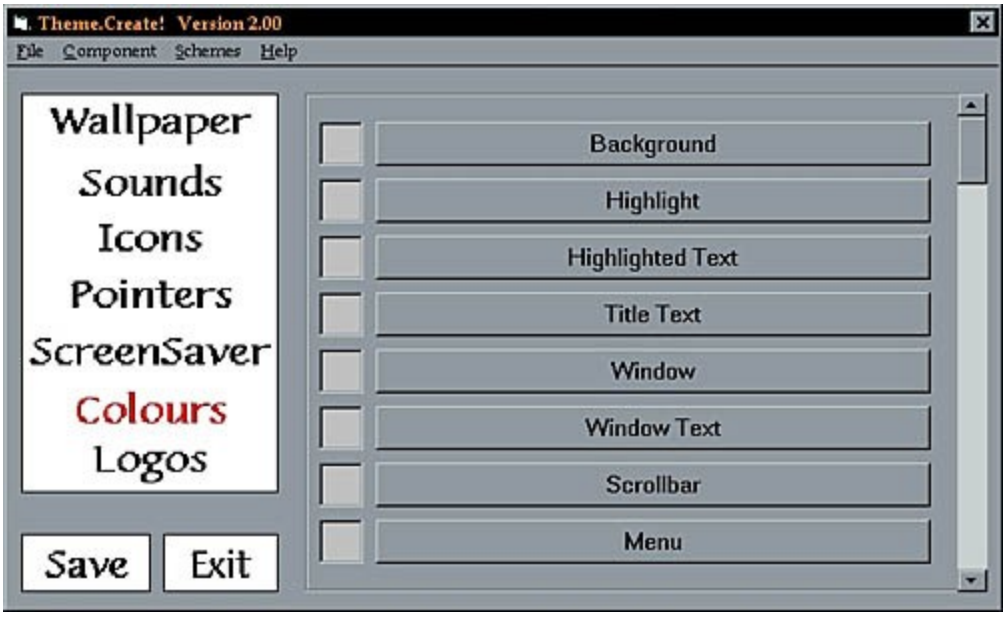
Click on the Start button in the lower left corner of the Windows 95 taskbar and go up to ACCESSORIES and select MULTIMEDIA and click on SOUND RECORDER. Open up one of the sound files you gathered from the Internet. Push the play button and then hit the stop button where you want to edit the sound. Then click on the EDIT menu and choose either DELETE BEFORE CURRENT POSITION or DELETE AFTER CURRENT POSITION to shorten the sound file. Now click on the FILE menu and then click on SAVE.

Go to Step 7

Theme File

Step 7 – Theme File

There are many ways to put everything together and create the theme file, which holds the instructions for Windows to specify the wallpaper, cursors, icons, and sounds. We will use a shareware program called Theme Create by Lizard Communications.



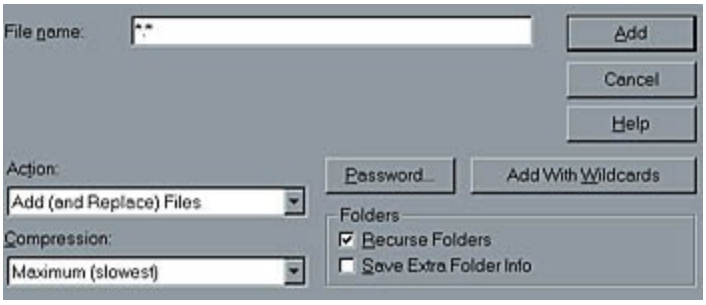
Once you have called Theme Create installed, start the program up. Now you just specify each component that you have already created. For example, you specify the wallpaper, icons, cursors, and sounds. The only thing you must specify now is the system colors. These are such things as the color of the windows, title bars, highlighted text, etc. Once you have specified all of the components, click on SAVE. This saves these specifications in a theme with the file extension .theme.

Go to Step 8

Distribution

Step 8 – Theme Distribution

Okay, so you've finished your theme and now you want to get it out to other computer users. The first thing to do is compress the theme components into one file with compression utility. I recommend downloading Winzip to compress your theme components.



Once you have Winzip installed, start the program. Click on the FILE menu and select NEW ARCHIVE. This brings up the new file dialog box. Supply a filename for your ZIP file and a destination and hit OK. Then the add files dialog box pops up. Make sure the box that reads "Recurse folders" is checked and maximum compression is enabled. Navigate to the folder with all of the theme components into one compressed file with a ZIP file extension. This is the standard format to distribute a group of files over the Internet.

It's a good idea to include a readme.txt file in the ZIP file that describes the contents of the file. You should include the program desktop themes are to be used with, in this case – Microsoft Plus! Also, in the readme.txt file, include installation instructions for the startup and shutdown screens (found in Step 3) because they can be tricky for newbies. Finally include your name and email address in case computer users want to contact the author of the theme.

There are plenty of web sites out there devoted to desktop themes. Many of them will be glad to post a link to your theme on their site. The only catch is that most prefer you already have your own web page and your theme located on your own web server. In other words, most sites will not place your theme on their own web server (usually due to space limitations). However, having your own web space nowadays is easy and inexpensive. Such services as Geocities and Angelfire will give you a small amount of web space on a web server for free. If you want lots of people to be able to download your theme, I suggest obtaining some web space for free and uploading your theme to your own web server account. Then contact the following theme web sites and ask them to place a link to your theme on their web site.

AJ's Desktop Themes

WinThemes

Desktop Themes Unleashed

Windows 95.com

FreewareNow.com

Softseek

Email the author

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