Clearing the **desk**

Tim Nott called time on the surfeit of icons cluttering up his desktop and came up with a compromise solution. Plus he offers more hints, tips and observations on Windows 95.

The Windows 95 beta preview program should be history by the time you read this — at least in theory. But the combination of publishing lead times, a French postal strike, and Microsoft UK's apparent policy of making beta updates available to everybody but the press, means I'm still lumbering away with build 347.

I've got far more used to it now, to the extent that when I boot back into Windows 3.1 I get unbearably frustrated when nothing happens having right-clicked on a file. I miss, too, the "kiss of death" button (the X button at the top right of each window) — something I hated at first.

Most of all I miss 32-bit multitasking. It's great being able to copy files, do a long print job, or run Ameol (the CIX off-line reader and, from France, my lifeline to the English-speaking world) in the background without it sequestering the entire brain-power of the processor. And as I type this sentence I'm defragmenting my hard disk.

This is admittedly slowing things down somewhat — even at my modest typing speeds the screen isn't keeping up — but it's still usable and doesn't throw a wobbly if I save a file (it just rescans the drive and catches from where it left off). It's a welcome change from the days when you had to exit Windows, run Defrag, and go away and do something

else for a few hours.

Then there are all sorts of small but pleasant surprises. The first time I put a music disc in the CD-ROM drive, I was startled out of my wits when it started to play, unbidden. Now the first autoplay data discs are starting to appear. What happens is that Win95 makes the very reasonable assumption that having stuck a CD in the drive you want to do something
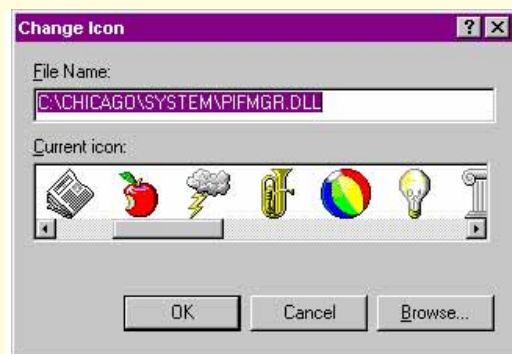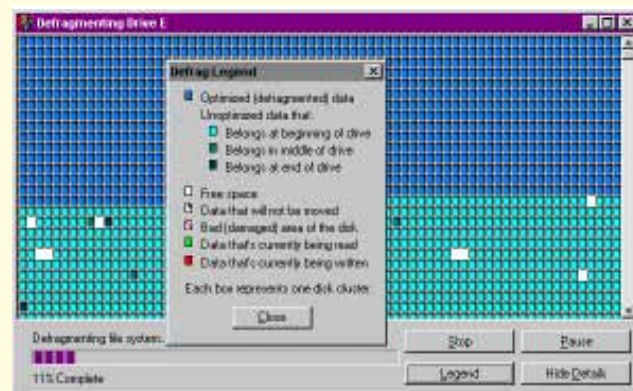
with it, so it looks for a file called autorun.inf in the root directory of the CD and takes its orders from there. Usually, the trick is to load a small program which displays a screen saying something like: "To start the Wizzo Interactive Encyclope-dia of Poisonous Fungi, click here." By the time the user has read this, the main program has loaded in the background (multithreading at work) and is ready to go, which, in the immortal words of Microsoft, "Significantly reduces the perceived load time".

It appears that not all third-party developers have quite got the hang of this. I won't name names, as the software in question was itself a beta, but it helps tremendously if the little program that autoloads is capable of detecting whether the application has already been installed. If so, run the main program. If not, run the setup program. Get this wrong and you run the risk of seriously alienating the user by trying to install another copy of the application every time the disk is put in the drive, unless they know the "disabling autoplay" trick (see the Ten Top Tips box, opposite).

Other things I liked at first, I now find annoying. Having shortcuts, folders or documents icons on the desktop was an interesting novelty. Half way through my second column of icons, I began to find it a pain in the neck — too much clutter, and they got buried under windows (but see the "desktop" tip in the Ten Top Tips box). What they really need is a docking station, rather like the taskbar, and I'm sure somebody will come along with one soon. But in the meantime, Win95 and I have come up with a compromise: I've stuck all my shortcuts into a suitably named folder in the root of drive C: — that way I can find it quickly on the taskbar, even when the title is truncated. There's a shortcut to this folder in the bottom level of the Start menu (right click, then "Open" on the Start button to add things here) and I've got it positioned and sized to cover the compulsory desktop icons.

The path to enlightenment

As I implied in my first Windows 95 column (*PCW* July '95), there's so much that is different, changing, and as yet undocumented that I may well be talking utter codswallop. And I walloped a fine piece of cod in the July issue by saying that you have to re-install your existing applications for them to work correctly if you've opted for dual-booting. Several people pointed out that this may not be necessary, but David Richardson was first off the mark.

Top Defragmenting drives under Windows at last — now there's no excuse not to do it
Above Some of the jollier icons in pifmgr.dll

So, before you blow the dust off those 20-odd floppy disks, try adding the old Windows and Windows\System directories to the Path statement in autoexec.bat. This trick has worked well for quite a few applications, and my initial fears that this might confuse Windows 95 have so far been unfounded. Make sure that the entry to the old Windows path comes after that to the new. You might also have to copy win.ini settings across — all I had to do to get the mighty Corel Draw suite to run was add

```
[CorelGraphics5]
Dir=C:\COREL50\CONFIG
```
to the new win.ini.

In search of a pound

In other respects, this Path trick was a slightly retrograde step. I'm lucky in that my CD-ROM drive and sound card are recent models, recognised by Win95. So goodbye to the real-mode (DOS) SCSI drivers, sound card drivers and mscdexe.exe. Disk cacheing is handled by Windows, so cheerio Smartdrv, and my Drivespaced hard disk "just works" without anything in config.sys. Most of this stuff was commented out by the Win95 installation routine, but in the interests of journalistic research and reckless lunacy, I removed config.sys and autoexec.bat to a place where the sun don't shine and Win95 wasn't going to find them. Everything still worked. Everything. And free memory in DOS sessions is a respectable 597Kb. A minor inconvenience is that DOS boxes default to the US keyboard

layout, but this is easily overcome: right-click on the Start button, choose Open, and dig through the folders until you find the MSDOS icon — it defaults to the first level of the Programs folder. Although this icon looks like a shortcut, it's really a PIF (Program Information File). Right-click and choose Properties — you'll get a six-page property sheet that combines options found in the former PIF editor and the old DOS box system menu.

There's a lot here and I'm not going to attempt to cover it now, so when you've finished playing with the fonts, click on the Program tab. In the Batch file box, type ukkeys.bat. Now create a Notepad file consisting of one line — keyb uk — and save it to your Windows 95 command folder as ukkeys.bat. This trick works on other PIF files too, so you can run the DOS edit.com and have your £ signs where they belong. (Windows rather politely creates a PIF the first time you run a DOS application from a folder or the Run... command.)

There's been loads of feedback from July and August's columns. Thank you all very much, and my apologies for not being able to reply to all the letters individually. All tips will be credited, so please keep them coming.

PCW Contacts

Tim Nott can be contacted by post via *PCW* or by email to timn@cix.compulink.co.uk

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