Split personality

The multiple-user feature of Win95 is a valuable asset for both networks and home PCs. Tim Nott shows you how to set it up and how it works.

One of the brand new features of Windows 95 is the ability to have multiple users on a single machine. This is tremendously convenient on a network, as it means someone can log in from anywhere on the system with their name and password, and have a desktop identical to the one on their usual machine. It's also useful on standalone machines used by more than one person, such as a home PC.

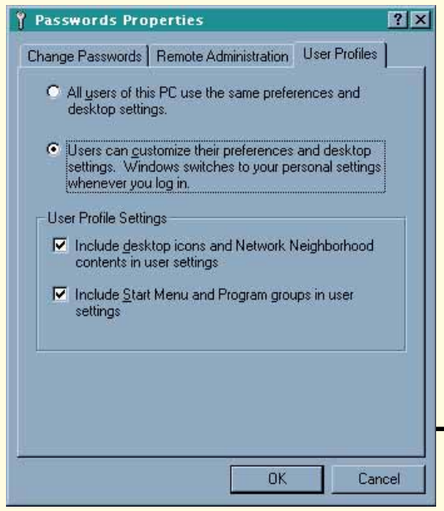
Setting this up is easy: go to Control Panel, click on the Passwords icon and select the User Profiles tab. There is a choice between all users sharing the same settings and users customising their own, so choose the latter and make sure the two boxes below are ticked. Next time you start Windows, a dialogue box will appear with a space for the user name and password. Fill this in, and Windows will "remember" any changes you make to the Desktop, Start Menu and (if applicable) Network Neighbourhood. You'll also get a personal Start Menu Documents list and your own Briefcase.

The way Windows does this is two-fold. If you look in the main Windows folder, you'll see a new folder called "Profiles". In this is a folder for each user and in each user folder are more folders for items on the Desktop, the Start Menu, Recent documents, and so on.

But this is only half the story — there is a whole load more stuff held in the Registry. Although Windows 95 reads CONFIG.SYS, AUTOEXEC.BAT, WIN.INI and SYSTEM.INI at startup (if they exist) it does this only to ensure backward compatibility. The registry is where all the settings, previously in these and other .INI files, are stored.

Windows 95 maintains two files: SYSTEM.DAT and USER.DAT, and backs these up with the .DA0 extension. If the .DAT files are found to be corrupt on startup, then the backups are used. With multiple users enabled, each one has a personal USER.DAT file. When a user logs on, these settings take over from the defaults. Most Control Panel settings such as colour and sound schemes, screensavers, wallpaper, icon spacing, window font settings, mouse and keyboard options, are stored here. In addition, 32-bit Windows 95-aware applications can store the sort of information formerly held in private .INI files or a private WIN.INI section, so each user has not just a custom desktop but customised applications as well. All this is transparent to the user, who changes things as normal from Control Panel or an application's Options menu. If you want to see how this works, open Edit Registry which will be nested somewhere in the Start menu. If you can't find it, type "regedit" in the Run… box. Click on HKEY_CURRENT_USER and the tree will expand. Click on Control Panel and you'll see a list of its various parts, and clicking on one of these shows the settings. You can edit these directly but it's a lot harder than the old-style .INI files and it's much easier to get things wrong, so meddle at your peril. Further down the tree you should see a section titled "Software" and it's here that personal settings for the other applications are stored.

There is much more to the concept of multiple users than this, though. The System Policy editor, to which I'll return at a later date, offers a whole range of security features that go far beyond the Windows 3.1 Program Manager restrictions.



Enabling multiple configurations on the same PC

Scraps do the trick

One of the things I yearned for in Windows 3.1 was a multiple clipboard. Sure, you could save .CLP files and Windows 3.11 would let you see more than one at a time, but it was still awkward to use. So try this: open a document in Wordpad and highlight a piece of text. Drag it right out of the Wordpad window and drop it on the desktop. You'll end up with something called a Scrap, an OLE object containing the selected text. You can then open the scrap into a new copy of Wordpad, drag it back into the same or another Wordpad document, or drag it back into another application to insert it as an OLE object. Because you can repeat the process, you effectively have a many-barrelled clipboard. The same trick works in the Office 95 versions of Excel and Word, but the latter has another trick as well. Right-drag the selection onto the desktop, and you'll get the choice of creating a shortcut instead of a scrap. Close Word, click on the Shortcut and Word will restart, reload your document, and go to the spot that you dragged text from.

With the test release version of Word there is only one snag to all this: the shortcut file size is often larger than the file to which it points, but this might not be as bad as it looks.

Where are they now?

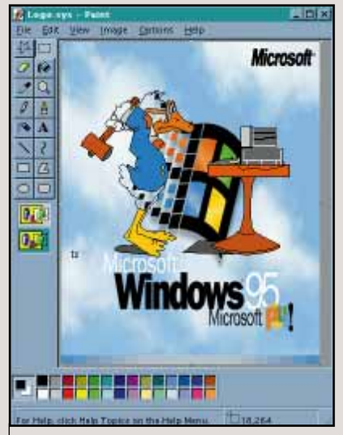
Here are some old favourites in new guises:

• Scroll bars
It's not a new idea but these have changed. The longer the scroll bar, the greater the proportion of the document or folder content is currently visible.

• Sort buttons
One thing I really miss is the button bar in Windows 3.11 File Manager that lets you sort files by name, extension date or size. I was getting heartily sick of having to dig into the second level of the View menu of a folder, or Explorer, to do this. When I finally bothered to look at the online help, it said: "When you display files in Details view, you can sort them by clicking the column headings." A second click reverses the order.

• Taskman
Whatever happened to the Task Manager? It's still there — run Taskman from the start menu — but its function is superseded by the Task bar which provides a running count of all visible windows. Accessing this from the keyboard is rather awkward however: you have to press Ctrl + Esc which pops up the Start menu, then Esc to close the start menu, Tab to switch focus to the Task bar, then the arrow keys to switch between buttons. It's much quicker to use Alt + Tab to switch from the keyboard: this now shows the icons for every task simultaneously, rather than one at a time. If you really miss that old Task Manager though, try creating a shortcut to Taskman.exe on the desktop and assigning it the shortcut key of your choice. If you're curious about what's running behind the scenes, pressing Ctrl + Alt + Delete shows a list of all running programs.

• File run…
Now, on the start menu. Just as before, you can run programs or associated data files (myfile.txt for example) but there's now the added bonus of being able to "run" a folder. You don't always have to type the full path: for instance, "Fonts" will open C:\windows\fonts.



Hammer your personal touch onto the startup screen

• Copying and pasting
The keyboard shortcuts for copying, cutting and pasting remain unchanged as Ctrl + C, X and V, and the old Windows shortcuts still work too: Ctrl + Insert, Shift + Delete, and Shift + Insert. Southpaws don't even have to take their left hand off the mouse.

• Screen play
A really important question is "How do I change the startup screen?" The startup screen image is an ordinary 256-colour .BMP file, with a couple of peculiarities: it is stretched in use from its 320 x 400 pixel size, and it has been given a .SYS extension to deter meddlers. But don't let that stop you. Make a backup of LOGO.SYS, which you'll find in the root directory of your boot drive. Start Paint, and you'll find you can load LOGO.SYS just like an ordinary .BMP file. Dabble away and save the results (you'll lose the animation at the bottom). If you want to pull the same trick on the closing-down screens, the "Please wait…" screen is LOGOW.SYS and the "Now safe…" screen is LOGOS.SYS in the main Windows folder.

This leads to a word of warning about shortcuts in general: that little line in the property sheet that says "291 bytes" or whatever isn't telling the whole truth. Each file on your hard disk takes up one or more "clusters". The minimum size of a cluster varies with the size of the partition: 4Kb on a 200Mb disk, 8Kb on 500Mb and so on. Look at the properties for your hard disk(s), create a shortcut, and look again. If you get some totally illogical change, it's probably because Windows has decided to dynamically alter the swap file size, so try the experiment when nothing else is running. This is one of the ways disk compression software scores, as each physical cluster on the hard disk can be packed with many small files.

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