



AMUG Tenderfoots #4

Communication Programs

Part 3

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Last month we talked about modems and their error checking mechanisms. After a modem, the single most important purchase you can make is a telecommunications program.

I will state right out that I am somewhat biased. I have never used anything but White Knight (formerly Red Ryder) until joining both America On-Line and AMUG Preferred a few months ago. With that up front what I will try to do this month is show some common features a telecommunications program should have to make it as versatile and responsive as possible. I'll begin by briefly describing the three programs I'm familiar with and use regularly. They are, in my order of preference:

White Knight (WK) - the everything but the kitchen sink telecommunications program. Beginning as a shareware program in the early days of the Macintosh, White Knight (then called red Ryder) garnered a close following both for its non-intuitive interface and its regular feature additions that satisfied more and more users as time went by. Over its various incarnations WK has added so many features that it can be very overwhelming to the beginner. Some of these features include a powerful macro language, the ability to send and receive files using all well known (and some not so well known) protocols, over 190 customizable user settings, plus the ability to act as a simple bulletin board. WK's versatility, frequent updates, and overall powerful set of features makes it nearly unbeatable for telecommunication aficionados.

Its not for everyone though. I've found many of the features in WK to be of no use to me at all, but they are there in case I ever need them. Also, the learning curve to really understand WK can be longer than other programs. The plethora of features can be daunting to the beginner. But once past the initial curve, most features are quickly accessed and utilized with a minimum of effort. If talking with every computer in the world is important to you, than you probably need WK.

America On-Line (AOL) - The first commercial use (to my knowledge) of the iconic interface makes telecommunications as easy as working on your own Macintosh. The software provided by the service uses a setup

script to dial the service and log on. Then you simply point and click your way through subject folders to locate any area of interest. Areas of interest and many controls are accessed with icon buttons just like HyperCard making it easy to navigate.

AOL's software uses lots of icons, and specialized selection folders to access many areas of interest. For example, the Business connection shows a scrolling list of all companies using the network. Double-clicking on a name takes you to the folder used by the selected company. You can also customize AOL's menus to allow you to quickly access any special interest groups you regularly attend.

AOL is a very good approach to telecommunicating with a network. It does have some bad features though. First, the software is dedicated to only one network service, which means you will require a second telecommunications program to talk with other on-line services. It's also slow and somewhat ill-designed. Many of the features are used only after traveling through several windows of choices, and much of that information appears to come from the network. Both of these activities actually cause you to spend more time on the network than you might prefer. Also, finding a particular program in their downloading section is difficult, if not impossible to do. I've tried looking for a couple of game programs I've personally uploaded and have never found them listed. Finally, if you use MultiFinder or have upgraded to System 7.0, background downloading or uploading of files while you use another application isn't possible.

Overall though, I enjoy using the AOL software and wish other networks could use the the same approach without the irritating features I noted above.

AMUG Preferred Tele-Finder (ATF) - A bulletin board alternative that also offers an iconic interface to telecommunicating with the Macintosh. Tele-Finder will dial, log on, and manage a session with the AMUG Preferred bulletin board. Once you're on the appearance is similar to the Finder's desktop with folders for various subjects, mailboxes to send and receive mail, and a row of function icons across the bottom of the screen that makes the uploading and downloading of mail or files as easy as dragging a file to the icon.

Tele-Finder is another nice implementation of iconic software but it too has some irritating habits. Probably the one I've encountered most is the posting of a letter or notice to "ALL". Tele-Finder responds by saying it has no users with that name and refuses to accept it. It sometimes gets confused when downloading a file if you change your mind and click the cancel button. It has usually taken several clicks before a particular download is canceled.

Tele-Finder does have some nice features, most especially a nice networking bridge to hundreds of other BBS's (bulletin board systems) spread around the world. Messages arrive nightly from places as far away as Australia enabling you to communicate with people all over the world without creating large phone bills.

Now that I've described the three software packages I am familiar with, let's talk about a few items you should look for in a communications package that will make a difference in which one you get.

- 1) A telecommunication program should be versatile. Versatile means that the software is capable of talking with different computers using various protocol, parities, and baud rates. White Knight excels at this, versatility being it's middle name. Basically, if a protocol or special format was ever used to link two computers, White Knight can probably use it. In contrast, both America On-Line and Tele-Finder software suffer a little from this lack of versatility. They are, however, necessary if you plan on using a service that has dedicated software.

2) The software should provide easy setup and modification. America On-Line and Tele-Finder are better at this than White Knight. Outside of providing the telephone number of the service to call, a password, and a baud rate, they handle just about everything else. White Knight, on the other hand, has numerous dialogs that enable you to specify in great detail exactly how two computers should communicate. Its not too hard after a bit of experience, but the initial settings in WK can be daunting to a newcomer.

3) A scripting language or macro capability that can speed up logging onto a service, sending mail, receiving mail, downloading files, and finally logging off.

For example, White Knight enables you to write macros to handle just about any telecommunicating chore you come across. White Knight also has a “watch me” mode that will record a macro as you execute a particular session. America On-Line, on the other hand, offers limited macro capability. The logon and off features are automatically included, but after that you are on your own. It does offer something called Flashmail that will automatically logon to America On-Line, send and receive mail and files, then quit the session all by itself. This capability has little use when manually navigating the network.

Tele-Finder will log also you onto a service, but again, after that you are pretty much on your own. It has no macro language although downloading is as easy as clicking a button or dragging a file to an icon.

You can overcome the limitations of both America On-Line and Tele-Finder by using a popular macro program like QuicKeys or Tempo, even MacroMaker if you are still using pre-System 7.0 software. Adding just a few macro commands can save you plenty of time and money everytime you logon to a network.

Like all software purchases, you will never know if a particular piece of software satisfies you unless you use it. Getting a dealer to let you access a network with software may be a bit too much to ask. But chances are you know someone who has a copy of the software you are thinking about. Ask them if they will show you how it works, and preferably, let you use it on their computer to see if it satisfies your requirements.

Most people are real happy to talk about their software. They will give a very honest opinion about what they like or don't like about a particular software package. Always listen with a grain a salt. Things they may hate in the software could be just what you are looking for. Listen to their talk, observe how they use the software, ask questions about things you don't understand, and if they'll let you, use it yourself. Only then will you know if a particular software package will meet your requirements.

As you can see, none of the telecommunication software packages I've described even come close to satisfying all my requirements. So I am stuck using several in order to use various bulletin board systems and commercial networks. Don't let this daunt you though. Accessing a network is easy and fun, providing lots of entertainment and many opportunities for learning. You won't know this until you try.

Well, I've pretty much talked myself out on telecommunications for now, so next month we'll look at something new. Until then, so long.

Frank