ALSoft Power Utilities — proof that more is less
By Tom Pitts

In a Macintosh software market crowded with outstanding utility packages, ALSoft boldly goes where others have gone before. ALSoft Power Utilities is an eclectic set of utility programs that generally overlaps with the popular Norton Utilities as well as Now Utilities and HandOff II. Although some Mac users might find this package useful, the truth is that Power Utilities offers little to distinguish it from its better known and generally more powerful competitors.

Power Utilities provides three hard disk management tools that are quite useful. **DiskCheck™** is a powerful disk diagnostic program similar to Disk Doctor of Norton Utilities. It scans selected volumes for most types of errors and issues a complete report. It cannot, however, correct the errors it finds — and any disk errors must be repaired before you can optimize your hard disk with its companion, DiskExpress. The manual recommends using Apple's Disk First Aid to correct any problems found by DiskCheck. Unfortunately, Disk First Aid cannot repair all types of disk errors. You must back up and reformat your hard disk if Disk First Aid is unsuccessful in repairing a hard disk error. You might try to repair the disk with Norton Utilities before you give up and reformat the disk. Never be lulled into a false sense of security just because you have a program like Norton Utilities. Serious disk errors *must* be corrected — and that means reformatting the disk.

Figure 1 here

On the brighter side, **DiskExpress II** is an excellent, easy to use hard disk optimization utility — probably the best available. Eventually files will become fragmented on most hard disks, especially those that see heavy use. The end result of fragmentation is slowed performance and increased potential for file damage or loss. A defragmentation program reorganizes the files on your hard disk so that all parts of a file are stored in contiguous blocks on the disk. The drive head does not have to move over large areas of the disk to assemble a file, so file access is quicker. DiskExpress II not only defragments the files on your hard disk, but also organizes your files according to their frequency of use. It places your more frequently used files adjacent to the disk directory, where access is quickest. Free space is relocated adjacent to the frequently used files, and sporadically used and dormant files are moved to the periphery of the hard disk. It also optimizes the space allotted to virtual memory for those who use System 7.

Figure 2 here

You can run DiskExpress II manually from the Control Panel interface. For most users a periodic manual optimization should be sufficient to prevent significant fragmentation problems. (This is similar to the way one would use Norton Utilities' Speed Disk™.) However, when a hard disk is heavily used, such as in a business and on networks where many users access the disk, fragmentation can occur rapidly. In such cases the automatic mode is probably easier to use and more efficient. When it is set for automatic optimization, DiskExpress II observes your pattern of work (or the pattern of file use on a network) and automatically optimizes files — in the background during idle periods. Although its activity slows the animation of screen savers such as After Dark™, it does not interfere with other functions. It has a number of options that let the user determine, among other things, the time, method and degree of optimization and the volumes to be optimized. These options will be particularly helpful for the more sophisticated user, such as a network manager. Those with little experience or interest in hard disk

management can simply set DiskExpress II to its automatic mode, and let it do the work. (Be cautious using DiskExpress with other programs that write to your hard disk in the background, such as

AutoDoubler. Intuition says this could be a problem, although I have no experience since I trashed AutoDoubler.)

Figure 3 here

Figure 4 here

The third of the hard disk management tools is **MultiDisk™**, a hard disk partitioning utility. This easy-to-use desk accessory lets you create multiple, resizable partitions on any volume. It can convert partitions previously created by SUM or FWB. A host of options allow partitions to be resized, deleted, renamed, encrypted, password protected, and more. MultiDisk has more features and flexibility than most partition software that comes with a hard disk. It also comes with MultiDisk Partition Recover, an application that can recover deleted or damaged MultiDisk partitions. In general, MultiDisk is less powerful than dedicated hard disk management products such as FWB's Hard Disk ToolKit and La Cie's SilverLining. For that very reason, it is an excellent choice for average users who need or want to create partitions on their hard disks. However, unless you have a very large hard disk or manage a small network, you will not find MultiDisk terribly useful.

Figure 5 here

One of the more handy utilities in the group is **MenuExtend™**. This is a System 7 only Control Panel device that creates hierarchical submenus from all folders (or folder aliases) in your Apple menu. It allows immediate access to files and folders stored up to five levels deep from the Apple menu. You may set it to display folders and files separately within the submenus, thus making access easier. Now Utilities provides a similar program, NowMenus, which is compatible with system 6 as well as System 7.

Figure 6 here

Network managers will find **ScreenEclipse™** and **DiskFlash™** useful. The former is a very simple screen blanker that requires little memory. It darkens the screen of an idle Mac, such as a file server, and does not interfere with other activities. DiskFlash displays a flashing icon at either end of the menu bar to indicate hard disk activity — reads and writes can be shown separately. Unlike a similar program from Norton Utilities, it does not crash your system nor does it interfere with any other activity.

Figure 7 here

Perhaps the most powerful — and definitely the most complex — of the Power Utilities is **MasterJuggler™**. On the surface, it is a resource manager very similar in function to Suitcase II. (I replaced Suitcase II v. 2.0 with MasterJuggler and could detect no significant differences in my resource management.) It allows you to access fonts, desk accessories, sounds, and FKeys stored on any mounted volume. They need not be stored in your system file or folder. MasterJuggler matches Suitcase II v. 2.0 in virtually all important features — including many of the resource management utilities that come with each program. The notable exception is the ability of Suitcase II v. 2.0 to create interchangeable font identification documents that can greatly facilitate font management if you take a document to a service bureau or image setter that also uses Suitcase II.

Figure 8 here

MasterJuggler is much more than a simple resource manager, however. In fact, that is one of its detracting features. It attempts to provide so many features that it is difficult, if not

intimidating, to gain familiarity with it. (I prefer a set of utilities like Now Utilities, in which the many features are provided by separate, simple programs. You can pick and choose amonr them to get those you want.) In the case of MasterJuggler, if you persist and read (and re-read) the manual you will be rewarded for your work. Fortunately, it is easy to access most of MasterJuggler's features from its Apple menu.

Figure 9 here

One of MasterJuggler's more useful functions is Application List, a user configurable application and document switching and launching utility similar to HAND-Off II, On Cue and Now Utilities' MultiMaster. With a few simple key strokes you add applications and associated documents that you wish available in the list. You access Application List in the MasterJuggler DA menu or from a hot key-activated pop-up menu. From the list you select an application (and document) to open. If you are using system 6 and MultiFinder or System 7, you can switch between open applications or open a new application. If you wish, background windows can be hidden when you move between applications. The only significant drawback to this utility is the numerous keyboard commands necessary to configure it and access it. At first, constant reference to the manual is necessary, but with continued use it is easier to remember these key combinations. Online help is available within all of MasterJuggler's list windows and pop-up menus.

Figure 10 here

MasterJuggler provides lists (available from MasterJuggler in the Apple menu) and pop-up menus (activated by user-defined hot keys), similar to those for applications, for immediate access to desk accessories (Apple menu items for System 7 users), fonts, sounds, and FKeys. From these lists you may perform a variety of tasks, such as viewing font typefaces and selecting a default font, executing an FKey, playing a sound, and opening a desk accessory. There is even a MasterJuggler pop-up menu from which you have access to the lists as well as certain other of its functions and to MasterJuggler itself. There is also a Windows pop-up menu that lets you switch between open windows within an application. (Anyone able to keep track of all of these lists and pop-up menus and their activation keys immediately qualifies for membership in Mensa.)

MasterJuggler has many other features, some of which you might find useful. With **FontShow™** you can view and print lists of all or selected fonts and sample text in various sizes and styles. **HotSounds™** is a utility that lets you select various sounds to be played at certain Finder events. It is not as flexible as SoundMaster (shareware) or SndControl, which accompanies Suitcase II v.2.0 and is available separately as shareware, but will suffice for many sound aficionados. **Sound Converter™** is useful to convert digitized sounds to the format used by MasterJuggler and by System 7. **ResConflicts™** scans resources and reports on any name or number conflicts it detects. There are additional utilities included that will resolve such conflicts for you. I was particularly pleased with **Font/DA Utility™** (not the same thing as Apple's Font/DA Mover). It quickly converted my older fonts to the new NFNT format, and, in doing so, resolved a long-standing font conflict that I was unable to correct with Suitcase II and ResEdit.

Figure 11 here

The bottom line

ALSoft Power Utilities will be very useful if you do not currently have Suitcase II and Now Utilities. However, both Norton Utilities and Now Utilities should be higher priorities on your software budget list. DiskExpress II and MasterJuggler probably justify

its purchase — if you need these programs and can get a terrific price. ALSoft would do well to beef up the group with the addition of more powerful disk formatting, repair and recovery programs and to move some of the features of MasterJuggler into a separate program. A more powerful Power Utilities would definitely give Norton Utilities a challenge.

The facts

ALSoft Power Utilities
ALSoft, Inc.
P.O. Box 927
Spring, TX 77383-0927
List price: $129
Street price: approximately $60
Requirements:
Mac Plus or better,
2 MB of RAM and a hard disk,
System 6.0.4 or higher,
System 7.0 for MenuExtend.
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