WinVN, a News Reader

by Mark Riordan

Preliminary Documentation -- revised 11 December 1989

This program is a visual Usenet news reader for Microsoft Windows. It bears a vague similarity to the Unix program "vn"; hence the name WinVN. WinVN is an own-time project and should not be considered an official product of anyone but myself. However, I am making the source and binary freely available to anyone who wants them.

This file contains end-user documentation. See the file `WVDOC.C` for programmer documentation.

Please note that the current version of the program is a Beta-test version. There are numerous gaps and omissions; I hope to fix these eventually.

This version of the program is free to anyone who wants it; please let me know how you like it.

Introduction

WinVN presents three types of windows to the user, corresponding to three different types of information provided by the Usenet news service:

1. The Usenet (or simply Net) window, which lists the names of all the news groups, with a visual indication as to whether you're subscribed to each one.   Subscribed groups are in black; unsubscribed are in a different color. (See below.)

2. The News Group (or Group) windows, which list the subjects of all the articles that are currently available in a given news group, with a visual indication as to whether you've already seen each article. There can be several different Group windows on the screen, one for each of several groups.

3. The Article windows, each of which contains an article from a news group. There can be several different Article windows on the screen, one for each of several articles (which may or may not be all from the same newsgroup).

WinVN talks NNTP (Network News Transport Protocol) to a news server, which must be running the NNTP program. (The source for a Unix implementation of NNTP is readily and freely available.) To use WinVN, you must have a connection (serial or TCP/IP) to an NNTP server.

How to Use WinVN

WinVN uses the point-and-click style of user interface familiar to millions of Macintosh and Microsoft Windows users, so I won't go into detail on how to use the mouse or pull-down menus. Instead, I will concentrate on WinVN-specific features.

WinVN will initially present you only with the Net screen in the upper left corner of the

screen. To view a newsgroup, scroll the Net window until you find the name of a newsgroup you find interesting. Double-click the mouse on the name of that group. This opens up a Group window, which will contain the subjects of all the articles in that group. Be patient--the NNTP server is rather slow at extracting the subjects of articles. Also, in an effort to conserve network bandwidth, the NNTP server sends the subject text in rather large batches. This can result in long pauses. WinVN will inform you of progress in the title bar of the Group window.

To view an article, double-click on its subject in a Group window. WinVN will open up a window, retrieve the text of the article, and display it. This goes much more quickly than retrieval of subject lines.

You needn't open a new window for every group or article--see the pulldown menu "Options" on the Net window.

Both the Net and Group windows have a Search menu, which allows you to search for particular items of interest. Select **Find** to bring up a dialog box, and type in the substring for which you wish to search. Clicking on OK or hitting Enter will start the search. Subsequent matches of the same substring can be found by selecting **Find Next**.

You can save the text of an article to an MS-DOS file by selecting the **File** menu in the Article window. There is an option to append the text to an existing file.

Currently, WinVN is oriented toward mouse users; however, most operations can also be performed by keystrokes. As with any MS Windows application, menus can be selected by holding down the Alt key and pressing the key corresponding to the underlined character in the menu. F6 switches amoungst the various windows on the screen. Page Up and Page Down scroll by screens; Control-UpArrow and Control-DownArrow scroll by lines. In the Net window, hitting Enter while the cursor is positioned on the name of a group brings up a window containing the titles of the articles in that group. In a Group window, hitting Enter while the cursor is positioned on the subject of an article brings up a window containing the text of that article. In both windows, F4 is used to find the next matching line from a previous search.

Files Read by WinVN

In addition to its connection to the NNTP server, WinVN relies upon two disk files to obtain information. The first is the `NEWSRC` file, which contains the names of all the newsgroups you have heard about so far, an indication as to whether you are currently subscribed to each group, and which articles, if any, you have already seen in each group. WinVN assumes that the file `NEWSRC` is available in a directory referenced by the current PATH environment variable. The format of `NEWSRC` is identical to the format of the ".newsrc" file used by the Unix "rn" program, so you can just make a copy of your ".newsrc" file if you are currently using "rn" or "vn" on another machine.

WinVN also reads the file `WIN.INI` at startup to look for character strings describing default actions. If you are happy with WinVN's defaults, which are listed below, you don't need to modify `WIN.INI` at all. Using `WIN.INI` to store configuration information is the standard method of storing this information for Microsoft Windows, but since many people are not familiar with Microsoft Windows, I will briefly describe the concepts here.

`WIN.INI` is a standard ASCII line file that is usually located in the `\WINDOWS` directory on a PC running Windows. The file is divided into "sections"; a section is simply a number of consecutive lines of text that provide information specific to a particular application.   A section for a particular application starts with a line that contains simply the name of the application in square brackets. The section is ended by the beginning of the next section. The lines within the section contain "profile strings" whose syntax and meaning are defined by the application. WinVN's section begins with the line **[winvn]**. A segment of the `WIN.INI` file might look like:

> **[winvn]**
> **UseSocket=0**
> **NNTPIPAddr=35.8.1.33**
> **CommString=COM1:9600,e,7**
> **NetUnSubscribedColor=200,60,150**
> **GroupSeenColor=100,120,180**
> **FontSize=8**
> **FontFace=Helv**
> **FontBold=1**
> **NewWndGroup=1**
> **NewWndArticle=1**
> **SaveArtAppend=1**
>
> **[MSWrite]**
> **...**

Profile Strings

The profile strings accepted by WinVN are listed below. The default values are given in the above example.

UseSocket= 0 or 1
>   Indicates whether the WIN/TCP version 2.03 TCP/IP product should be used to talk to the NNTP server. If set to 1 (true), WinVN will attempt to connect to port 119 of the NNTP server mentioned in NNTPIPAddr. If it's set to 0 (false), WInVN assumes that you have already established a serial connection to an NNTP server on the serial port mentioned in CommString. Usually, this amounts to logging into a Unix or other host and doing a "`telnet` <host> `119`" before starting WinVN.

NNTPIPAddr=<numeric ip address>
>   The IP address of the NNTP server. Ignored unless UseSocket=1.

CommString=<communications string, ala the DOS MODE command>
>   The serial communications parameters to be used if UseSocket=0.

NetUnSubscribedColor=<red,green,blue>
>   A string of 3 numbers, each in the range 0-255, indicating the color to be used to display unsubscribed newsgroups in the Net window. The numbers are given as red, green, and blue. Pure red, for instance, is 255,0,0.

GroupSeenColor=<red,green,blue>
>   The color to use to display the subjects of articles you've already seen (in a

Group window).

FontSize=<point size>

The point size of the font to be used in all three windows. 0 is a special case, and means to use the system font. (The system font is a fixed-pitch font used extensively by Windows. Its main virtues are high readability on low-resolution displays such as CGA, and the fact that Windows can display characters in the system font very quickly.)

FontFace=<font face name>

The name of the font face to use if FontSize is non-zero. In practise, only "Helv" is readable unless you choose an unreasonly large font size. Helv's main virtue is that it lets you fit more characters per line than the system font.

FontBold= 0 or 1

Whether the font should be bolded. For greater readability, I recommend setting this to 1, even though the bold fonts take up more space horizontally.

NewWndGroup= 0 or 1

The initial state of the "New window for each group" flag. This flag can also be set temporarily (that is, for a given session) via the Options menu on the Net window. If you look at a lot of news groups, you'll want to set this to 0 (false).

NewWndArticle= 0 or 1

The initial state of the "New window for each article" flag. This flag can also be set temporarily (that is, for a given session) via the Options menu on the Net window.   You should probably set this to 0.

SaveArtAppend= 0 or 1

Whether WinVN should append text to a file or overwrite a file, when saving an article to an existing disk file. 1 (true) means append.   This is one of the least useful profile strings, especially since it can be set at run time by checking a box in the "Save article" dialog box.

DoList= 0 or 1 or -1

Whether WinVN should ask the server (via the NNTP LIST command) for the status of all the newsgroups when starting up. The process takes from 3 seconds (386 machine over Ethernet) to almost 3 minutes (2400 bps phone line). If this list is requested, then WinVN will be able to tell you which articles are new (since you last used WinVN) and therefore which groups contain new articles. 0 means don't ask the server, 1 means do ask the server, and -1 means put up a dialog box each time WinVN runs, to let the user decide each time.

Current Bugs / Restrictions / Wish List

FTP Software Inc.'s PC/TCP product current does not support Windows very well. They are working on the problem. Meanwhile, I have hacked the code in FTP Software's drivers enough so that WinVN will work with TCP/IP when run in Windows real mode (win/r). That's probably all I can do until FTP Software delivers a fixed version of their

product. Incidentally, WinVN isn't too reliable when using the serial support at high bit rates. I think that XON/XOFF isn't working too well. I haven't had any problems at 2400 bps, though. WinVN does not talk TCP/IP very reliably at all.

WinVN should provide keyboard equivalents for all actions that can be executed with a mouse. This is medium priority.

FontSize= does not seem to work for all font sizes. I don't understand this.

The defaults for the "New window for each group" and "New window for each article" should be "false". They are currently "true" only to facilitate demonstrations; they will be set to "false" when the program is released.

WinVN currently does not write the file `WIN.INI`; it only reads it to obtain configuration information. A well-behaved Windows application should provide dialog boxes or some other user-friendly means of setting defaults. Currently, the only way to change WinVN configuration information is to edit the file `WIN.INI` with a text editor. (Any editor, such as EDLIN, NOTEPAD, or PE, will do.) Providing a better way to set defaults has a rather low priority.

Many other niceties remain to be implemented.

I would appreciate any suggestions or additions to this list.