

WinVN -- A Usenet News Reader

A Submission to the 1991 MSU Hypermedia Contest

Zenith Category

Abstract

WinVN is a Microsoft Windows-based front end to the Usenet News system, a kind of distributed international bulletin board system. WinVN provides a friendly, PC-based means of reading and writing Usenet News articles. It is an example of a distributed network application that incorporates hypertext-like capabilities.

Purpose

The Usenet News system is a public messaging service provided by a network of thousands of computers worldwide. Over 100,000 computer users read and write over 10 million characters worth of *articles*, or public messages, daily. These articles are organized by topic into over 1000 *newsgroups*. An article written by a user at one site is automatically sent to other sites for reading by other users.

Use of the Usenet News system requires a specially-written program called a Usenet *news reader*. WinVN is a such a program. It provides the same types of functions as mainframe programs like **NETNEWS**, **rn**, and **nn**, but with a friendlier point-and-click interface.

Because it is PC-based, use of WinVN does not require a mainframe account. It is a "distributed" application in which the work of selecting, viewing, and composing articles is done via the PC.

Audience

In a nutshell, WinVN's audience is everyone who can read and use a mouse and keyboard. The Usenet News system provides such a wealth of information on so many topics that just about anyone can find articles of interest.

WinVN is particularly targeted at novices. Its visual orientation and point-

and-click interface make it much easier to use than most other news readers. The fact that it does not require a computer account makes WinVN appealing to users who do not have access to a multiuser computer or who cannot afford the associated usage fees.

Because it provides easily-manipulated, scrollable lists, WinVN is also especially suitable for all users who browse large numbers of newsgroups and articles.

WinVN lacks some of the most sophisticated features of traditional news readers. For instance, "kill files" are not supported. (Kill files allow a user to, for instance, automatically ignore all articles written by a particular author.) Therefore, WinVN is not the best choice for some Usenet News "power users".

Platform

WinVN requires:

- A Zenith computer (or other IBM compatible).
- Microsoft Windows 3.0 or later.
- A mouse.
- PC/TCP software from FTP Software, Inc. (Actually, WinVN does provide a mode in which only a serial port is required, obviating the need for PC/TCP and an Ethernet board. However, this mode is implemented primarily for development purposes and is not recommended for general use.)
- An Ethernet board or other means of network access.
- A Usenet News server. At MSU, the host **msuinfo** is used. (An account on the server is not required.)

Installation

For the convenience of the contest judges, WinVN is provided on a 3.5-inch bootable floppy diskette suitable for use in the Zenith microcomputer laboratory in 415 Computer Center. The diskette provided copies WinVN to the directory C:\WINVN and automatically runs Windows and WinVN from that directory.

That's all the reviewer should have to know to successfully run and evaluate WinVN. However, some additional details are provided below for the inquisitive reviewer.

The diskette assumes that Microsoft Windows is installed on the computer in

directory C:\WINDOWS, and that a Western Digital WD8003 Ethernet board is present. The WD8003 is assumed to be set at interrupt 2, I/O address 0x280, and memory address 0xc8000. At this writing, these assumptions are accurate for 415CC.

Due to limitations in the current version of FTP Software Inc.'s PC/TCP software, Windows must be run in Real mode (**win /r**) for WinVN to access the network correctly. These limitations are expected to be addressed in an forthcoming version of PC/TCP.

Hence, if WinVN is to be run subsequently from the same computer without reinstalling, the reviewer should start Windows with the command **win /r**. A reviewer may wish to install WinVN as an icon in a program group under Windows' Program Manager. The **New...** entry in the Program Manager **File** menu should be used, but a detailed discussion is beyond the scope of this document.

How to Use

WinVN contains an extensive hypertext on-line help system. Therefore, only abbreviated instructions will be given here. Some basic familiarity with Microsoft Windows is assumed.

When WinVN is launched, it creates a window in the upper left corner of the screen. Initially, this main window displays status messages as WinVN connects to the network and queries the news server. If WinVN discovers that new newsgroups have been created since the last time WinVN was run, it displays a dialog box containing a list of these new groups. You can select the groups in which you feel you would be interested; these groups will be displayed at the top of the main window. When you have finished making your selections, click the **OK** button, or click **Cancel** to ignore the new groups entirely. When in doubt, just click the **OK** button.

Once WinVN has completed initialization, the main window displays a scrollable list of available newsgroups. The topics covered by the newsgroups can be guessed from the names of the newsgroups; for instance, **alt.atheism** discusses atheism, **comp.os.mach** discusses the computer operating system Mach, and **sci.archaeology** discusses the science of archaeology. Newsgroups in which you have indicated a special interest (to which you have *subscribed*) appear at the top of the window in black. Other groups appear below in red.

Each article in Usenet News has a one-line *subject* describing the contents of the article. A list of the subjects of the current articles in a newsgroup can be gotten by double-clicking on the name of a newsgroup. This action creates a scrollable *group window* in the upper right area of the screen containing article subject lines.

Double-clicking on a subject line in a group window causes the corresponding article to be displayed. The article appears in a scrollable *article window* in the bottom half of the screen.

There are menu options to view the next article with the same subject, to compose a new article or an electronic mail message, to search for articles containing a key phrase in their subject lines, and so on. There are a number of configuration options under the **Options** menu of the main window. If no options are explicitly selected, WinVN defaults to reasonable values.

To test the posting of articles, the newsgroup **local.test** is recommended. Note that due to news server limitations, you won't see the articles you post until you exit and restart WinVN.

More can be learned from the on-line help built into WinVN. Help is

accessible via the **Help** menu of the main window. Note: Help runs slowly in Microsoft Windows Real mode. It runs much faster in Standard or Enhanced mode; however, TCP/IP communications are currently not possible in these Windows modes. A forthcoming version of FTP Software, Inc.'s PC/TCP is said to correct this problem.

Copyright Considerations

WinVN was written entirely by its MSU author, with the exception of a small public-domain sorting routine. The author has placed WinVN and its source code in the public domain.

Therefore, aside from the fact that WinVN essentially requires the user to have the software product PC/TCP from FTP Software, Inc., the program is free from copyright constraints.

Commercialization Potential

The author has placed WinVN in the public domain. However, this need not prevent others from trying to market the program, presumably with promises of support and updates.

Traditionally, Usenet news readers have been placed in the public domain. This may be due to Usenet's ties with the Unix operating system, where the prevailing culture has caused many programmers to place their work in the public domain. Thus, it is not clear that traditional Usenet users are ready to pay for a news reader.

However, in the past two years, several microcomputer-based news readers have been released, and some of these are commercial or shareware products. Most of these products run on the Macintosh; there have been surprisingly few entries in the IBM PC market. What few PC news readers there are appear to be obscure and not of the highest quality. Therefore, there may be a market opportunity for WinVN, especially with the emergence of Windows 3.0 as a powerful market force.