On the line to **OS/2**

If you want to know more about all things OS/2, there's just one place to go — online. Terence Green helps you get switched on.

CompuServe is an excellent source of OS/2 information and official IBM support in the OS2SUPPORT forum. From the emails I've received since starting this column six months ago, it's easy to generalise about the audience as it ranges from home users to corporate programmers. You worry about hardware and applications; and you want more information on OS/2 and related subjects.

This column attempts to keep you up to date on the first two requests, but the only viable answer to the last requirement is to point you towards the wealth of online OS/2 resources. It really doesn't matter which operating system you're using these days — the latest information, the updates that you need to fix bugs in the operating system, and the most recent device drivers, are almost always found online first.

Get up to Warp speed

If you really don't want to start exploring the online world, send electronic mail to that effect and I'll occasionally note a few other information sources. But the best solution is to get connected with Warp, the first PC operating system to include Internet Access software.

While the Internet, and the World Wide Web especially, are particularly good sources of information, they do require some form of Internet access via a company LAN or dial-up modem to an Internet Service Provider. You also need a bit more expertise to set up an Internet connection, and the information is far more widely-dispersed than on a highly-organised online service such as CompuServe.

If you don't have Internet access or a subscription to an online service but do have a modem, you can use the HyperTerminal utility in the Warp Bonus Pack to access the IBM BBS which is free (apart from your telephone charges) and relatively up to date.

CompuServe is currently the best organised source of OS/2 information that I'm aware of, and the Warp Bonus Pack includes OS/2 CompuServe Information Manager which will get you started. CompuServe has been reducing its charges steadily over the last few months in order to remain competitive as the availability of online services expands. The most recent cut coincided with the launch of AOL in the UK. CompuServe's leading competitor in the USA, America Online, where they are neck and neck with over three million subscribers each, uses the AOL acronym as it expands into the world outside the US.

AOL, in common with CompuServe, offers Internet access in tandem with regular conferencing services and, like CompuServe, devotes most of its access software development to Windows. So if you're an OS/2 user and would rather use OS/2 software, the question is whether it is easier, more convenient, or even less expensive to stay with a service such as CompuServe or AOL. Might it be better to move over to the Internet entirely? There you can use OS/2 TCP/IP applications, which are plentiful, and increasingly you can find all the support and downloadable software you need.

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A small selection of OS/2 sources

BBS

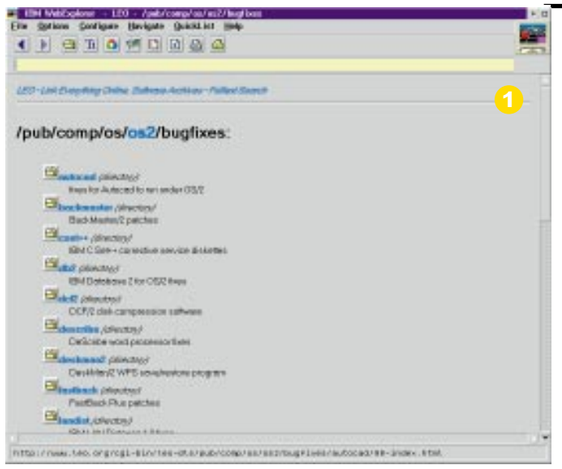
IBM BBS 01256 336 655
— Mainly drivers and updates.

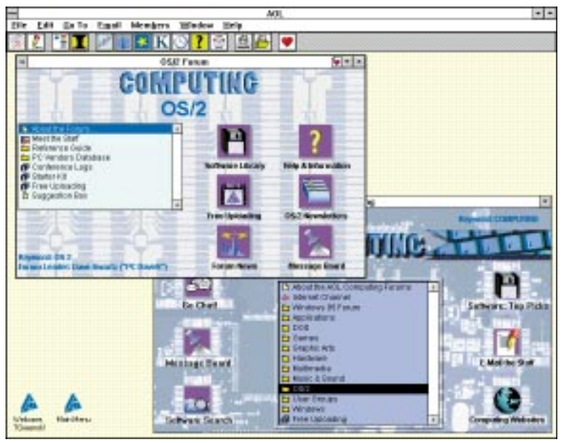
Internet sites

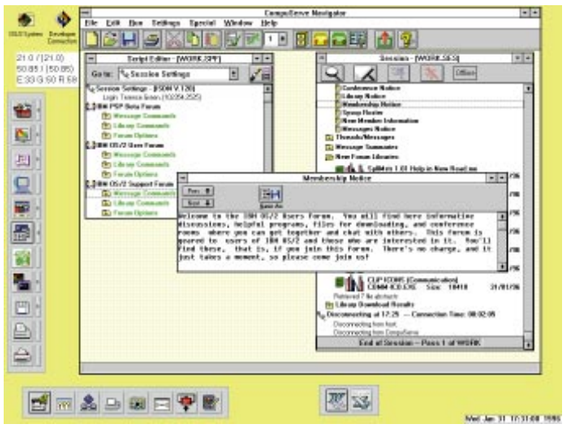
Hobbes ftp.hobbes.nmsu.edu
— Everything OS/2 from official and unofficial IBM fixes to shareware.
Walnut Creek www.cdrom.com
— Similar to Hobbes.
LEO www.leo.org
— Link Everything Online: OS/2 drivers and updates via FTP or WWW.

AOL

OS2 OS/2 Forum
— CompuServe forums.
OS2SHARE OS/2 Shareware library.
OS2SUPPORT OS/2 support and updates.
OS2USER OS/2 discussion and software.







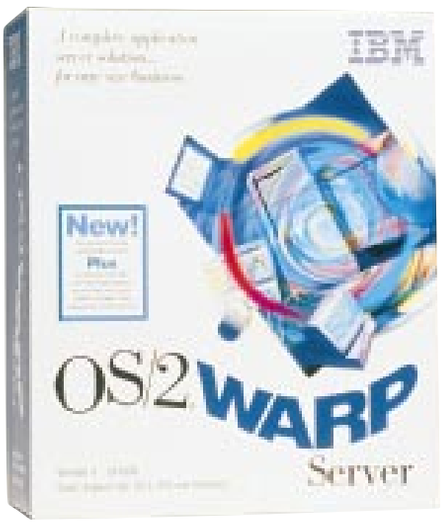
(1) *LEO, the German source of drivers, updates and applications bugfixes for OS/2*
(2) *AOL in action showing the OS/2 support forum but having to use Windows software*
(3) *CompuServe is an excellent source of OS/2 information and official IBM support in the OS2SUPPORT forum*

Fools rush in to FixPacks

In a prior column, I warned against the dangers of picking up OS/2 FixPacks from unauthorised sources. Now I have to warn against picking up authorised FixPacks too soon. The follow-on to FixPack 10 was FixPack 16, which was rushed out before last Christmas. Shortly thereafter it was withdrawn due to "problems". In short, unless you're keen to experiment, don't rush into FixPacks until others have tested them for you. The online OS/2 community sussed this out rapidly, it was quickly withdrawn from service, and FixPack 17 was released at the end of January to replace the ill-fated #16.

Much interest was generated by FixPack #16 because it contained a fix for the Single Input Queue. The SIQ issue means that a program which fails while in the foreground awaiting input can freeze out any other process requiring user input, effectively putting you on the road to the big red switch because you can't get to the task list to shut down the offending program. Windows NT specifically avoids this problem by having multiple asynchronous input queues.

A partial workaround via the Ctrl-Esc handler was introduced with Warp and a more effective fix has now been included in FixPack #17.



The SIQ fix involves an increased queue-size and closer monitoring of applications to determine whether they have hung. When an application doesn't respond to either a mouse click or being selected from the Task List, it is marked accordingly and the system focus is switched to the next running application.

This will enable you to regain control of the system and allow you to kill the offending application if necessary. You may decide to leave the hung program hanging around in case there's a chance it will come to life. If you do, OS/2 will continue to monitor it to see if it begins accepting input again.

Until the end of 1995 I paid for all my online access via CIX, Demon Internet Services and CompuServe. I've since received sponsored CompuServe and AOL subscriptions which leaves me with nothing but a huge telephone bill to contemplate. Accordingly, in future columns I plan to compare and contrast these four services and their offerings for the connected OS/2 user, both in terms of access software and for the quality and availability of OS/2 information and support services.

OS/2 for the PowerPC

OS/2 for the PowerPC slipped out at the end of December 1995, fulfilling the latest in a long line of revised projections. It isn't available to the general public as such, but people who know they need it and can make a case for being supplied, and who know whom to contact within IBM, might be able to pick up a copy.

OS/2 PPC is the microkernel version of OS/2 Warp Connect, except that it contains a poor shadow of the network support in the Intel-based Warp Connect. The current iteration is mainly of interest to developers who would like to prepare for the day when PowerPC computers come of age, but that probably won't happen in 1996.

Development of OS/2 PPC has been put on the back-burner in order to focus on Intel-based Warp, which IBM will promote as the main competitor to Microsoft Windows 95 and Windows NT in "the connected enterprise".

Common hardware issues

● CD-ROM drive not recognised

As of Warp Full Pack which shipped this time last year, OS/2 support for SCSI and sound-card attached CD-ROM drives is quite comprehensive, but support for the NCR-embedded SCSI interface found on many motherboards is not included and there's only partial support for IDE-attached ATAPI CD-ROM drives in Warp Full Pack (the blue-box version with Windows application support included). Red-box Warp shipped before Full Pack, so it will also need the following fixes in order to recognise ATAPI IDE and NCR SCSI CD-ROM drives.

OS/2 drivers for the NCR are available, complete with instructions as to how to install them on the OS/2 setup diskettes. I've been using older NCR OS/2 drivers, but recently discovered an updated set on LEO (www.leo.org), a German site which has a particularly good selection of OS/2-related drivers. Look for NCR810.ZIP in the pub/comp/os/os2 directory tree.

IDE drivers can be found in the file ATAPI.ZIP, which is widely available on bulletin boards, CompuServe and the internet. This is the second ATAPI.ZIP package (67,776 bytes; file date 13/2/95) and should be used in preference to the first update because it includes support for a number of early IDE CD-ROM drives which don't fully conform to the ATAPI specification.

Read the instructions carefully as you may need to edit the BASEDEV=IBM1S506.ADD line in config.sys manually, and be sure to check that the BASEDEV=IBMIDECD.FLT appears in your config.sys.

● See all drives in a CD-ROM Changer

If you have a SCSI CD-ROM Changer and Warp only sees the first disc, edit config.sys and add the /ET parameter to the SCSI device driver (*.ADD) which relates to your particular SCSI card, usually an Adpatec or Future Domain.

● Discovering a faulty driver

While updating your system drivers can resolve issues, it sometimes goes wrong and you can end up with a system which fails to boot. There a number of recovery options available, some of which have been discussed in earlier columns, but before rushing in, check which driver has failed by rebooting and pressing Alt-F2 when the white square appears in the top left-hand corner of the display. OS/2 will display the name of each driver as it loads. With a bit of luck, you may be able to spot the offending driver as the last to load before it all goes pear-shaped.

PCW Contacts

Terence Green can be contacted either by post c/o *PCW* or by email to **tgreen@cix.compulink.co.uk**
Updates and fixes other than FixPacks are to be found on CompuServe (OS2SUPPO)