PERSONAL TOUCHES

You wouldn't be happy with the existing décor if you moved house, so why put up with the standard Windows look and feel? Tim Nott shows you how to personalise your PC

Ever since the dawn of time, which was in around 1986, men and women have striven to make their personal mark on the Windows interface. Even in those days, you could change the colours of components and customise sounds to the extent of turning the warning beep on or off.

Since then, things have moved on somewhat, and the opportunity for choice – as well as that for spending vast amounts of time tinkering – has grown. We're going to take you on a guided tour of some of the ways you can shape Windows to your own practical and aesthetic demands. Although most *PCW* readers probably know how to change screen colours or wallpaper, we've included instructions on these elementary stages for those who are new to the bewildering worlds of PCs and Windows. Be warned that some of the tips and tricks here won't work with Windows 95, and please don't undertake mission-critical work and customise at the same time, especially if you are using untested utilities and shells.

Wallpaper

Changing your wallpaper – the full-screen desktop background – couldn't be easier. Right-click on the desktop, click Properties on the pop-up menu and go to the Background tab. Windows provides a few rather dull papers, so you'll probably want to find your own. Hit the browse button, and go to wherever you keep your picture files. Note that if you want to use anything other than the bmp format, you'll need to enable the Active Desktop – see the workshop later. You have a choice of tiling, centring or stretching the wallpaper, which should be self-explanatory. If you are going to stretch the

image, do make sure it has the same width-to-height ratio as the screen – usually 4:3 – or the image will be distorted. For the very best results, use a file that has exactly the same dimensions in pixels as the screen resolution.
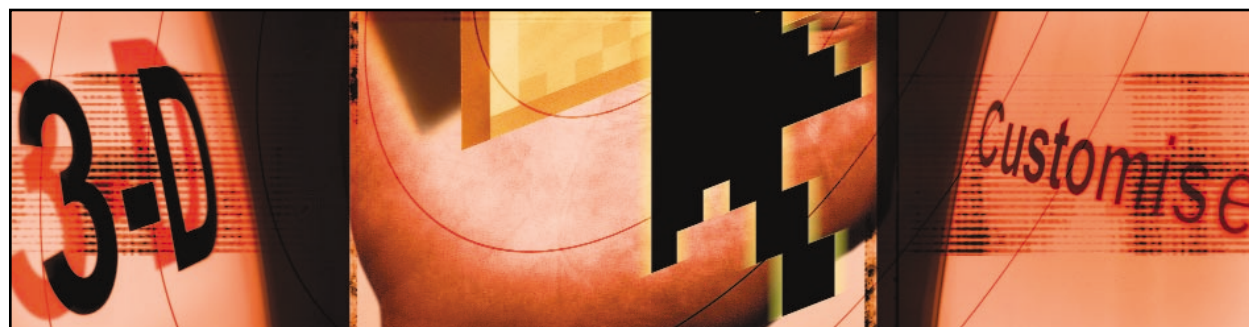
This just leaves the problem of where to get wallpaper files. The obvious answer is from a scanner or digital camera, but if you don't have either of these then there are rolls of the stuff on the web. Type 'windows wallpaper' into any search engine and you'll see what we mean. We don't have room to attempt to summarise what's there, but we can draw your attention to some of the more unusual sites.

At http://micro.magnet.fsu.edu/wallpaper/winpaper/, which is part of the vast Florida State University microscopy site, there is a vast selection of photomicrographs covering everything from computer chips to Fuller's London Pride beer. The strangely named, but inoffensive, Digital Blasphemy site (www.digitalblasphemy.com) contains some stunning computer art images at sizes up to 1,152 x 864 for free. Members have access to hundreds more. For those with more conservative artistic tastes, why not download a Vermeer? The Rijksmuseum website (www.rijksmuseum.nl) has some stunning images of paintings at really high resolution: the Kitchen Maid you can see in the Win3D workshop is 1,600 pixels high by 1,429 wide. It's a shame Vermeer didn't work in standard Windows 4:3 format, but you can always trim the canvas down to size. For those of a more literary bent, why not hack a page out of the Gutenberg Bible? The British Library has recently completed high-resolution digitising of its two copies at www.bl.uk.

GAMES

INTERNET

My Documents

Select Desktop Pattern

3·D

Customise

OFFICE

MULTIMEDIA

A multitude of shells to choose from

The ingenuity and generosity of Windows enthusiasts should never be underestimated. Alternative interfaces or shells are available for Windows – many for free, and most others offer a free trial.

We've included a workshop in this feature on Win3D, as it's free, looks good, runs 'straight out of the box' and we can tell you practically all you need to know in just 12 steps. Alternatives take more effort, but offer greater opportunity for the technically minded and graphically creative. We did a workshop on Window Blinds, back in August 2000, and the whole ethos is based on windows of any shape and texture you want. You'll find this – and other goodies such as transparent menus and window shadows – at www.stardock.net. Thematic Chroma, available at www.thematic.com/chroma/index.html offers

something similar – there are lots of pre-designed themes you can download, or the intrepid can roll their own with CromumlI – a 'powerful declarative layout language'.

If you don't find that much of a challenge, try www.winstep.net, where you will find WorkShelf – a multi-paged desktop replacement, and NextStart, a menuing system with a NeXT look and feel. Although neither of these are for the faint-hearted, the latter does automatically convert your existing Start menu.

At www.lighttek.com (two Ts, or you get a firm of electricians) you'll find Talisman, which can transform your PC into a 'magical world arranged as you like' and 'throw flowers and favourite photos on the screen'. Enough said.

3DTop, as the name suggests, is another 3D virtual world, which you can download from www.3dtop.com. Unlike Win3D it

doesn't come ready to run, and we had an interesting time getting to grips with it. There are some wonderful touches, including spotlights you can adjust and objects that spin in 3D or fly around. There's a good selection of work at the site, but 3DTop is not for those who suffer motion sickness.

Among the also-rans you'll find EVWM (http://evwm.unpaved.com/) – 'not dead' but resting since March 2000. It has the distinction of combining the *Hitchhiker's Guide* and *Star Wars* in the same screenshot and also enables you to have a completely blank Desktop – without turning off the monitor.

The daddy of them all is probably Litestep (www.litestep.net), more a Linux-inspired community than an interface. Despite the geekspeak, many of the 1,000-plus themes are stunning. Worth a try, but don't inhale.

Appearance
Moving onwards, the next stop is the Appearance tab of Display Properties. Note that you can use this in two ways. First, you can click on the relevant parts of the picture for quick access. This won't, however, let you reach all the possibilities: you need to access some items from the drop-down list. We're not going spend too much time hand-holding here – the thing to do is get in and experiment – but we will give you three tips. Make sure that you save your current settings as a named scheme before you start. Save settings you have lovingly created as a scheme, too, before exiting. And don't try to get shaded title bars if you are running 256 colours or fewer – it can't be done.
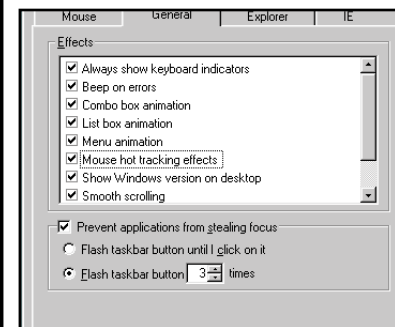
Icons
If you right-click on a shortcut and choose Properties, you'll see a dialog with a Change Icon button. You'll see similar buttons in Display Properties, Effects; and Explorer's View, Folder Options, File Types, Edit (Tools, Folder Options, File Types, Advanced in Windows Me). In each case, hitting the button takes you to another dialog, where you may or may not see further icons. If you don't see any – or none that you like
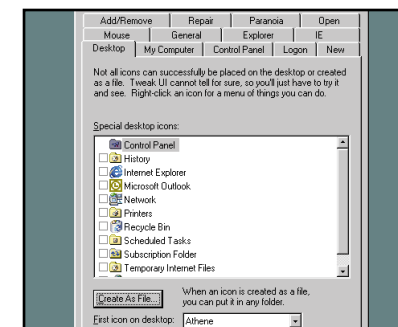
– hit the Browse button. Now it gets confusing, as although icons can exist as standalone ico files they are more usually wrapped up in an exe or dll file. Finding interesting ones can be a challenge, but to get you started, try browsing to WINDOWS\SYSTEM\SHELL32.DLL, WINDOWS\PROGRAM.EXE or WINDOWS\SYSTEM\PIFMGR.DLL.

If you want to have more choice over which icons you can change, and a greater selection to choose from, then you'll need to get some software. There is a huge variety of icon management and icon creation software available for download, as well as legions of standalone icons. Or favourite manager is IconPackager, from Stardock, which you'll find at (www.stardock.com/products/iconpackager/). It's shareware, and the full version without nag screens cost $14.95 (about £10). It will let you change icons practically anywhere, either by themed sets or individually. If you want to craft your own, our favourite is Axialis AX Icons. Once again, this is shareware, costing $14 to register, but you can get hold of a trial version from www.axialis.com. In addition to providing all you need artistically, it will let you assemble sets of icons into libraries inside exe and dll files.
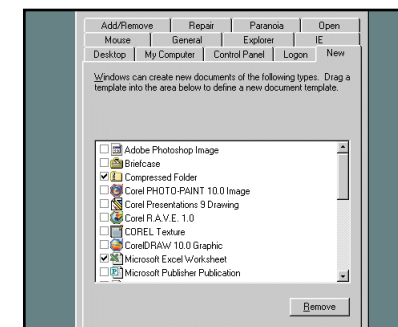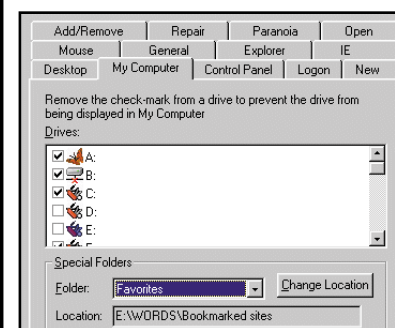
Streamlining Windows with TweakUI

1 TweakUI is a Windows must-have for customisers. Originally available as a free, unsupported, download for Windows 95, it was standard on the Windows 98 CD. It was dropped from the Second Edition of Windows 98, and didn't reappear with the Millennium Edition. There's a happy ending, however, as a new version, claimed to work with all Windows versions, can be downloaded from www. microsoft.com/ntworkstation/downloads /powertoys/networking/nttweakUI.asp.
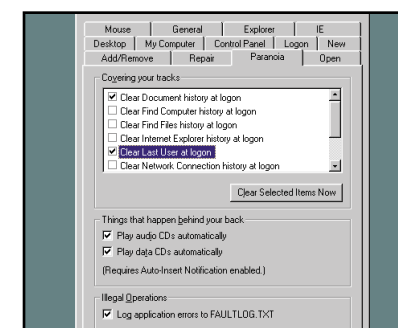
2 Once installed, TweakUI appears as an icon in Control Panel. It has 13 pages, and while we can't cover them all, we'll take a look at the most productive in terms of streamlining the Windows Interface. Starting with the Desktop tab, this lets you remove clutter from the Desktop – such as the icons for Network Neighborhood, the Recycle Bin and Internet Explorer – that can't be deleted in-place.
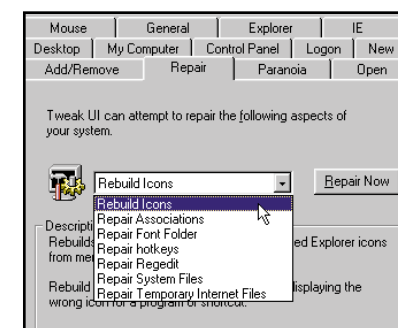
3 If you rarely use the right-click, 'New' feature because of the huge list of file types, but would like to keep it for a few types, then you can weed out the unwanted from the 'New' tab. For most types you can either temporarily disable the template type by unchecking the box, or permanently remove it: note that the latter will need a reinstall of the software to undo.

4 If you're sharing a computer with children, then the Control Panel and My Computer pages may be useful. In these you can hide Control Panel applets and entire drives from the user. You can also change the location of many of Windows' 'special' folders from here, such as Recent Documents, Program Files and Favourites: this can ease the pressure on a congested disk partition and make backup easier.

5 They know who you are, they know where you've been, and they know what you've been doing. TweakUI's Paranoia tab can be set to clear all those tell-tale lists, ranging from Internet Explorer History, through Recent Documents to the histories of the Run and Find Files command. You can either do this with one click 'on demand', or set Windows to clear the lists every time the computer is restarted or a different user logs on.

6 Although not strictly customisation, the Repair tab can often undo the effects of over-zealous meddling or sheer bad luck. A common problem, for example, is that the Font folder behaves like a normal folder and loses its 'Install Font' command, and another is that shortcuts and files display the wrong icons. TweakUI can repair these and several other problems.

Cursors and sounds
You're probably getting the hang of this now, so once you get to Control Panel, Mouse, Pointers, then hit Browse you'll see what's available. If that doesn't fire your rocket, then take a look at what's in the Windows Desktop Themes (see overleaf). Those with a creative urge will be pleased to learn that Axialis also publishes an animated cursor creator – see above for the URL. However, if you're content with the labours of other artists, you'll find loads on the web. Among

our favourites are the animated insects at www.members.home.net/wwseb/cursors.htm. There are also loads of cursors (and every other resource we've mentioned) at the Tucows site (www.tucows.com) where a cursory glance shows dragonflies, handguns and hot air balloons competing for your desktop pointing duties.

Be careful with changing your sounds. Most of us in the office would much rather have uninterrupted music while we work and have yet to find a sound scheme that didn't get irritating
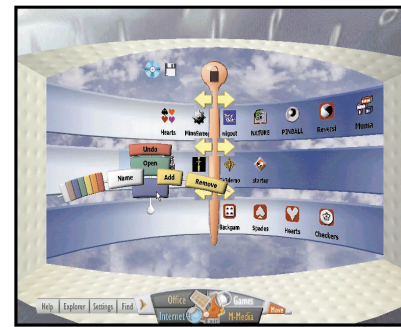
Entering another dimension with Win3D

1 This workshop shows how you don't need any programming or artistic skills to have a slick, three-dimensional Windows shell. First, download Win3D from the Clockwise site (www.clockwise3d.com). You'll need Windows 95, 98, Me or 2000, a Pentium II 250MHz and a display adaptor with 16bit colour and hardware DirectX 6 support. Installation is straightforward, doesn't change your system files and you can return to vanilla Windows at any time.

2 You can move straight to a room by clicking on its entrance, or on the corresponding button on the navigator at the bottom of the screen. Alternatively, you can click the Move button on the navigator, and use the mouse and/or keyboard arrows to navigate as a free spirit in a virtual world. Now try right-clicking on anything: you'll be able to change the colour and sometimes other attributes such as the sky. Notice how the clouds and stars gradually move.

3 Let's move straight to the important stuff. The Games room will be pretty bare when you move in, as Win3D doesn't process your Start Menu, but notice how you can rotate the three bands to accommodate many more icons. The padlock gadget switches between rotating the bands together or separately. If you right-click on one of the three rotating bands, or on an existing icon, you'll get an elegant three-dimensional Add button that lets you add new icons.

4 The Add button shown in the previous step leads to a straightforward file-browsing control. Note that it's much easier to pick the existing shortcuts out of the Start Menu, by navigating to the Windows\Start Menu\Programs folder, than it is to try and find the original program files for the games.

5 To work: once again, the Office is sparsely furnished when you first move in, though Win3D did find most of our Microsoft Office installation and lay it ready on the desk for us. Right-click on the pinboard behind the desk to create notes, and right click on the stack of blocks at the left of the desk to create shortcuts to other applications in the same way as in the Games room.

6 Here we've added a few more shortcuts, creating a second row of blocks. We've also been right-clicking on the walls to change the décor. The mysterious lid embedded in the floor leads to the recycle bin, and the stacked cabinets to the left of the applications open to reveal Control Panel settings. We've set the Autohide option on the Windows Taskbar. If you have trouble getting at it – as we sometimes did – press the Windows key on the keyboard.

7 Over on the other side of the Office is a stack of favourite folders. Once again, a right-click will customise both the contents and the appearance. There's a limit to the number of folders you can have here, but Windows Explorer is always available from the pull-out at the left of the navigator. Notice how the Win3D background fades into the background when you open a folder or a program.
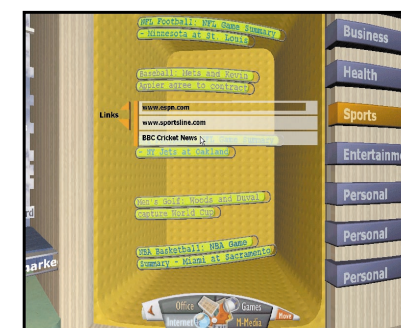

8 This room is the multimedia headquarters, and you can add to the stack of programs at the left in the manner previously described. There are controls for Real Player here as well as volume and balance controls for CD, wav or MP3. If you click on the little CD and floppy disk you see in each room, they spin through the air before opening the appropriate drive.
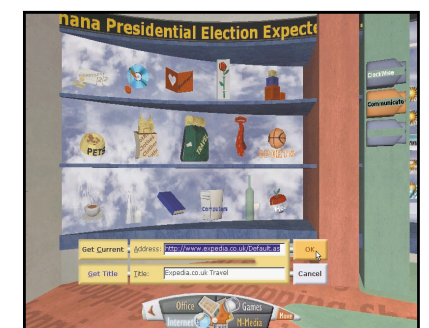

9 At the right of the multimedia centre is your personal art gallery. Each block holds a picture thumbnail – once again, you right-click to assign images. Once your blocks are loaded, clicking on one shows the full image on the adjacent screen. A further bizarre touch is that you can smooth-scroll the images across the screen.

10 The Internet room is really the star of the show. When connected you get a constant news banner scrolling around the top of the room: click on this to load the full story into your browser. To the left of the main screen is a running weather summary for your favourite cities, and to the right a seemingly un-customisable list of US sports results. Clicking on any of these brings details into the main screen. You also get access to your own mail client, or Win3D's free mail service.

11 To the right of the main screen is the news booth. Each category on the right opens a different section, pre-populated with stories preselected for you. You can, however, add your own sites or completely customise the unpopulated 'Personal' sections. Note that these don't replace your existing bookmarks or 'Favourites' that can be reached, as normal, through your browser or from a button in the centre section of the Internet room.

12 You've probably already guessed this is the shopping centre. All these goodies are actually animated, and will take you to vendors of flowers, books, CDs and so on. You will doubtless want to customise the destinations: the smart way to do this is not to type in URLs, but to browse to the site of your choice, then right-click on the appropriate icon and click the 'Get Current' and 'Get Name' buttons.

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after a few days. But, if you insist, Control Panel, Sounds, is the place to go. As with cursors, you can change sounds by scheme or individually. Unsurprisingly there are vast volumes of sound samples available on the web, including hours and hours of copyright violations from your favourite films. Here's looking at you, kid.

Themes
When Windows 95 arrived, Microsoft also published the Plus! Pack, a £35 add-on

containing, among other things, co-ordinated Windows custom looks known as 'Themes'. These were later bundled free with Windows 98 and Millennium, and now look rather tired – especially the truly awful '60's USA' which can only be described as a tragic consequence of drug abuse. Nevertheless, there are high points (such as the Dangerous Creatures cursors) and the idea is a good one: themes encompass practically all the visually configurable bits of Windows, including cursors, icons, wallpaper, screensavers,

colours, fonts and sounds in one handy package. A Control Panel component gives one-stop access to all these aspects, and you can pick just the bits that you want. It's a perfect solution for those who'd like a new look without having to spend hours twiddling in various corners of Control Panel and other places.

Microsoft hasn't created much in the way of new themes since Plus, though there are a few available from the update site, including a retro-chic fashion theme. Third-party

themers, however, have not been idle. At www.themeworld.com you can find everything from an Alcoholics Anonymous theme to Aquarian Age Astrology, as well as *The Grinch*, *The Simpsons* and other popular copyright transgressions. At www.themeswindows.com/ they tend to concentrate on fantasy landscapes and women in bikinis, but there's a very fine Tutankhamun theme there as well. There are many, many more sites with free themes: if your interests lie in the spiritual and artistic, don't
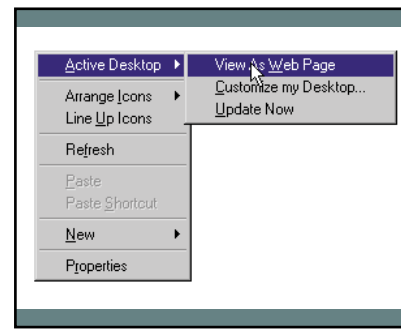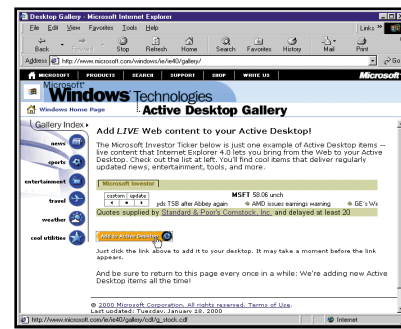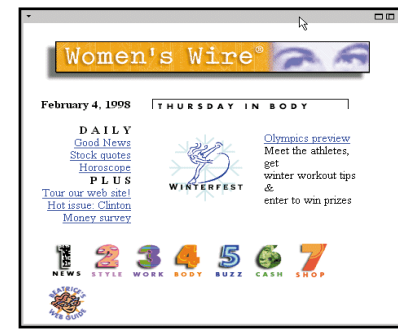
Using Active Desktop

1 The Active Desktop converts your static desktop into a living container for all kinds of content. Here we have a bit of everything – live news, a clock, our favourite photographs, animated banners, a search engine and even a satellite tracker. Unlike conventional windows, Active Desktop items are always in the background and never obscure any folders or applications that you have open.
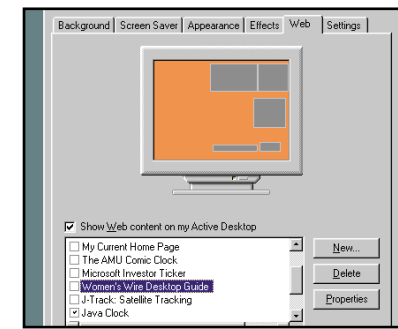
2 First, we need to do the obvious and turn on the Active Desktop. There are several ways of doing this, the simplest being to right-click on the desktop, select Active Desktop from the menu, then 'View as Web Page' in Windows 98 or 'Show web content' in Windows Me. If these commands are missing, then enable the Active Desktop from the IE page of TweakUI. One immediate benefit is that you can now use space-saving jpg or gif files as wallpaper instead of bmps.
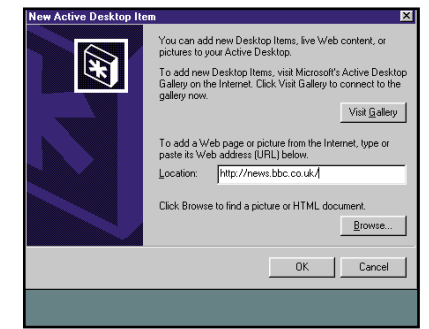
3 The next step is to right-click on the Desktop, choose Properties, then go to the Web tab. Click the New button, and you'll be invited to visit the Microsoft Active Desktop Gallery. Here you'll find a rather limited selection of items to add to your desktop, few of which are relevant to European users. We were especially unimpressed by Women's Wire news, which seemed to be permanently stuck in February 1998. Take heart – this is just practice.
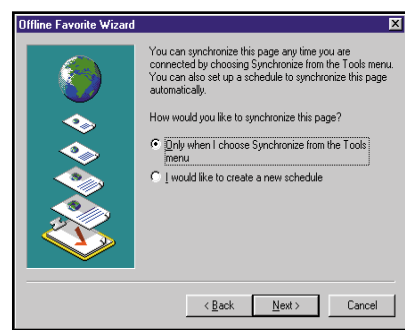
4 Having added an item to the desktop, it then appears in a borderless window. However, if you pass the mouse over it, you'll notice a blank title bar appears at the top. Grab this and you'll find you can move the content around. The small triangle at the left-hand end lets you synchronise the content, and careful mousing around the edges will also reveal a resizing frame. Windows Me users have an extra option to take the item full-screen.

5 You can remove items temporarily by unticking them from the Display Properties, Web dialog. You can permanently remove them with the delete button, and in the case of the US weather map and the Women's Wire site you'll probably want to. The tick/untick option does give considerable flexibility, but remember to click the Apply button if you want to continue with Display Properties still open.
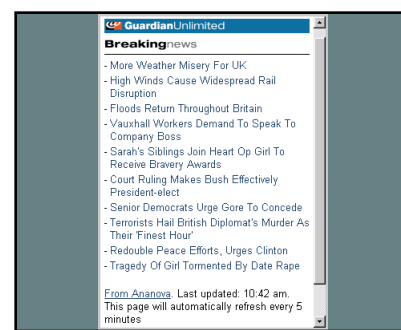
6 Fortunately you are not limited to the items in the Gallery: you can enter any URL in the New Active Desktop dialog. Here we are going to get the BBC news on the desktop. If you are lazy, as we are, open the site in your browser and copy and paste the address from the browser's address bar.
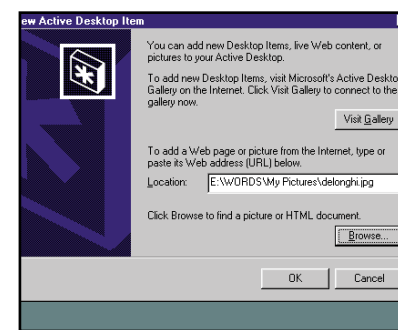
7 The next screen will give you the option to either OK the item straight away, or add some options. If the site needs a password, then the Options route gives you the chance to add this. You also get choices on updating: you can update at regular intervals, on a schedule recommended by the site, or only when you manually synchronise. If you don't have permanent or unlimited Internet access, choose this last option.

8 Now you can use the techniques from step 4 to get the item positioned on the desktop as you want it. Here we've arranged it just to show the 'ticker' of the latest stories and the front-page headline. Clicking on either of these will open the full story in your default browser.

9 Other news sites have features that lend themselves better to this treatment. Shown here is the Guardian Unlimited/Ananova breaking news panel, which you can add to your desktop by going to www.guardianunlimited.co.uk and choosing 'Pop up headlines' from the news menu. The Times also has a 'News ticker' but this is a java applet that works independently of the Active Desktop.

10 Active Desktop content doesn't have to be online. With a little ingenuity, you can use your desktop as a photo album, for example, by adding a New Desktop Item and browsing to graphics files of your friends, family or favourite toaster. Unlike web pages, which reveal more or less of the page when you use the resizing handles, graphic files stretch or shrink to fit.

11 Just because the content is local, it doesn't have to be static. The wavy text below the picture is actually an animated gif banner that we made in Paint Shop Pro. As animation has yet to come to the printed version of *PCW*, you'll have to take our word that the text is waving around on the desktop with a transparent background.

12 The final touches – we've added a cool-to-the-point-of-unreadable Java clock from the Microsoft Gallery, and, rather more usefully, a quick entry to the Google search engine. To display your Active Desktop in all its awesome majesty, you can choose to hide those distracting icons. You can do this in Windows 98 from the Effects tab of Display Properties. In Windows Me, right click on the Desktop, Active Desktop, Show Desktop Icons.

miss www.infonet.ee/arthemes/ where you can download Rubens accompanied, albeit somewhat anachronistically, by Mozart or the Sistine Chapel with Vivaldi.

The workshops

We've three workshops for you to try some serious interface experimenting. The emphasis in these is first on taking control and second on having fun. You don't need any programming knowledge or artistic skills to tackle any of these.

First we get to grips with the essential Windows toolkit, Microsoft's TweakUI. Next we take a look at a complete, ready-to-run three-dimensional shell replacement – Win3D. Finally we take a practical look at the Active Desktop. The Active Desktop first saw the light of day in Internet Explorer 4. This made several changes to the general Windows interface, blurring the distinction between the local Explorer and Internet Explorer, and became part of the operating system with the launch of Windows 98.

The Active Desktop hasn't been the riotous success Microsoft hoped it might be. The much-vaunted 'Push' technology that brought live-content channels to the desktop soon lost momentum, the main and obvious reason being that most people don't want someone else's choice of content 'pushed' at them. The Active Desktop also failed to win hearts and minds on this side of the Atlantic, where free local phone calls and permanent Internet connections have been the exception. However, with the growth of 'always on' services such as ADSL or cable, and the somewhat erratic emergence of unlimited access dial-up deals, the Active Desktop technology may finally see its day. If dabbling in our Active Desktop workshop gives you a taste for that sort of thing, then there is a lot more you can do. There are plenty of ready-made Active Desktop themes available on the web, as well as applications such as calendars that make use of the Active Desktop. The really intrepid can also program their Desktop – and folders – in naked HTML.