Cleaning up Windows 95

Microsoft should resolve to improve its operating system's useability / **Simson L. Garfinkel**

FOR 1997, MICROSOFT Corp. should resolve to make its Windows operating systems and Office application programs easier to use. I'm not talking about change for change's sake, the planned obsolescence that many people think dominates the computer industry. No, I'm talking about simple, intuitive, straightforward changes to Windows 95 that would make using Windows-based computers more enjoyable.

My biggest complaint with Windows comes from windows that can't be resized (stretched to make them wider or taller). Windows is filled with them. Select "Open" from the "File" menu in any Microsoft application and you'll see a selection of 10 or 20, with a scroll bar that lets you see another 10 or 20 files. What happens if you are in a directory with 300 files? You have to painstakingly scroll through your directory, hoping to find the particular file you want.

That's infuriating when you are sitting at a computer with a 15-inch or 17-inch screen. It would make far more sense to let the user stretch the Open window so more files could be seen at the same time.

Another big complaint comes from the way Windows handles those scroll bars themselves. Sometimes, Windows scroll bars are "synchronous": The contents inside the window scroll as you move the scroll bar with your mouse. But other times, the scroll bars are not synchronous: You move the scroll bar, but the contents inside the window don't get updated until you let go.

Synchronous scroll bars are easier to use than the other kind because they eliminate the guesswork by immediately showing you how far down in your document you are going to be moving in response to a click-and-drag on the scroll bar.

When Microsoft first started playing around with scroll bars in the 1980s, computers weren't fast enough to keep up with synchronous scroll bars. But they are today.

Microsoft's Multiple Document Interface windows are yet another holdover from the 1980s – from Windows 2.0, in fact – that similarly have got to go. An MDI window is a window whose sole function in life is to hold other windows. That's a lot of windows, too many for my taste.

Once again, Word for Windows 95 is a prime offender in this area: When you run WFW95, the program creates a huge window that obscures the majority of your computer's screen. You then create other word document windows inside this big MDI window.

MDI windows waste one of the most crucial resources on computers today: screen real estate. And they're clearly not needed: Netscape Navigator doesn't use them, nor does Microsoft's own Internet Explorer, nor does Microsoft Word on the Macintosh. So why do MDI windows dominate other Microsoft products, like Access and Excel? Mostly because it's easier and more fun for programmers to add new features to a product than go back and fix their mistakes.

Under the hood, there are deeper problems still with Windows. Consider the way programs are installed: You double-click on a special installer program (confusingly named SETUP.EXE, no matter what the name actually happens to be). This program asks you some questions, then copies the necessary files to your hard drive. It all seems so simple – until you want to move the program to some place else on your hard drive. Then everything breaks. That's because many programs that run under Windows actually install little pieces of themselves all over your hard drive, and every little piece needs to know the location of every other little piece.

This fragmented installation "footprint" makes uninstalling programs even more difficult. That's one of the reasons there is a thriving market for Windows "deinstallation" programs, such as CleanSweep, Remove-It, UnInstaller and WinDelete. The irony is that most application programs sold today come with their own deinstallation programs. These third-party products are successful because the deinstallation programs that come with applications rarely work properly.

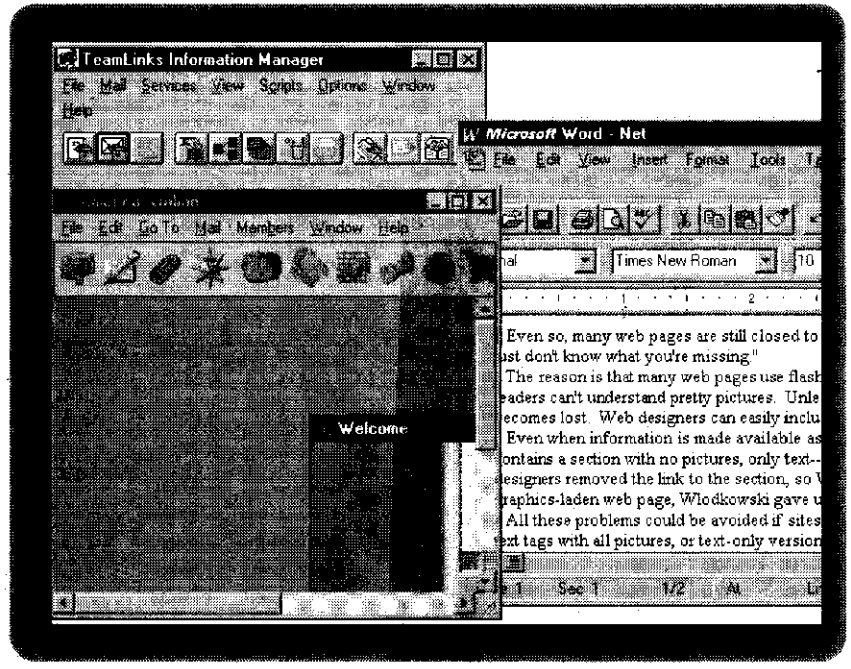
Useability is important for many reasons. For starters, a program's useability is directly responsible for how good we feel about using it. In today's increasingly computerized society, the useability of computer programs is important.

Useability also contributes to efficiency, speed of use and overall productivity. Programs that are hard to use waste time: Just think about the time wasted scrolling around Open and Save windows because you can't resize them. Sure, it's only a few seconds here and a few seconds there, but all of those seconds add up. I easily open 200 files a day. If this process could be shortened by just one second, I'd have an extra 20 hours every year.

Unfortunately, real strides forward in useability frequently require rewriting or even reinventing fundamental aspects of computer programs. That's why we're unlikely to see big strides in this area from a company that dominates a particular product category. After all, change involves risk.

Perhaps most important, a company's current customers frequently don't like changes in the interface. Interfaces that are easier to use threaten people who spent a lot of time mastering the older, more difficult interface.

That's why competition is so important in the computer industry. And that's why the current domination by Microsoft is so unhealthy.



Technology writer Simson L. Garfinkel can be reached at plugged-in@simson.net.