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By RON LUKS

DC Desktop v 1.2E

Numerous features make this package a solid value

Every new computer user goes through two distinct phases of adaptation. The first phase is fairly rapid, and involves learning the basic rules of operating the machine. Once these simple functions have been mastered, the second phase begins, when the user starts customizing and personalizing the system to improve the ease and comfort of its use. Some people would claim that this phase never really ends, since just as one discovers when one buys a home, there's always something that needs sprucing up, or something new to add.

The graphical GEM Desktop interface of the Atari ST/Mega system goes a long way towards simplifying the first, or "learning" phase of computer adaptation; especially when compared with the older generation of command-line interfaces common in the MS/DOS world. However, the relative inflexibility and closed structure of the ROM-based TOS operating system does not lend itself to much in the way of personalization or customization beyond the few basic settings allowed by the SET PREFERENCES menu item, and the Control Panel desk accessory.

Atari has continually enhanced the ST Desktop with each succeeding generation of ST, and has added powerful and flexible new features to coincide with the release of the Mega STe and TT computers. Unfortunately, this doesn't address the problem faced by owners of older-model STs who wish to upgrade their Desktop environments. While software-based improvements such as the Extended Control Panel may provide sufficient upgrade path for most users, the Desktop itself remains impossible to modify, without exchanging ROMs.

Products such as NeoDesk (reviewed elsewhere in this issue) that replace the STs native Desktop system with a completely redesigned system, will satisfy the needs of certain users. But what about the significant number of ST owners who simply want to upgrade their Desktop environment, without sacrificing the familiarity of the built-in GUI? DC Desktop, from Double Click Software, may be the ideal solution.

Enhance, Don't Replace

Actually, the package sums up the product very well in just two phrases: "Enhance, don't replace," and "The GEM desktop just got better!" The DC Desktop package consists of a master program, installed from the AUTO folder, and a series of additional program modules providing optional features. The user may choose to install certain of these automatically, at boot time, or may execute modules from the desktop, as required.

The main program, DCDSKTOP.PRG, offers a fairly powerful set of enhancements, all by itself. Unique icons may be assigned to files and devices, and program icons may be placed directly on — and executed from — the desktop. Objects placed in

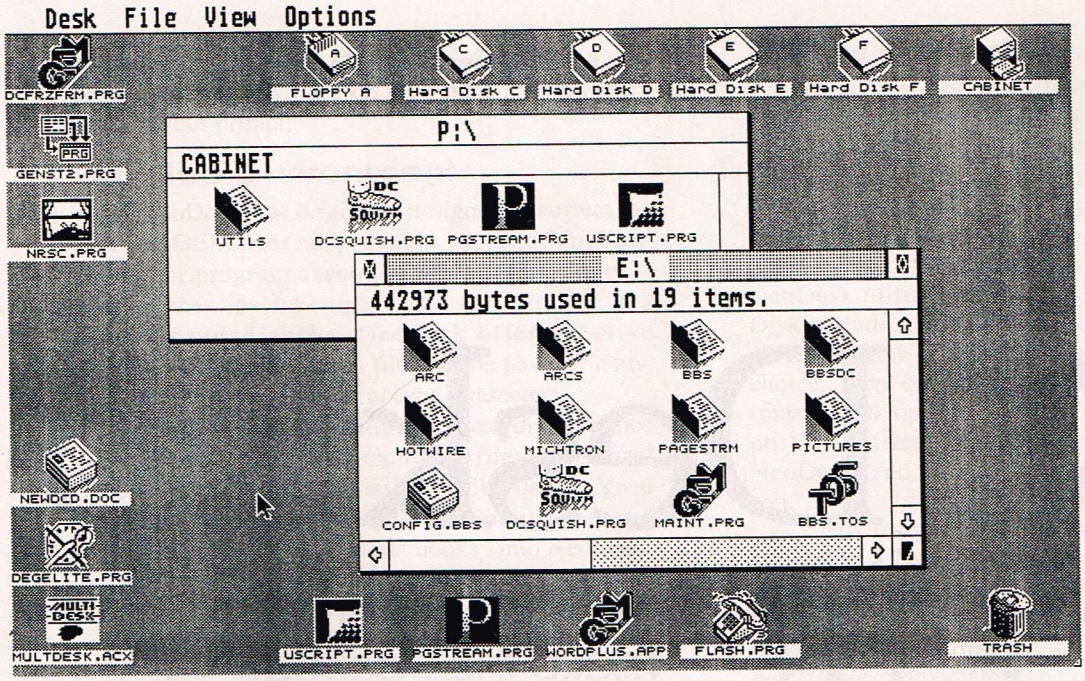

Figure 1. A typical DC Desktop installation. Note unique device and program icons installed on the desktop surface. Also shown is a CABINET window, containing a working suite of desktop-publishing-related programs.

TRASH are now recoverable; and a virtual drive, called CABINET, allows collecting oft-used system resources in one, easy-to-find place. Different desktop setups, CABINETS, and other aspects of configuration may be loaded and saved with single keystrokes. One-touch execution of utilities such as the file selector, DC Installer, and Icon Editor programs is also provided.

Lots of Icons

DC Desktop allows you to create and assign distinctive icons to every file and drive. A very powerful and easy to use Icon Editor program is included in the DC Desktop package at no additional charge. As far as designing your own icons goes, you need not fear if your artistic talents are as minimal as mine. The folks at Double Click Software supply nearly 100 pre-drawn icons along with the Icon Editor. In addition to these, nearly 1,000 more icon shapes are available for downloading from their BBS (see below) or from their vendor-support area on CompuServe (GO ATARIVEN from any CompuServe system prompt).

All icon images pertinent to DC Desktop are stored in the default DCDSKTOP.ICE file, loaded at bootup. DC Desktop allows you to associate a specific icon with any file or device. You can also specify that a single icon image be associated with a certain class of file, via wildcard expression. Thus, assigning a special icon to all .TOS files, or all .ACCs, is reduced to a single, global operation. When preferred icon assignments are not explicitly specified, DC Desktop employs pattern-matching to assign sensible icons to different things.

You may edit the icons provided with the package, create new icons from scratch, or use the Icon Editor to bring in icon images from other external sources, including (but not limited to) NeoDesk icon files and icons embedded in standard resource (.RSC) files. The editing tools provided in the Icon Editor are quite flexible and powerful, and the user is urged to study the documentation for a full explanation of their use. For the technically-inclined, the documentation includes very detailed technical specifications for the .ICE file format.

As with the current version of the GEM Desktop, program icons may be installed directly on the desktop itself for easy execution; avoiding the problem of having to look through numerous, deeply-nested folders to find the .PRG you need. As is most efficient, a desktop program icon is not a copy of the program itself, but merely represents the pathname of the executable file. Double-clicking on a desktop .PRG causes the program to execute from the normal context of its home directory, where its resource and other support files are stored.

An extension of this trick is used by DC Desktop's virtual disk drive, CABINET, to provide "one-stop" access to programs residing in far-flung locations on your system. Dragging a program icon to the CABINET creates a copy of its path there, represented by an icon. Groups of icons can be col-

SYSTEM: **Atari ST**

SUMMARY: **Flexible system for enhancing, rather than replacing, the original GEM Desktop**

PRICE: **$39.95**

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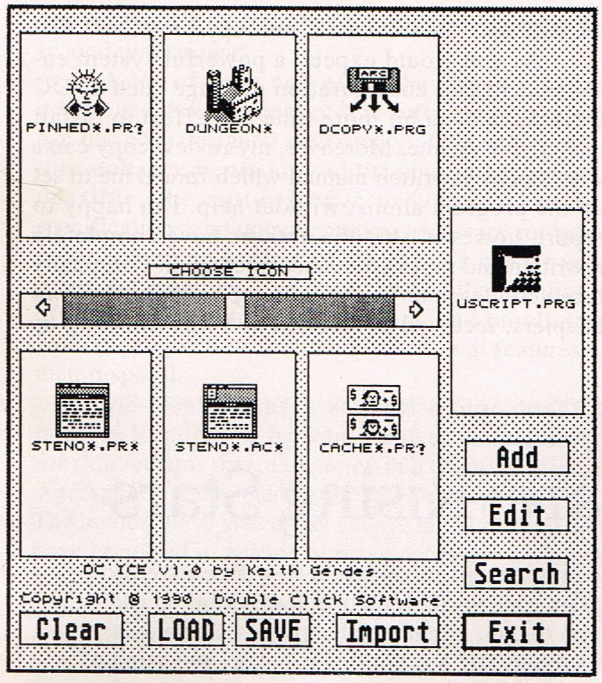

Figure 2. DC's Icon Editor, showing some of the wide variety of "pre-fab" icons offered with the system.

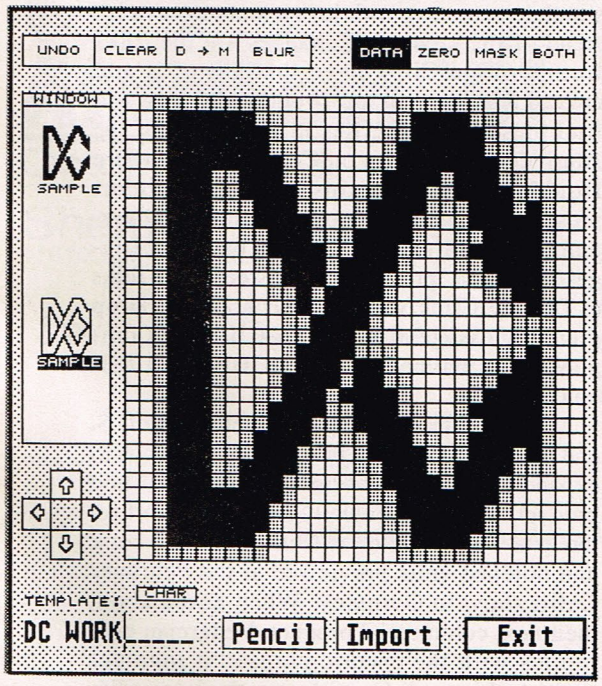

Figure 3. The Icon Editor at work. Both the icon's basic bitmap, and its "mask" may be edited, giving the designer control over how the icon appears normally, and when selected.

lected in the CABINET, providing quick access to a working suite of applications while neatly avoiding the confusion that can result from installing all these programs on the desktop, directly. You can even create multiple CABINETS and load or save them with simple keystrokes at any time. This feature alone is worth the price of the package.

Other Program Modules

Additional enhancements to DC Desktop are provided in the form of function modules. Depending on the functions you wish to add and the amount of memory at your disposal, you may select certain option modules for auto-installation at boot time, or execute them later, as needed.

The module DCSHOW adds full scrolling and global search to the standard Desktop's "Show/Print/Cancel" function, which allows the reviewing of text files on-screen. A second module, DC SHOW PICS, further extends the system's ability to display non-executable files, adding the capacity to view NEOChrome and DEGAS files, directly, by double-clicking. The DC SHOW ARC module is actually an .ARC shell. When SHOW ARC is installed, clicking on an .ARC file prompts several options: contents may be listed or extracted as required. Finally, DC SHOW HEX may be installed, allowing file review in hexadecimal format. This last module will mainly be of interest to programmers.

Additional modules go on to enhance the functionality of DC Desktop in even more striking ways. DC DESK DROP allows you to replace the desktop background with a picture or pattern of your choosing. This module, like the SHOW modules, 'hooks' invisibly into the TOS/GEM routines to enhance standard operations. The three picture formats and available fill patterns are explained in detail in the manual.

DC SPOOLER is a sophisticated print buffer that supports a printer device icon on the DC Desktop. Printer output may be spooled selectively, according to whether it originates via screen dump (ALT-HELP) or via normal text-output channels, as from a word processor. Text files may be dragged directly to the printer icon, in order to place them in the buffer queue. The size of the buffer is neatly set by renaming the spooler module appropriately. (e.g., DCSPL100.PRG installs a 100K buffer). You can even check spooler status by selecting Show Information after highlighting the printer icon.

The DC TERMINAL module is a simple VT-52 terminal emulator with a capture-buffer feature that allows you to connect to a BBS or an online service such as CompuServe or GEnie. Finally, DC KEYTOP, a bonus desk accessory, offers DC Desktop users one of the most powerful features of Atari's newest GEM Desktop: the ability to assign keystroke equivalents to GEM menu items.

Installation and Caveats

Before using DC Desktop the first time, it is necessary to run a configuration program to register your copy of the software and to set up some initial parameters. Fortunately, the package comes pre-configured with default settings that will allow you to get up and running very quickly. The CONFIG program writes parameters back to the master program disk and various modules, so to prevent any disasters, you are strongly urged to make a backup copy of the original disks immediately upon opening the package. The software is not copy-protected.

As you would expect, a powerful system enhancement and configuration package such as DC Desktop takes a bit more time and effort to install than a video game. Moreover, my review copy came with a poorly-written manual which forced me to set up the program almost without help. I'm happy to report, however, that the authors have completely rewritten and replaced the documentation I originally received. Based on last-minute copies of the first two chapters, received in the mail as I was finishing up

Double-Click Software: Rising Stars

Double Click Software, publisher of DC Desktop, was formed in the Fall of 1986 when the original partners needed a corporate name to put on their shareware products. Today, those four partners, Mike Vederman, Paul Lee, Keith Gerdes, and Gilbert Callaghan, are one of the most prolific sources of freeware, shareware, and commercial programs for the Atari computer.

DC's first commercial product was Shadow, a background file-transfer utility marketed through Antic Software. Shadow worked alone or in conjunction with a terminal program, allowing file-transfers to proceed concurrently with other applications.

Currently, DC's most successful package is Double Click Utilities ver 2.0, which they market directly. This fantastic collection of programs includes a RAMdisk, a program that converts ARC'ed files into self-extracting packages (compressed files that will uncompress themselves automatically when you double-click on them), and a decompression utility that handles .ARC, .LZH, .ZIP, and .ZOO formats. Another program included in the set, DCSQUISH, lets you compress programs into a more compact form that is still executable, allowing for considerable saving of disk space.

Other current stars of DC's product line include DC Port, a hardware product that adds extra serial ports to the ST, and DC Shower, a stand-alone version of the DC SHOW module from DC Desktop.

Much to their credit, Double Click has not forgotten that its roots lie in shareware and freeware utilities. To reinforce their ties to the Atari community, the partners have made a committment to release a new freeware program each week, for a one year period, in addition to their commercial activities. Starting last October, DC has kept its promise, releasing a stream of free product updates and patches for their commercial products as well as stand-alone utility programs and games.

These offerings are far too numerous to mention here, but if you find yourself in need of a program that turns the mouse pointer around for left-handed users, or allows you to simulate text entry with joystick commands instead of the keyboard, chances are the folks from Double Click have thought of it and created a program to meet your needs. You will find these freeware files in library 13 of the Atari Vendors Forum on CompuServe, where Double Click maintains a regular support presence, as well as on other commercial systems and BBS's. In fact, if you have any suggestions for a "program of the week", the folks at Double Click want to hear about it. Drop them a message at UID 75300,577 on CompuServe or mailbox address DOUBLE-CLICK on GEnie.

Thanks to widening sales both in the U.S. and overseas, Double Click Software intends to expand their support of the Atari market. Their product line will eventually include support for the new TT computer as well as the notebook and notepad units previewed at the February CeBit show in Germany. When asked about their next commercial product, Vederman only replies with the cryptic phrase "it involves multi-tasking ..." Considering the versatility and innovation displayed in DC's current products, we're waiting impatiently to see what's in store.