Alarm bells ringing

Tim Nott gets his PC's timekeeping back on track and has fun customising Windows.

When I first bought a PC, I was rather alarmed to note that the clock on my £2,000 investment kept rather worse time than the watch I'd bought for £5.99 in a petrol station. Somewhat older and wiser now, I realise that this is perfectly normal behaviour: every PC I've owned has been more or less erratic in its timekeeping.

Then one of these strange spatio-temporal warplets occurred, in that two consecutive (and unprompted) emails on the subject of Windows clocks appeared in my in-basket. The first was from Darren Phillips, who pointed me at Dale Nurden's freeware TclockEx, at http://users. iafrica.com/d/da/dalen/ tclockex.htm. This simply lets you display both the time and the date in the system tray.

The next offering was from David Laszlo, who pointed me to Kazubon's Tclock (no relation, but also freeware), which is available to download from http://homepage1.nifty.com/kazubon. 'So what?' I hear you ask. Well, David's mail came from Cheltenham – where I lived when I bought my first PC. And – brace yourselves for an incredible coincidence – Darren's came from Tewkesbury, a few miles away from Cheltenham, which is where the aforementioned petrol station was sited. Uncanny or what?

Those with long memories may remember that Tclock made its debut in this column by solving two 'impossibles' at once: changing the icon on the Start button, and getting the date to appear alongside the time in the System Tray.

This time round, I felt it had the edge over TclockEx for two reasons. Firstly, despite a less-than-perfect command of English, author Kazubo Sato's help file is ruthlessly honest. 'If trouble occur

frequently while TClock is running, you should stop using TClock. It may cannot run properly in case of circumstance of machine [it seems there are more machines which can work well than the author expected]. TClock is not recommended for who take priority of system stability.'

Second, it has a killer feature – it will check the time from a time server of your choice and adjust the clock accordingly. A time server, by the way, is not a person counting the days to retirement by telling people the time over the Internet, but an NTP (Network Time Protocol) computer that keeps very accurate time with the help of atomic clocks, or possibly cheap garage watches. You can configure Tclock to synchronise at regular intervals, and it gets a special award for good manners with an option to do so only when you are already connected: so no phantom dial-outs.

You can find out more than you ever wanted to know about NTP and

Above: From the post-cataclysmic...
Right: ...to polished luxury

horology (stop giggling at the back) by visiting www.eecis.udel.edu/~ntp. Should you decide to visit the Kazubon site, don't be put off by the Internet Explorer box inviting you to download and install 2.7MB of Japanese Language support – cancel this, as the page is in English anyway.

Makeover

Tips on customising Windows always seem to generate a lot of positive feedback. It seems that many people get a lot of satisfaction from imposing their own will on the visual aspects of Windows, ranging from the start-up and shut-down screens, to the title and toolbar bitmap in Internet Explorer.

If you've ever used the popular WinAmp or Sonique MP3 players, you'll know that the distinctly un-Windowsy look of these can be further customised by using different 'skins'. These give a totally different shape and colour scheme to the application, while retaining a similar set of controls.

Window Blinds takes this approach to system level. You can get a completely different look to everything, including window frames, dialog boxes, buttons, menus and other items. You also get two more standard window controls: a roll-up button that makes the window disappear up into its own title bar, and a push-pin button that keeps the window on top of all others.

The trial version comes with a variety of skins (or 'personalities' to use the correct terminology) ranging from the ultra cool to the sumptuously kitsch, and more are available for download. Two of my favourites are Broken Windows, whose dog-chewed frames and cracked buttons reflect Rob West's cynical view of the world's greatest operating system,
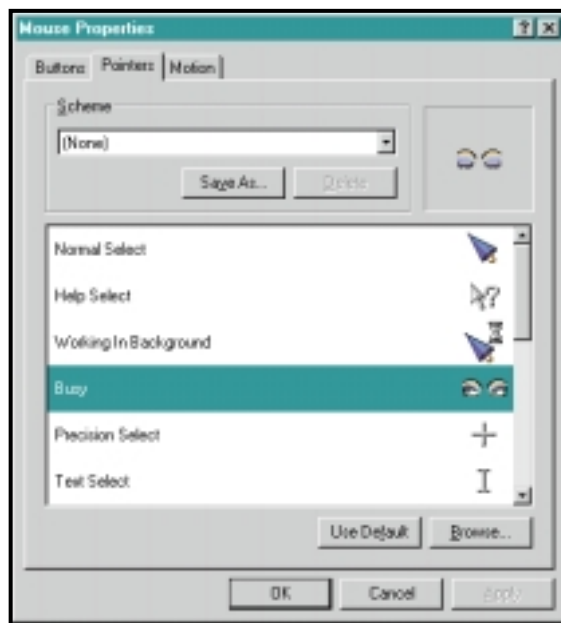
and Zeljko Skropanic's Wood, which combines cabinet-making mastery with near-illegibility. Others include Mac, BeOS and Next lookalikes, but astute readers will note that this isn't quite imposing one's own will, but rather that of a third party.

If you want to design your own personality, all you need is a bitmap editor and a text editor. You use the first to create components, such as title bars, sides, buttons and so on – in both active and background states – and the latter to define which bitmap goes where and fix the positioning and behaviour of the elements.

Busy eyes from the MS Fashion theme

There are some splendid transparency touches – you can make part of a window component transparent, so that windows don't have to be rectangular; you can make window backgrounds transparent, so that the desktop wallpaper (but not icons or other windows) shows through; you can even do SeeThru out of a job by giving desktop icon text a transparent background.

There is also plenty of scope for animation and mouse roll-over effects,

from the MS update site, but there are lots more available on the Internet, as several readers have pointed out. Mark Sparling pointed me at a little guitarist, available in both left and right-handed versions, at http://members.tripod. com/~MC_Guitars/index-2.html and John Terrance let me know about a cheerful set of Grim Reaper cursors (www.geocities.com/SiliconValley/ Horizon/4570/cursorz.html) that I felt went rather well with the Broken

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and if you buy the registered version, you also get custom scroll and progress bars. Window Blinds gets four stars in the Tim Nott displacement activity stakes and very nearly prevented this column arriving on time. You too can enhance your desktop and destroy your productivity by visiting www.stardock.com/products/ windowblinds.

Cursors galore
April's brief mention of the animated cursor editor produced a rash of responses. Apparently I've been living in a very sheltered world, relying only on the animations supplied by Microsoft. My previous favourite was that in the Fashion desktop theme, downloadable

Windows personality mentioned above.

Further investigation revealed far too many links to be included here, and there is a rather alarming preponderance of cutesy pets, Boston Terriers being particularly over-represented. Apparently, animal lovers are only too happy to pay £3.75 a pup for these. Some, however, are worth seeing just for the titles, including the 'snow mosquito drawing nourishment' (shareware from http://members.home.net/wwseb/ cursors.htm). The site of all sites, cursor-wise, has to be the Tucows site – http:// freethemes.mirror.ac.uk/cursors/ misc.htm – which has thousands of the things, ranging from aliens, through fast food to animated cross-stitching.

By serendipity, Gerald McMullon misread my reference as an icon editor, and wrote to tell me of his collection of 18,000 icons, which is housed at http:// web.ukonline.co.uk/gerald.mcmullon/ icons/icons.htm. What more can I say?

Crash barrier
In days gone by, whenever people gathered to have a good moan about the weather, the rubbish on TV or the price of fish, somebody would always be around to nod sagely and 'blame it on the Russians'. However, since the end of the cold war, this vital role of social scapegoat has been missing from our lives, but it's becoming more and more fashionable to blame Microsoft for all our ills, despite the fact that the company has yet to mount a tank invasion of another country or build a dodgy nuclear plant.

I'm not going to leap to Microsoft's defence on the issue of buggy software: indeed I'm grateful it has provided me with a way of making a living. But when your PC starts spewing strange error messages, refuses to print, or falls over, don't be too quick to blame the OS. Before you get involved with lengthy diagnostics and re-installing Windows, cast a critical eye over the hardware.

For printing problems you should always check the cable. Is it firmly connected? Does the problem go away if you swap it for a known working cable? If mysterious crashes occur, seemingly apropos of nothing, and especially a while after booting up, close down the machine and open the case. First, make sure that the fans are turning freely and not caked in crud. Overheating is a very common cause of crashes. Next check that all connectors – both power and data – are firmly pushed home. Ditto cards and chips, as once again, when the PC warms up, thermal expansion can make the crucial difference in breaking a physically tenuous connection.

Finally, defective memory chips are not as uncommon as one might believe. If you can swap out your PC's memory for 'known-to-be-good' modules, then do so. If you are not able to do this, you can sometimes make a diagnosis by removing modules (if there are several) or swapping them around.

Crying wolf
Every so often, a reader or a friend is kind enough to forward me details of a virus alert. This, in itself, is fine, public-spirited

behaviour. Unfortunately, 95 per cent of these warnings turn out to be false alarms. Virus hoaxes, to which I alluded briefly in last month's *Word Processing* column, are originated by those who score high in the antisocial creep stakes but lack the necessary brain power to write real viruses. Once you've seen a few of these, a definite pattern starts to emerge: they all usually state that should you get an email with xxx in the title YOU SHOULD ON NO ACCOUNT OPEN IT.
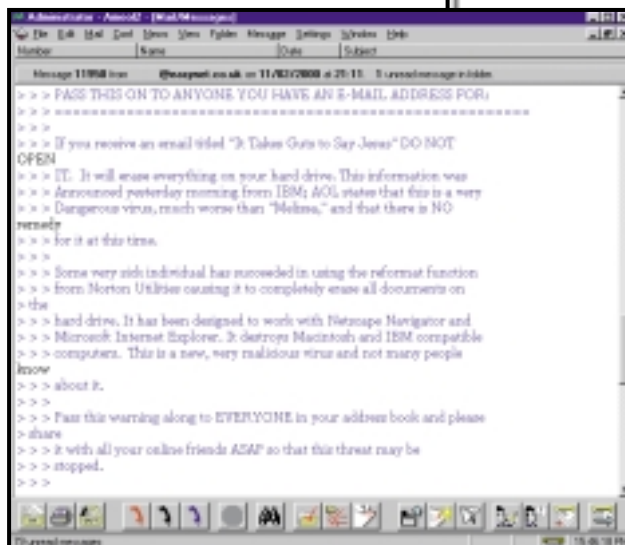
Favourite candidates for xxx include 'Free money', 'Win a holiday', and practically anything with the names Jesus, Elvis or Bill Gates included. So, don't automatically pass on the alert on to the entire membership of your address book, because this, of course, is exactly what the originator wants you to do.

According to the US Department of Energy's Computer Incident Advisory Capability: 'We are spending much more time debunking hoaxes than handling real virus incidents.' So first do a little checking. Your first stop should be the Symantec website (home of Norton Antivirus), which has a well-maintained list of hoaxes at www.symantec.com/avcenter/hoax.html.

Go up a level for news of real viruses. You can also check the rival Network

Natural selection with a 'marquee'

the numeric keypad works, then holding down the Shift key temporarily turns it off? Well I didn't, that is until Ian Ratcliffe pointed it out. Ian also points out that April's tip about getting My Computer as a cascading menu on the TaskBar also works with the Control Panel. Again, you have to move it to the right so that just the legend is visible.

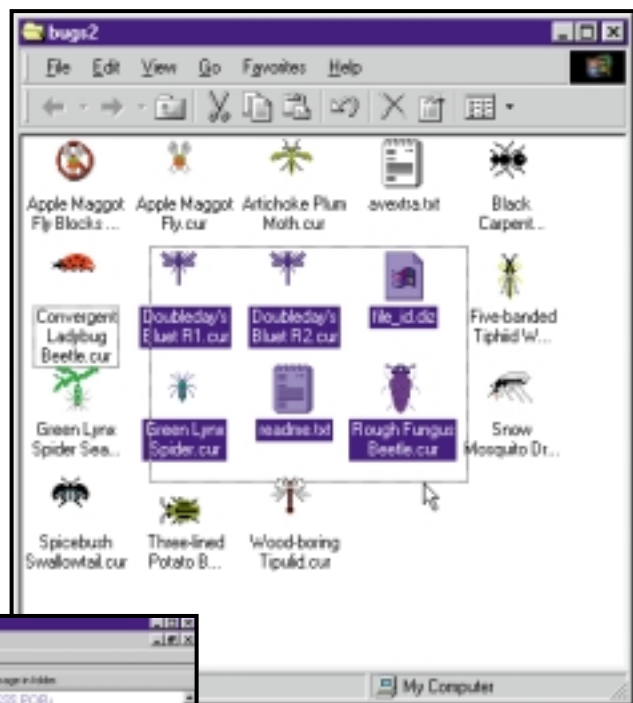*Concerned, well-travelled, and wrong: check out before forwarding*

Finally, Ian has discovered that Shift & Insert pastes the contents of the clipboard. To which I would add that

Virus hoaxes are originated by those who lack the brain power to write real viruses

Associates site (home of McAfee VirusScan) at www.nai.com/asp_set/anti_virus/library/hoaxes.asp, or the rather more entertaining www.kumite.com.

Readers' tips
Did you know that if you have the keyboard NumLock turned on, so that

Control & Insert copies, and those shortcuts date back to Windows 2 days, but still work. I think all of that shows an excellent investigative spirit for an 11-year-old. Keep them coming, Ian.

Gayle Perrin is a long-term Corel Draw user and wrote to say that she'd been 'selecting multiple items in that program for years by drawing a

rectangular marquee around them. I was amazed to find that the same trick works in the Windows 98 file system'. Indeed it does, and I you can add further, 'marqueed' rectangles to the selection by holding down the Control key – unlike Corel Draw, where the Shift key is used to add to a selection.

SeeThru
There is good news for all those who have had difficulties in getting hold of Mike Strong's SeeThru – the thingamajig that gives your desktop icon titles transparent backgrounds. It's now available from www.one2three.freeserve.co.uk/utilz.htm. And there is even better news for those who feel they are spending too much time browsing the Internet, which probably includes all readers of this column. Check out http://home.att.net/~cecw/lastpage.htm, and free up some quality time.