



Utilities for Windows and the Mac

by Craig Savage

I admit it: I love this job. Almost every day, a new box of software arrives in the mail for my review. One unwanted result, however, of my software surfing is that installing and uninstalling software gives both my Macintosh and my 486 PC a real workout. My hard drives runneth over, forcing me to remove something old so I can add something new.

But making more room on the hard drive is only part of the problem. Frequently adding and deleting applications also means my system files are constantly being modified. Macintosh "Preference" and "Extension" files grow every time a new application is loaded, consuming precious RAM, and my PC's AUTOEXEC.BAT and WIN.INI files (to mention only two) either get butchered or grow to unmanageable proportions. Occasionally, they cease to function at all.

My solution to these problems is software utilities — small applications that help you get the most out of your computer. There are hundreds, maybe thousands, of utilities; I'll consider here a few that have helped me the most.

Before I get too involved, however, I can't help noting that the whole concept of utilities for your computer is slightly behind the times. A computer shouldn't be so complex that it needs "bolt-on" solutions to help it function properly. I don't need a utility to help me drive my truck, and someday I should be able to do without one for my computer.

S.O.S. for Windows

If you're as ignorant as I am about how a computer actually works, you're bound to need assistance figuring out what's going on inside the machine, especially when something goes wrong. Like your trusted auto mechanic, diagnostic utilities peek under the hood of your computer to see what is working right and what

isn't. These programs make suggestions about changes, and most will even make the changes for you (with your permission).

Help. Macintosh users will get an assist from a program called *Help* (Teknosys, 3923 Coconut Palm Dr., Suite 111, Tampa, FL 33619; 800/873-3494). It's a "knowledge-based" application that compares your system setup to a huge list of known conflicts, and reports any problems it finds. *Help* will find and resolve Macintosh INIT conflicts, for example, which ordinarily are difficult to uncover.

WinProbe. For a Windows version of the 10,000-mile checkup, PC users should try *WinProbe* from Landmark Research International (703 Grand Central St., Clearwater, FL 34616; 800/683-6696). The "Tune Up" feature analyzes your hardware and software configurations and then suggests how to resolve conflicts and improve performance (Figure 1). *WinProbe* told me, for example, how to optimize my Smartdrive settings, and also assured me that I had properly configured my permanent swap files (good news for me, since I hardly comprehend the concept of swapping anyway). Everything from hard drive sector checks to SYSTEM.INI problems are diagnosed and explained in as close to

English as you're going to get. If you like to get grease under your fingernails, *WinProbe* is the tool to use.

And for those DOS users whom I regularly offend in this column, *WinProbe* comes bundled with another utility called *DOS for Windows*. This program eliminates the need to temporarily suspend Windows just so you can use the DOS command line. Instead, this utility creates a fully functioning, scrollable window that lets you perform DOS commands from within Windows. It's perfect for Windows users who don't want to give up their favorite batch files and other familiar DOS features.

Uninstaller. Windows users pay dearly when they remove an application. The Windows operating system is a complicated shell that scatters files all over the place. The upshot is that when you install a program, it's almost impossible to know which files have been affected.

A good example of this "waxy buildup" in your hard drive is what happens to the PATH statement in your AUTOEXEC.BAT file every time you install a new application. The PATH tells the computer where to look to find files — a typical PATH statement might be `PATH=C:\DOS;C:\EXCEL`, which tells the operating system to look for

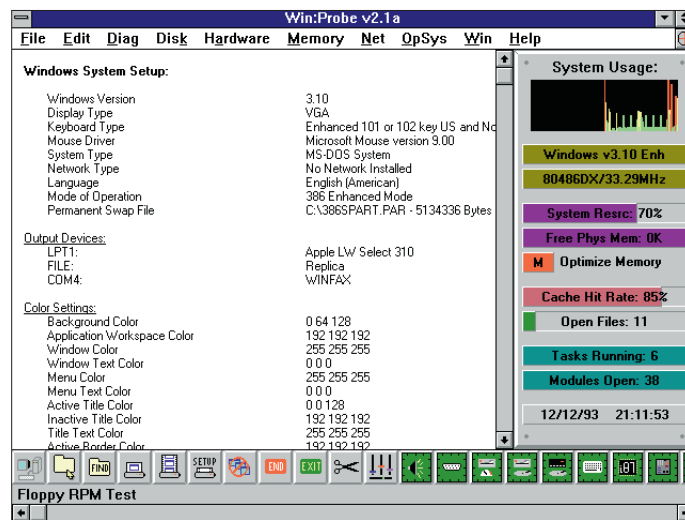


Figure 1. The diagnostic utility *WinProbe* analyzes your Windows configuration, and eliminates conflicts that could cause problems or reduce performance.

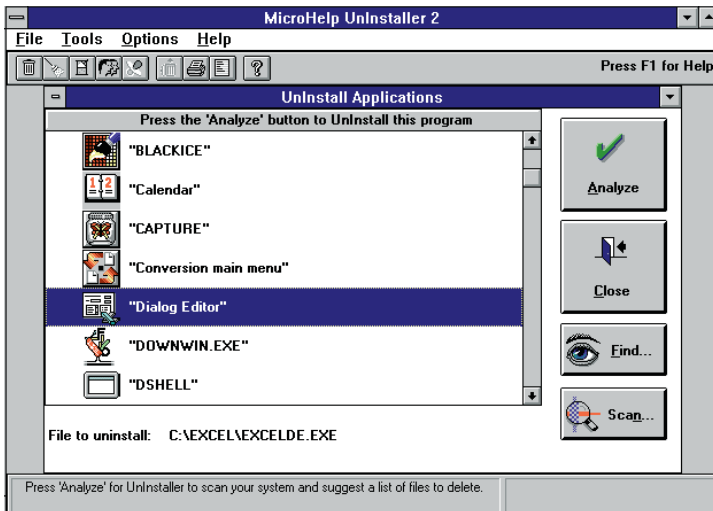


Figure 2. The (Uninstaller) utility removes all traces of Windows applications — including changes made to system files — by completely reversing the effects of the application's installation routine.

files in the DOS and EXCEL subdirectories. But the PATH statement can only contain 138 characters. As each program adds its own subdirectories, the PATH statement eventually becomes too long.

You don't realize there's a problem, of course, until you want to remove the application. Then it's just about impossible to clean up all the changes the application's installation program made.

The solution is a utility called *Uninstaller* (MicroHelp, 4359 Shallowford Industrial Pkwy., Marietta, GA 30066; 800/922-3383), which does just what its name implies — it completely reverses the installation process for any Windows application (Figure 2). It also removes fonts, video drivers, and other unneeded Windows components. I used Uninstaller, for example, to find and remove more than 150 space-wasting duplicate files from my hard drive.

None of the utilities I've mentioned is infallible, however. Although they seem to provide answers, they really only give you suggestions. It's still up to you to decide whether to modify something. A rule of thumb I picked up from the Uninstaller manual says, "Don't delete or modify anything unless you know it's safe to do so." Sound advice.

Search Utilities

Another group of utilities I can't live without are "full text" search engines that treat my entire hard drive as a database. In other words, every scrap of information is treated as a "field" within a "record" that makes up a "document." The concept

is difficult to grasp at first because most of us are still locked into the concept of a hierarchical, upside-down directory tree. But with the advent of 500 or more channels on the "information superhighway," full-text searches may be the only way we keep from drowning in data.

Search utilities literally read and index every discrete piece of data on your hard drive, including databases, spreadsheets, and CAD programs. Let's say you can't remember the filename for an invoice, but you know it contains the words "concrete block." If you're a Windows user, just launch *Eclipse Find* (Phoenix Technologies, 846 University Ave., Norwood, MA 02062; 800/452-0120), and in a second or two, up pops a list of all the files that contain that text string. Click to view the file in a window, and click again to launch the program you originally used to write the invoice, already opened to the document you need. *On-Location* (On Technologies, One Cambridge Center, 6th Floor, Cambridge, MA 02142; 800/767-6683) does the same thing for Mac users. ■

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If you have a question about computing in construction, address it to State-of-the-Art Contractor, JLC, RR#2, Box 146, Richmond, VT 05477.