



Windows 95: To Switch or Not to Switch? (Part 1)

by Péter Jacsó

Before the big launch, but during that period when Microsoft had practically flooded the "beta tester market" with pre-release versions of Windows 95, IT columnist Péter Jacsó spent some time with the new operating system. Here in Part 1 of "To Switch or Not to Switch?" are some of Péter's thoughts and comments. These are "not merely the thoughts of a detached columnist who gets excited when any new software or hardware lands on his desk (let alone a brand new operating system)," says Péter, "but also of an educator who has to make sure that students will be able to do their assignments on dozens of different computers currently running Windows and/or DOS."

There is no universally valid answer to the question of whether to switch to Windows 95. It depends on many factors, such as what you expect from the switch, what you are using your PC for, and what your hardware platform is. We'll talk here about the potential advantages and disadvantages of switching to Windows 95 from the perspective of information professionals who manage, provide, and teach the use of computerized information retrieval services, the ones who deal with online and CD-ROM systems for a living (and for fun on the side).

The Siren Songs

Despite the name changes (do you remember Chicago?), the last-minute injunction threat from the Justice Department over the proposed bundling of Microsoft Network connection software with Windows 95, and the many delays, the new operating system has arrived. As opposed to Windows 3.1 or Windows for Workgroups 3.11, which were only shells added to the mandatory DOS, Windows 95 is an operating system and a shell in itself. The official version is to be released after this issue of *IT* goes to press, so my comments are based on the beta versions I used (along with a few hundred thousand other previewers). The most touted features of Windows 95 can be summarized as follows:

Interface: The desktop interface has been completely revamped and is now visually more appealing, intuitive, and... well, Macintosh-like. Thanks to its ever-visible Taskbar, it allows easier navigation among programs (which can now really run in a multitasking fashion). And thanks to its Explorer program, it permits more efficient management of files (which can now have long, non-cryptic names).

Applets: Built-in applets (Wordpad, HyperTerminal), utilities, and "wizards" let you view the contents of files without launching the application programs that created them, change video resolutions

(though not color depth) without rebooting, play audio CDs, launch CD-ROM applications automatically, install new hardware items (plug-and-play), and check those hardware items' status and requirements in a central registry.

Audio and video synchronization: Both synchronization and performance of audio and video have been improved by new Indeo and Cinepack codecs (coders and decoders), by a CD-ROM File System (CDFFS) that does away with the memory-hogging MSCDEX, by CD-ROM device drivers (written by Microsoft rather than by drive manufacturers), and by DirectDraw—which bypasses red-tape operations by sending images directly to the video card.

Connectivity among shared resources: It's now easier to connect to shared resources on a local area network, as well as to dial-up Internet and other online sources through built-in TCP/IP and Winsok modules. And, of course, you can connect to the Microsoft Network (which triggered an uproar in the existing consumer services industry and some muscle-flexing in the Justice Department).

The Unsung Tunes

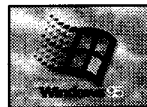
If practically all the above are actual pluses, and the cost of the upgrade is less than \$100, would you need to think twice before installing Windows 95? Well, yes.

Why? Because of the ugly facts of everyday life in the computing world. Here are some of the most important ones:

Hardware requirements: Hardware requirements are quite steep for the operating system upgrade. Strictly speaking, according to Microsoft, Windows 95 will run on a system with 4 megabytes of RAM and a 33 MHz Intel 386 processor. But in my experience, on that system it would barely crawl. I doubt that you would see the potential performance improvements even on the 8 megabyte, 66 MHz 486DX2 category system that is recommended by Microsoft for consumers (as opposed to developers). This echoes the grossly underestimated recommendations for Windows 3.0 and MPC1 specifications a few years ago, put forward, I believe, to lure in users with minimally qualified hardware. You really need 12 megabytes of RAM and a 75 MHz Pentium for Windows 95 to perform seriously. For software playback of MPEG compressed video, a 90 MHz Pentium is much better. To make use of the multitasking power and the dynamic buffer allocations of CDFFS in Windows 95, 16 megabytes of RAM is definitely recommended.

The knowledge factor: Unlearning what you had to learn in order to cope with the inane splitting of Program Manager and File manager in Windows 3.1 may take some time. While it is worth it, it can be frustrating. File management in Windows 95 is not all heaven, either. It is inconvenient that you can only move or copy files if both the source and destination folders are visible. The long file-

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Windows 95: To Switch or Not to Switch? (Part 2)

by Elisa K. Miller

Just prior to the August 24 "Launch 95" event, Information Today, Inc.'s Elisa K. Miller informally surveyed library and information professionals about the advent of Windows 95. In Part 2 of "To Switch or Not to Switch?," she reports on her findings.

The hype preceding the introduction of Windows 95, which has been appearing in the media for over two years, has covered everything from the features of the product to the legal ramifications of the built-in online system to when it will finally be available. Now that the operating system is hitting retailers' shelves, home and organizational PC users are having to tackle the question of whether to upgrade their systems. Corporate and institutional users tend to have broad concerns about the effects of a changeover to an entirely new operating system, while home users

tend to have fewer overriding concerns preventing them from making such a change.

In an effort to assess the climate for upgrading to Windows 95 in the information community, *Information Today* posted a query to members of the information community from a number of listservs that cover the information industry, requesting responses on the subject of upgrading to Windows 95.

The Waiting Game

Not surprisingly, many of the respondents indicated that they or their organizations would not be changing any time soon. The primary reasons noted against an immediate upgrade included lack of system resources (the need to upgrade multiple PCs from 8 to 16 megabytes of RAM), the costs of training, the still-entrenched use of DOS-based software and other legacy systems, lack of technical

support for such a change, network reliability, and the expense of upgrading to 32-bit versions of existing software packages.

Ernie Dornfeld of the Seattle City Clerk's Office spoke for many of the respondents: "We see no strong business need at this time to upgrade and have decided to take another look in six months. . . . We have neither the money nor the technical support staff time to move to Windows 95 unless there is some compelling reason."

A lack of any *really* compelling reason, along with the desire to wait until "all of the bugs have been worked out," seems to be reason enough for postponing the decision for a little while. In one case, where the organization is already committed to a Windows environment, a respondent noted that his organization would probably be acquiring equipment on which Windows 95 would come preloaded, offering an opportunity to test the

software with the current computer network and legacy systems. If all goes well, they would consider the upgrade during the next budget cycle.

The Learning Game

Training issues are a concern to some. Elizabeth Hewins of Operational Technologies Corp., a fast-growing company in San Antonio, said, "I have been bugging our manager of computer support for well over six months about training issues with respect to installing Windows 95. . . . [She also mentioned the need to move from WordPerfect 5.1 for DOS to Microsoft Word, a demand generated by their client base.] We have just begun to address the issue of training, which will add to the cost of implementation. Likewise, we are discussing the potential loss of productivity during this learning phase. However, since so few people use Windows now, we can go directly to Windows 95!"

Support software seems to be on the minds of a few respondents as well. A professional indexer noted that while the current virus software will not work with

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names, which are long overdue, are welcome, but don't forget that if you want to pass a file named "windows-95-review-for-IT" to someone running Windows 3.1 it will appear as "windows~." It also takes some time to endow the thousands of files you already have with long file names, so this feature won't necessarily be an overnight success.

The utilities in your portfolio: The revamped applets and the new utilities are nice, but few users were willing to put up with their predecessors in Windows 3.1. Instead, they invested in standalone communications software, real word processors, and utilities, including decent desktop managers with much broader file-viewing (and printing!) capabilities, and virus protectors and system testers such as the Norton family of utilities. These utilities will not run in Windows 95, and if you try they may corrupt your files.

For automatic playback of audio CDs, many people installed shareware and freeware programs years ago. Windows 95's Autoplay is nice, but it will not make an old CD-ROM player sing. Nor will your current crop of CD-ROMs launch automatically. Only new ones endowed with special files can take advantage of this

Windows 95 feature.

There is true plug-and-play for those components that themselves are plug-and-play-compliant (and if your BIOS is also plug-and-play-aware). The Hardware Wizard makes installation of any peripheral much easier than before, but with legacy devices (from the pre-plug-and-play era), it still may not qualify as easy.

If you really want better audio and video, you will have to upgrade to upcoming versions of multimedia CD-ROMs, which will make use of the 32-bit versions of the Indeo and Cinepack codecs. While CDFS will provide immediate relief from memory crunch, the Windows 95 device drivers for proprietary, non-standard drivers still must come from the drive manufacturer.

DirectDraw is promising, but it is not likely to make it into the first official version of Windows 95. It came out of the blue when Microsoft backed away from supporting the DCI video acceleration solution, and CD-ROM title developers now have to make changes to replace DCI calls by DirectDraw calls. Meanwhile, in Windows 95, no one seems to be at home to answer, well, the door.

Connectivity: As for connectivity, the ease of networking is enticing. But if you are a network manager you don't just drop your current networking software, which you have tweaked for countless

hours to keep under control. Having the prerequisite software for Internet connections is convenient, but such software is readily available from hundreds of online sources free of charge—along with freeware Web browsers that Windows 95 does not have. Windows 95 cannot match the lock-stock-and-barrel solution and ease of installation of the free CompuServe Internet Dialer and SpryNet browser, for example.

While we're on the subject of connectivity, the entire uproar about the online connections built into Windows 95 seems to be blown out of proportion. The few services that are available on Microsoft Network are nicely and professionally designed, but aren't yet much by comparison to the big three. Microsoft Exchange, which is supposed to act as a universal mailbox, is more like a U.S. Postal Service mailbox that excludes any pickups or deliveries from Federal Express, UPS, etc. Exchange currently can be used for electronic mail only to and from Microsoft Network, Microsoft Mail, and CompuServe—limited "universality" at best.

So... Should You or Shouldn't You?

I would say do not rush to upgrade, even if you already have the hardware for it. If you are an independent information

professional (or want Windows 95 on your home computer), wait a month or two until the significant bugs surface; the help hot lines cool down; new releases of the device drivers, utilities, and applications you need have appeared on the market; and the inevitable "tune-up" version of Windows 95 is out.

If you are responsible for managing a number of PCs and PC-users, wait a little longer. Start testing Windows 95 on a single PC, learn your lessons, listen to stories from the trenches, read *Information Today* (where we will discuss specific issues), and choose a non-critical time for conversion. As a journalist, I could not wait to use the beta version of Windows 95 and Microsoft's Jumpstart package (a special collection of Windows 95 software) on at least one PC. But as an educator, I will hold off on any global switch until next April, when the spring semester ends and I feel that the transition will be safer. In the meantime, I will keep you posted.

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