



Face facts

The look of your desktop can greatly enhance the enjoyment you get from using your machine.

Chris Cain shows how to give your Mac a facelift.

One of the best things about Windows 95 is how much better it makes the PC look and feel. But so as not to let us Mac users be outdone, especially by Microsoft, I'll show you how to give your Mac OS a facelift: there are hundreds of commercial, shareware and public-domain programs to brighten up your desktop. But first, let me bring you up to date with the latest developments.

The biggest recent event in the Mac world was the arrival of the first range of PowerPC-based PowerBooks. Comprising both full PowerBooks and PowerBook Duos, they offer the highest level of power and portability yet from Apple.

Specifications include either a 100MHz or a 117MHz 603e processor, making them faster than many desktop Macs, including the new 5200. Each comes with a minimum 8Mb of RAM, 500Mb hard disk, and either a 9.5in greyscale or a 10.4in colour screen, supporting 256 or thousands of colours, depending on the model. Lithium Ion battery technology provides

between three and five hours of use, and there's even AppleTalk-compliant infrared communication built in.

For those who don't quite need the power of the 603e, a new 680LC40-based PowerBook, the 5300, has been unveiled. For a full review, see this month's *First Impressions* (page 61).

Sound Manager 3.1

Existing Mac users will be pleased to learn that the new version of Apple's Sound

Manager, incorporating native PowerPC code, has arrived. Sound Manager is that part of the Mac OS which deals with audio recording and playback in all its forms. The new version 3.1 provides better performance all round, and there are vast improvements when it is used with PowerMacs.

Sound Manager's first notable new feature is support for two additional audio-compression formats: IMA and μ Law (pronounced "mu-law"). The IMA format is based on a standard proposed by the Interactive Multimedia Association and can compress 16-bit sound with a ratio of 4:1. IMA is particularly good at compressing CD-quality music for integration into QuickTime movies.

The μ Law codec is an international standard for compressing voice-quality audio, typically 16-bit at 8kHz, with a 2:1 ratio. It's often used in telephony applications and on the Internet as the encoding format for .au sound files.

Perhaps the most significant change is the inclusion of more native PowerPC code. Previously, Sound Manager was written entirely in 68000 code and ran under the 680LC40 emulation on PowerMacs. This could drastically slow the machine down during a sound-intensive task, and the effect was especially noticeable in multimedia applications and games with music soundtracks that played through the action. With its improvements, the new version is between four and seven times more efficient, enabling applications to do much more while sound is playing or recording.

Thanks to a number of bug-fixes, this system extension is more robust too, and Mac OS alert sounds will no longer freeze the machine while it's playing — Sound Manager 3.1 supports asynchronous alert sounds.

I've been running a beta test version of Sound Manager 3.1 for the last three months on two different

PowerMacs. The difference between it and version 3.0 is noticeable, particularly on Marathon which seems to move more smoothly than before. I highly recommend it and you can download it from Apple's Web Servers.

Another impending new addition to the Mac OS is a native edition of SCSI Manager. I've been running a beta release of this too for a while now, and have enjoyed definite performance gains with it installed. This SCSI Manager, plus Sound Manager 3.1 and other system refinements, are likely to make up the next System 7.5 Update disk.

Finally, news just in reveals that there may be compatibility problems with some third-party Quark Xpress extensions running on a 9500. Due to the nature of the 604 and its use of cacheing, any extensions which use self-modifying code (a bad programming habit) may break when run on the new system. Apple UK says that during tests only three of some 40 additions caused problems and all used 68k code. However, if you rely heavily on such an extension and are thinking of upgrading, it may be wise to contact the manufacturer to check that it will run.

The right image

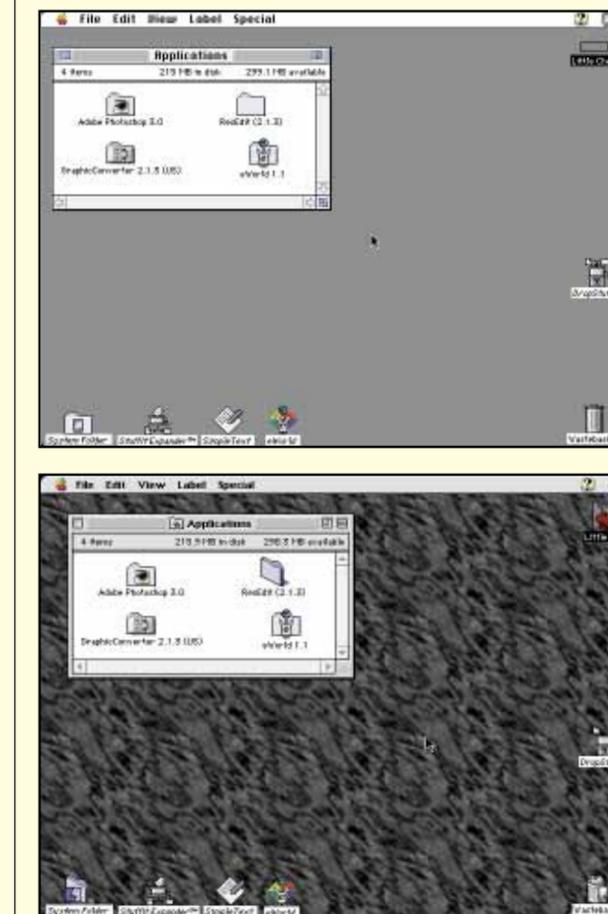
While Microsoft has been steadily improving the look and feel of Windows, it's fair to say that Apple has neglected the Mac's on-screen appearance. It's true that System 7.5 is one of the best-looking GUIs around, but it's nowhere near as customisable as the competition. All you get is a small selection of desktop patterns and the option to change the system font — there's no standard way to install a proper backdrop or change the way the windows look.

Apple is aware of this and will be addressing many points in the next release of the Mac OS (codenamed Copland). But there's no need to wait — several public domain, shareware and commercial utilities are available to help dress up your desktop.

The right background image can make all the difference to your desktop, be it a simple pattern or a work of fine art. One of the best ways to change it is to use the popular shareware package, Desktop Textures Suite. This comprises a Texture Installer and one or more data files filled with pretty patterns.

To install a new texture you double-click a data file, which loads the installer and allows you to browse through a collection of textures. When you find one you like, clicking "Install" sets it up as your

The Mac desktop — before and after



The standard Mac desktop (Mac) features a clean design, but its plain system icons and background are somewhat drab by today's standards. Using a few simple shareware programs and extensions you can add new life with a multi-coloured textured backdrop, new icons for your hard disk, a 3D menu bar, windows and matching trashcan as seen in the screen below

backdrop until you decide to change it. Newer versions of Desktop Textures feature a Texture Randomiser, which will change your background every time you restart.

For those who want a picture rather than a repeated pattern, Berkeley Systems, of After Dark fame, makes a product called Screen Posters. There are two versions currently available, Marvel and Star Trek, which will fill your screen with comic-book heroes or images from the Final Frontier. Screen Poster images are JPEG-compressed to provide maximum quality with the minimum of RAM requirements. Although the images are in full 24-bit colour, Screen Posters will apply dithering to make them presentable at lower bit depths. You can even use your own images by saving them as JPEG files and dropping them into the Screen Posters folder.

Other desktop pattern programs worth a look include BackSplash, an extension that places a PICT file in the background, and Before Dark.

An interesting piece of shareware for customising the look of the user interface is Greg's Buttons. Now on version 3.7.2, this often-updated Control Panel lets you change the colour and appearance of dialogue boxes, menus and windows. Options include a 3D bas-relief metallic look for buttons, and a choice of colours for window frames, menu bars and menu text items. Five minutes with Greg's Buttons can transform your system's appearance, but beware: going overboard with the colouring can produce truly horrible results.

The author of Greg's Buttons, Greg D. Landweber, has also recently released a new extension called Aaron (presumably named after Copland, the American composer). Dropping it into your System Folder and restarting will give you a chance to see what Copland will look like before it ships. Greg has taken all the new OS elements seen in preview screenshots, such as a 3D trashcan, new-look window frames and smart standing folder designs, and put

Sound Manager 3.1 CPU Usage

Playback on 6100/60	Emulated 68k	Native PowerPC
8-bit, mono	5%	1.6%
8-bit, mono, w/sample rate conversion	12%	2.2%
16-bit, stereo	13%	1.9%
16-bit, stereo, w/sample rate conversion	26%	2.3%
16-bit, stereo, w/sample rate conversion, IMA	41%	6.6%

Utility of the Month

This month's award would have gone to Greg D. Landweber's wonderful Aaron extension: installing it has totally transformed the look of my desktop and it's amazing what 3D shaded buttons and windows can do. But as it's not really a utility, I've given the award to the Stuffit Expander from Aladdin Systems.

Downloadable from eWorld, Aladdin's Internet Home Page and any other good Mac bulletin board, Stuffit Expander can be used to decompress archived files in the popular Stuffit and Compact Pro formats. It will unencrypt Internet files that have been "encoded" using Bin-Hex and MacBinary formats, and when combined with another product called DropStuff with Enhanced Expander (also available from the Internet) it will additionally cope with AppleLink, Zip, Arc, Gzip, Unix .Z compression and unencoded files. In short, it's the best drag-and-drop compliant decompression util available.

If you're keen to find these shareware programs and try them for yourself, the address of Aladdin's Web Page is <http://www.aladdinsys.com>.



Giving your Mac a makeover



Freshen up the look of your dialogue boxes, menus and windows with the shareware *Greg's Buttons*



them into a small program. The result is a much improved interface. It's surprising what a modest alteration can do — check out the before and after screenshots [page 309] to see what a difference it makes.

Icon do that

Backdrop textures and colourful windows are important but they are only part of the visual desktop experience. Icons are another main desktop feature, and there are plenty of well-drawn ones to be found on bulletin boards and public-domain disks. Popular icon collections include characters from *The Simpsons* and *Looney Tunes* cartoons, and faces from old and new generations of *Star Trek*.

Adding a custom icon to a program or your desktop is easy. Once you've chosen the icon you want, select it and call up its information box using Command I or Get Info (from the Finder File Menu). Now highlight the picture of the icon in the box and copy it to the clipboard in the normal way. Bring up the Info box for the icon you want to replace, then paste the new one over the picture inside. Simple. Users who want to create their own, original icons can use a package such as Photoshop and paste in other icons in the same way. This is not always successful though — Apple's ResEdit is a much better bet.

Another way to bring the personal touch to your Mac is to assign sounds to functions, such as emptying the trash and ejecting a disk. If you like the idea, check out a little package called *Kaboom*, available from Softline.



Desktop Textures is one of the most popular ways to bring your desktop into the nineties



Popular replacement icons for your favourite programs include characters from *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, and *The Simpsons*

PCW Contacts

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Apple 0181 569 1199
Berkeley Systems' **Screen Posters** costs £10.99 and **Kaboom** £39.99. Both are available from Softline on 0181 401 1234
Sound Manager 3.1 is downloadable from the software section of Apple's Web Page on <http://www.apple.com>