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Test Drives

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GOLDEN COMMPASS

Creative Systems Programming

At up to \$22.80 per hour for 9,600 or 14,400 bps connections, it's easy to run up charges of hundreds of dollars per month on CompuServe. Anyone who uses a plain terminal emulator and wades through CompuServe's menu structure and impossible user interface is probably not an OS/2 user. Chances are, they use Unix, stay with the command-line interface, and think **grep** is pretty intuitive. You absolutely must use a tool that handles the menus and allows you to read messages off-line. Golden CommPass 2.1 (GCP) offers that ability and more.

Most work is done off-line

The typical Golden CommPass session takes two or three passes through CompuServe. The first pass retrieves the messages, which you review and reply to off-line. The second pass sends your replies. To save time and money, you might not want to download every message in every section. Golden CommPass allows you to mark headers. With this technique, it scans the sections you've selected and makes a list of the message topics. You browse that list off-line, indicating the topics that you'd like Golden CommPass to download on the second pass. A third pass would be used to send any replies to those messages. (By the way, Golden CommPass supports keyboard macros to simplify the entry of commonly used phrases in those replies.) One of the biggest benefits of Golden CommPass is its use of multiple threads to save you time during this process. Unlike any other CompuServe navigation

tool, you can begin reading the messages downloaded from a forum immediately, even while other forums continue to be downloaded.

To simplify your scan through the subjects, Golden CommPass allows you to specify keywords of interest or disinterest. It can then sort the subjects so those with "include" keywords move to the top, while those with "exclude" keywords move to the bottom. With version 2.1, Golden CommPass has intelligent thread marking. It keeps track of the topics that you select and in future runs, pre-marks those topics for download.

However, this ability is not a guarantee that you will only see the messages you want. A common problem on CompuServe is "topic drift," wherein a reply to a reply still has the same subject header, but no longer has anything to do with that topic. If you are entering a reply that is off the subject, Golden CommPass allows you to write a reply while changing the subject header.

As you're reading messages, you may be interrupted and have to stop. No problem, Golden CommPass can set a bookmark automatically in the message file, so that when you restart, the file will open to the last message read. You can also manually set bookmarks through a message file to make it easy to get back to messages of interest.

Tracing the threads

Those who are tight on disk space should use the overwrite option so that downloaded messages replace those that were stored earlier. On the other hand, those who frequently use CompuServe often come across messages that are interest-

ing—if they could only remember the original messages topic. Thus, if you have a little extra disk space, you should instruct Golden CommPass to append messages to the existing file. Then, when you find a cryptic message, you can use Golden CommPass' "Jump to parent" option to take a look at the message that inspired the reply.

This option, however will cause the message files to continue to grow on your disk. With version 2.1, Golden CommPass lets you "age" a message file, removing the oldest entries. You can either enter a specific message number, causing all lower numbers to be removed, or enter a cutoff date. All messages stamped by CIS before that date are removed. (It would be easier if Golden CommPass allowed you to specify the number of days you wished to keep and do the date arithmetic to remove the older messages.) If you're a pack rat, those older messages can be archived into a different file.

You can help lessen the need for others to use this feature by quoting short pieces of a message in your reply. When you are replying to a message, the window splits horizontally, with the original message at the top, and an area underneath for your reply. You can easily go to the source window and copy the few words required to set the stage. Rather than just doing a straight paste, Golden CommPass can automatically put quotation marks, or the '>' symbol in front of the text to indicate to readers that the section is a quote from another message, as shown in Figure 2.

Exploiting GUI

The main window uses iconic cues to show the user where they are in the process.

Forums that have unread messages show up as books, those that have headers to review and mark show up as clipboards, library catalogs show up as a card-file, and so on. Each of these objects is opened with a double-click.

Golden CommPass' options are set via a standard Workplace Shell notebook. You can customize the

font and colors here as well, although Golden CommPass should have used the OS/2 color and font palettes for this purpose.

Golden CommPass also provides a button bar, grouping a number of common commands at the top of the window, where they can be activated by a single click. The button bar is configurable, so if you use other commands more frequently, you can easily put them on the bar.

Not just messages

Golden CommPass includes features to help with conferences. You can input messages in a window, allowing you to edit them before sending. You can also open a second input window or upload a text file and send it as a message. Golden CommPass can capture conferences in a log file, and maintains a scroll-back buffer so you can review the last few pages of text.

Golden CommPass makes it easy for you to keep an up-to-date catalog of the libraries in the forums you frequent. After the initial download, it tracks the date so that subsequent catalog updates can use the age to pull down only the

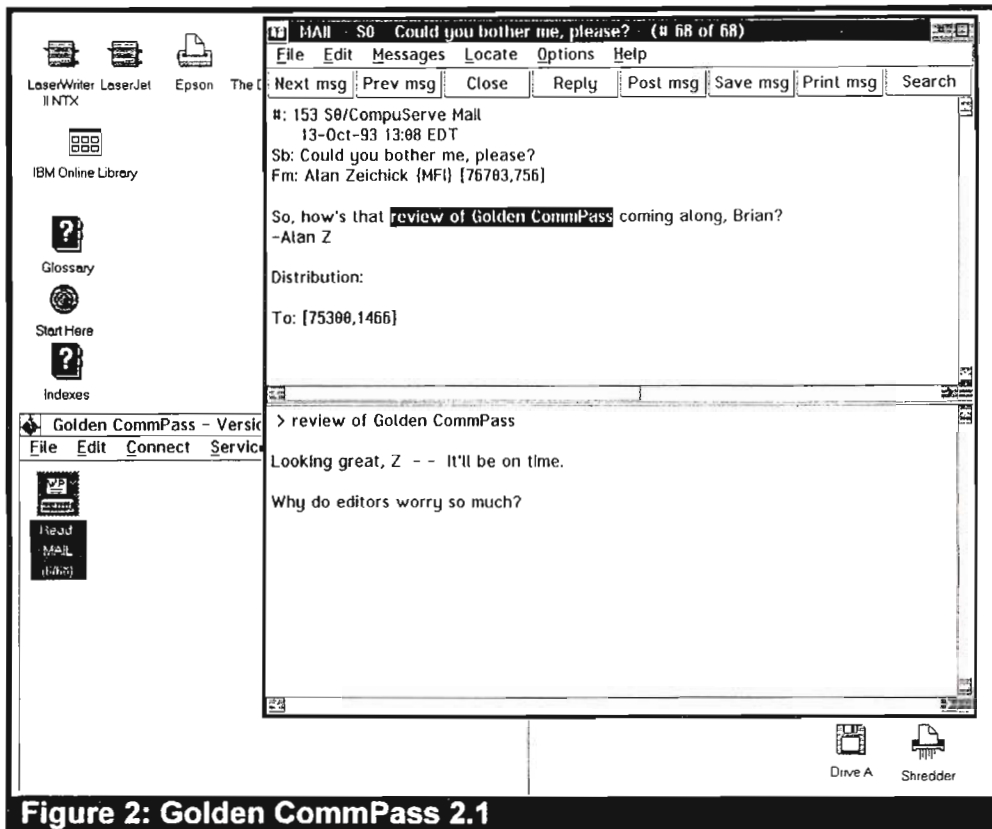


Figure 2: Golden CommPass 2.1

things that have been added or changed since the last update. You can browse through the catalog off-line, scanning by keyword, and mark the files of interest for later download.

Other goodies

One of CompuServe's features is a set of maps, kept up to date by the National Weather Service. Golden CommPass allows you to select these off-line, then download the GIF files automatically, presenting them via your favorite GIF viewer.

Golden CommPass' address book lets you keep the CompuServe ID's of those with whom you'd like to correspond. Try to remember who you have already added, because Golden CommPass lets you add duplicate entries to your heart's content without warning.

For more specialized processing needs, Golden CommPass allows you to create script files. You can also run it from the command line, so you could use a timer program to have it conduct a first pass automatically at 8:45 every morning, so that when you arrive at your desk at 9:00, it is done and ready for your perusal.

Finally, Golden CommPass lets you keep a handle on your expenses by providing an up-to-the-minute estimate of your monthly bill. By tracking the number of minutes spent on-line and the connection speed, Golden CommPass can produce a fairly accurate picture of your cost.

Glee or Flee

Golden CommPass has some key benefits, including the user interface, the money you can save by reading your messages and

browsing library catalogs off-line, and the time you save by being able to do other things during the download process, such as reading the messages from one forum while another is still being downloaded (while maintaining high-speed communication). Performance has been greatly improved over earlier versions. Taking all that into account, if you're a CompuServe user, Golden CommPass is one of those applications that can justify the purchase of OS/2 all by itself.

Brian Proffitt has been in the computing industry for 20 years. He was part of IBM's OS/2 team, left IBM to become the director of PC Week's Corporate Labs, and is now the President of Visionary Research. Brian is the author of two books on OS/2: OS/2 Application Development Tools, and OS/2 Inside & Out. He has written for several publications, including IBM Personal Systems Developer and PC Week. He can be contacted via CompuServe at 75300,1466, or Internet 75300.1466@compuserve.com.