



AN EFFICIENT FILE TRANSFER PACKAGE MEANS THAT THE USER CAN TAKE ON INCOMPATIBLE
MICROS AND STILL MAINTAIN A SMOOTH DATA LINK. JULIA NEWMAN LOOKS AT THE TRANSFER
SERVICES AVAILABLE AND CARRIES OUT A TEST ON WORDMONGERS' TX PACKAGE

HOW FILE TRANSFER CAN HELP YOU OUT

File transfer is the answer to a computer dealer's prayers. It is a boon to the user as well since it solves the recurring problem of incompatible machines which cannot communicate.

A dealer can recommend a new micro system incompatible with a company's existing micros but still, without qualms, assure clients that they can carry on using all their old files, so they won't have to junk all their existing data and start again.

File transfer also means the old micro is not redundant simply because disks cannot be swapped between it and the new micro. The old machine continues to give extra computing power – a long report can be transferred to the old machine for editing, then back to the new micro for printing.

You can also transfer files over a

modem, so a central office with an IBM PC AT could collate sales information from files transferred from its branches, each of which might have a low-cost Apricot system, and then send out updated price lists to all the branches.

Of course file transfer is not the panacea for all incompatibility ills. We researched different ways of achieving file transfer, and found that in some cases of incompatibility there may be no simple solution.

But we also tried file transfer out for ourselves using the Wordmongers TX program, and were pleasantly surprised to find it a painless experience.

Project – file transfer

We put ourselves in the position of a firm of solicitors which had been using a Sirius for several years. Imagine that

secretaries use the Sirius to edit and print standard contracts and letters, but because of competition for use of the micro find themselves having to stay late to get work out on time. The partners decide to buy a second machine, and it seems silly not to go for a state-of-the-art system – hard disk, powerful processor – so they settle on the Televideo AT, an IBM AT compatible.

But they face a further obstacle – to ensure that files created on one machine can be edited on the other, and vice versa.

We approached Wordmongers and explained the undertaking. Assuming the Televideo AT was truly IBM compatible, the company said, there was no problem. Wordmongers lists nearly 100 formats in which TX – its file transfer package – can be supplied more or less off-the-shelf. About 50% of

its business is in packages which transfer Sirius and Apricot files to IBM PCs.

But Wordmongers also supplies TX for exotic combinations such as the Transtec Krypton and the Chameleon. 'Our greatest claim to fame is that if you bring in a really weird machine we can get the software working on it,' says director Clive Salvidge. Wordmongers needs to keep the unusual machine for a few days, and reserves the right to make a surcharge of up to £50 for the extra work.

Off the shelf, TX costs £165 for a named pair of computers, or £195 for TX IV, the version used for transferring files via a modem.

Package structure

We intended to sit the micros next to each other as we transferred the files, so we ordered the straight TX package. It consisted of a short, rather technical-looking manual, a cable, and two disks. The disks were labelled Sirius 96 tpi (tracks per inch) and IBM PC double-sided 48 tpi DOS 2. We thought the format sounded okay, but we read the directory of each disk on the appropriate machine to make sure. Each disk simply held the TX program configured for that machine, so the Sirius program was called 'txmssir', and the IBM program 'txmsibm'.

We then took a look at the cable. Although the plug at the Sirius end was not actually labelled 'Sirius', when we compared the ports on the backs of two machines, it was clear where each end of the cable had to be plugged.

According to a separate instruction card, TX can be used to transfer both data files and applications programs. Data files will work on the new machine no matter what the operating system, but program files will only work if the operating system is the same on both machines.

Operating systems

The operating systems on the Sirius and the Televideo AT have similar features, but are different. The Sirius uses MS-DOS and the Televideo uses a PC-DOS look-alike. As far as we were concerned, WordStar files sent from the Sirius could be expected to work fine on the Televideo, but if we tried to transfer WordStar itself it would not work. We were quite happy with this arrangement because, apart from the fact that transferring our WordStar program to another computer (thus having two copies) would be piracy, we had already installed the word processing program we wanted to use on the Televideo - MicroPro's Easy. What was crucial to our scheme, however, was the knowledge that Easy files and WordStar files are mutually

comprehensible.

The next step, according to the instruction card and manual, was to set the baud rate (the rate at which data would be transferred) on each machine, preferably at 9600 baud. This is the fastest baud rate TX can handle, but it is quite fast in microcomputer terms. Unfortunately the manual did not tell us how to set the baud rate. It should have told us just to load the software on both machines and then follow the instructions on the screen, because when we did that, lo and behold the TX software asked us to choose a baud rate and continued to prompt for each item of information it needed after that.

The next prompt asked us to state which was the 'sending' and which the 'receiving' machine. So we typed 'r' on the Televideo which was the receiving machine, and then specified which was the destination drive. 'Waiting for link' was the message back from the Televideo. Then we typed 's' on the Sirius, stated the name of the file, and the file was transferred.

The whole process was surprisingly quick - from unpacking the disks to getting the message that the file had been transferred took about ten minutes.

'That cannot be all there is to it!' we thought, so we experimented a bit further. We discussed a few quibbles we had with Wordmongers.

Drawbacks

Once TX has sent a file it offers you the option to send another file, or quit. If TX is unsuccessful in its attempts to send a file because it cannot find one of that name, there is no way of simply quitting the program to read the disk directory and establish the correct spelling of the file. The only way to get out of TX is to reset the sending machine, which hangs up the receiving machine. Salvidge's solution is to send a short dummy file. 'I do agree it would be useful to have a quit option at that point,' he agrees.

A facility you would expect in a file transfer package is a 'wild card'. You use a wild card to send a bunch of files, employing '*' to represent any string of characters. For example, '*.*' will send all the files on a disk, and '*.ltr' will send all the files with the extension .ltr.

But what hindered us for a minute or two was when TX said it could not find files that we knew were on the hard disk. We guessed it was because the files we wanted to transfer were in sub-directories and not in the root directory. So we tried again, this time typing a path to the file, for example \easy\text*.* - but TX would not let us type a path. From this we deduced that TX expects you to change the

logged directory to the sub-directory where the files to be transferred are located before you load TX.

We tried it this way, and it did indeed work. But it also occurred to us that if you have to change directory to the directory where the files are resident before loading TX, you cannot send files from another directory without editing TX and reloading.

Salvidge agreed this was true, but told us that TX customers usually either transfer a single named file, or more commonly the contents of an entire disk, so there would be no need to chop and change directories.

Our final objection was that TX does not allow you to overwrite a file on the destination machine. This makes sense for security reasons but neither can you send a file which already exists on the destination machine, renaming it as you go. You have to rename the file outside TX and then send it.

There was an easy answer. If you were normally sending a batch of files, it would be very impractical to have to respond to a prompt for a name for each file. With file transfer taking place over phone lines it would be impossible.

One complaint remains - we would not have tripped up on these points if the manual had been clearer. The TX manual could do with a drastic rewrite. Still, the on-screen instructions in TX are very clear, and the actual process of file transfer was refreshingly easy to accomplish.