

No. 99. Win 98's Built-in System Information - Part II

- by Stan Kaplan, WB9RQR
105 Martin Drive
Port Washington, WI 53074-9654
(262) 284-9346
skaplan@mcw.edu

A couple of months ago we explored Windows 98's diagnostic tools, which are built right into the operating system, albeit hard to find. This month, let us go a bit more in depth, which will expose you to some very powerful diagnostic tools that can help you to tune your system to peak performance as well as solve problems.

Again, click **Start**, then **Programs**, then **Accessories**, then **System Tools**, and then **System Information** to get to the basic screen. We saw earlier that this presents you with a listing of a summary of basic information - how Win 98 was installed, the version of Internet Explorer in use, how long Windows has been up and running, the type of CPU in your machine, and so on. We went through the three major divisions shown in the left panel, **Hardware Resources**, **Components** and **Software Environment**.

This time, we will ignore those three major divisions in the left panel. Instead, click **Tools** at the top of the screen, then **Direct X Diagnostic Tool**, which will be present if your machine is multimedia ready. You will probably see eight or nine tabs (the number depends upon what is installed in your computer, so don't be upset if something I describe here is missing). Click **System** if it is not already shown. Again, some basic information is presented - date/time, computer name, operating system, language, CPU and speed, memory (this is the only Win98 utility that shows the true amount of RAM in your machine!), size of the page (swap) file and the Direct X version. Now click **Direct X Files**, which will show you file versions and dates. If present, the **Direct X Media Files** and **Direct X Drivers** tabs will also show you file dates and versions. Next, click **Display**, which will show details of both your video card and monitor, plus the installed drivers for these devices. If you have a multimedia-capable machine, you can test its ability by clicking the **Test Direct Draw**, **Test Direct 3D** and **Test AGP Texturing** buttons. Each will put your video system and monitor through a series of tests that you can watch on the screen, with a summary of any problems encountered.

Similarly, explore the other tabs - **Sound**, **Music**, **Input** (music input devices such as a synthesizer or electronic organ) and **Network** (attachments to a modem or direct to the web for Direct Play). The Sound and Music tab will also have some buttons that will permit you to test these systems. Finally, the **More Help** tab will give you a way to troubleshoot any Direct X problems that you found.

Pretty neat stuff, huh? Moreover, that is just the beginning! Close the Direct X Diagnostic Tool (you may need to start the System Information utility from scratch), and click on **Windows Report Tool**. This is a software device that allows you to report problems to Microsoft, and it will even automatically collect relevant data about your machine for them to help in their diagnosis. Truthfully, this is not a very useful tool and I don't recommend it. Close it, and move on to a much, much more valuable too, the **System File Checker**. If your machine is acting wacky-doodle and you eliminate a virus infection as a cause, use this to check your system files. If any are corrupt or missing, Win98 will identify them and prompt you for its CD-ROM, so the files can be restored. This one tool can save you from having to reinstall Windows 98, a real time saver, indeed. Way to go, Microsoft!

Next is the **Signature Verification Tool**, which looks for files that have been granted a Microsoft digital signature. When this signature is present inside the file, it means that the file is an unaltered copy of the original. Several (but not all) system and application files (.EXE, .SYS, .DLL, .VXD and others) are signed.

The **Registry Checker** does just that, making sure that this most vital of all files is not corrupt or incorrect. Did you know that the Registry is so important that Win 98 makes a new copy of it each time you successfully start your machine? That is why there is a tool to make sure it is healthy.

Dr. Watson takes a snapshot of your system, whenever a system fault occurs. It identifies the software that caused the fault, and may even be able to offer suggestions concerning how to fix the problem.

The **System Configuration Utility** lets you select the type of startup you want (full, selective or diagnostic). It will also let you look at and alter CONFIG.SYS, AUTOEXEC.BAT, SYSTEM.INI, WIN.INI and the Startup Group. A good, centralized way to alter these files during troubleshooting operations.

ScanDisk is the old 1990s DOS tool for identifying disk problems that has been newly updated for use with the version of DOS that underlies Win98 (Version 7). It is useful, and should be run from time to time. Finally, the **Version Conflict Manager** allows you to restore original files that were replaced after Win 98 was installed. This is particularly useful if a naughty software package you installed has overwritten a device driver file that worked with a newer version that does not. The manager will allow you to restore the original, good driver.

I hope this has given you a good overview of the very powerful utilities that come with Win 98. Overall, this is my take: Windows 98 is a very good Graphical User Interface/DOS software package. The utilities described here, when used in conjunction with the third party software package Norton SystemWorks to detect and repair problems, can keep your machine stable, running and productive. The question is, why did we have to wade through two versions of Windows 95 and a previous version of Windows 98 to get our money's worth? Happy computing!