

PC Commander: Not for nontechnies

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InterPath Corp.'s PC Commander promises and delivers a lot. With the \$95 program, you can define menus of single-key macro instructions for your applications. Complex tasks within and between programs can be reduced to one or two keystrokes.

However, PC Commander lacks elegance in its syntax, display, and user interaction. It is also very frustrating. Its assumptions go beyond the average PC user's knowledge. The software's approach is awkward at first. And the manual is dense at best.

The editor program used to create the menu macros divides the screen into three areas: menu/subroutine names and their options, links from menu options to submenus, and commands to be executed from menu options. I didn't find this division natural. It would have been simpler to use a traditional if-then structure, where all pertinent elements are together.

Luckily, the subroutine structure is similar to that of some computer languages, such as DEC Command Language, so I was able to figure it out after a few hours of creating files that compiled without errors but did nothing. I started with something small, the creation of a simple function-key-accessed macro. However, nothing happened until I began

using actual menu choices that the program could then tie in to a particular function key. The system seems to assume you want options, even if you don't.

Once I got the hang of the structure, I was able to replace my 437-line Basic-driven menu structure completely with PC Commander in about an hour. Of course, I lost my clock, CRT-saver timed screen blanking, and input verification functions.

The PC Commander menu, using the same menu structure as its Basic predecessor, ran much more quickly and allowed for more functions. However, PC Commander is obviously designed for those who know exactly what they want to do and how to get it done, while the Basic menu was written for nontechnical editors (it checks input before passing control to DOS programs and gives English-language error messages to users).

PC Commander allows no such luxuries, not even a remark feature on the menu for instructions or comments to users. It also has no abort feature for its macros.

The program does allow some neat capabilities. For example, to prepare articles for typesetting, Computer Society magazine editors must translate their word processing file into ASCII. Before the ASCII file is made, the original file

must be manipulated through a series of global replaces and formatting changes.

Such changes can be reduced to a couple keystrokes with PC Commander. The program also allows its redefinition of the function (and other) keys to be turned off so you can run other programs that use these keys. When you want PC Commander back on, simply press the rarely used numeric keypad 5 key or CTRL-keypad-5 to reactivate it. (Which one you press depends on what mode you want: function key only, alphabetic key, command string, or a combination.)

Unfortunately, PC Commander, Basic, and programs such as Microsoft Word and Hayes Smartcom II won't fit concurrently in my system's 256K RAM (PC Commander takes 64 K). I have a choice: Basic plus the applications software or PC Commander plus the applications. (Later, we expanded my system to 640K; PC Commander did indeed work as a supplemental menu to applications programs that were in turn controlled from a Basic-and-DOS semi-intelligent menu.

The experienced user could easily rely on PC Commander to connect applications. However, typical users—not hackers or computer bugs—will have problems with its lack of coaching and verification functions.

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