

# Double Your Fun Double Your Fun

By WILLIAM BLANK

Senior Member, Sacramento Chapter

It's what we do all day long. Working in *FrameMaker* (or *Word*), you write a sentence or two telling the user how to make the application perform its task. Then you flip to the application you're describing and set it up to display the activity you've just described. Then you shuffle through the open windows on your desktop to your graphics program so you can capture the screen, edit it, reduce the color level, add the callout, and draw a border. Then you export the screen shot back to *FrameMaker*.

Repeat this sequence fifteen times with all the attendant flipping and shuffling, and save your work as a portable document format (PDF) file. Then you have to open *Acrobat* to make sure everything appears exactly as you wish.

After about the seventh iteration, it looks so good that you unminimize your e-mail program to attach your creation and dispatch it to your co-workers. Then it's back to *FrameMaker* to create the HTML version. But everyone knows that *FrameMaker's* HTML conversion utility is, umm, less than perfect, so next you move to your HTML editor, where you view the document with multiple versions of diverse browsers until you're sure it displays perfectly (well, at least acceptably) in each.

Even with 21-inch monitors, there are too many open windows to keep track of (Figure 1). It's like holding a stack of a dozen playing cards and constantly reshuffling them to get the one you want on top.

## Increasing Space

The greatest timesaving, work-simplifying device for technical communicators is

an underused Windows feature: dual monitors. Installing a second monitor to your computer effectively doubles your desktop size. Your cursor moves effortlessly from one edge of monitor A to the adjacent edge of monitor B. Suddenly the work gets easier.

You can connect a second monitor to almost any computer running Microsoft Windows 98 or 2000, and instantly you have twice the work space. A window displaying almost any application will move seamlessly from the monitor you had to the monitor you add. As if by magic, everything works as it should.

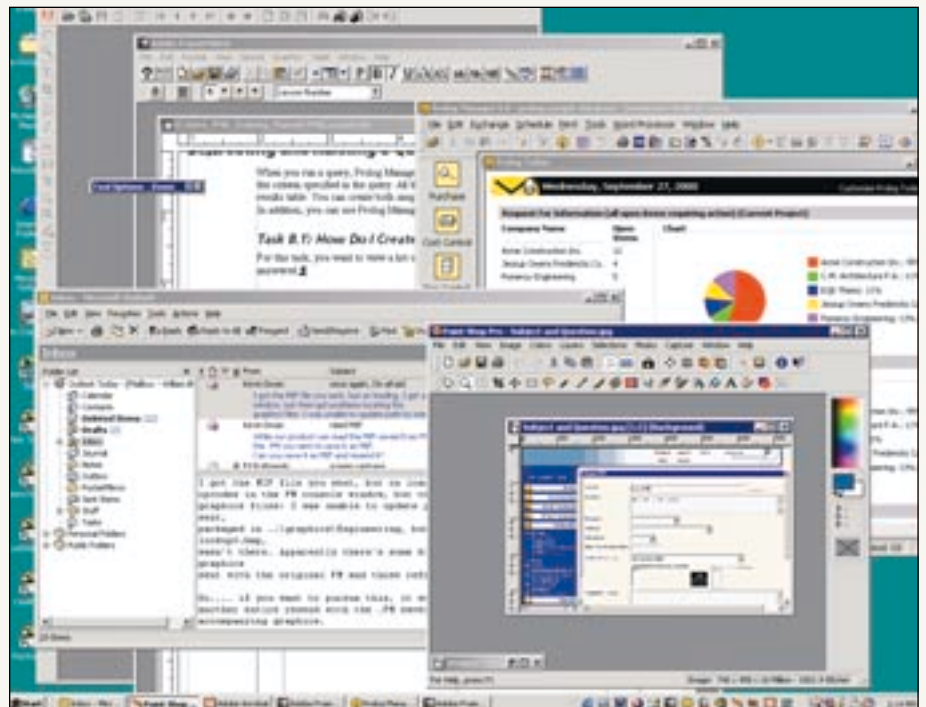
Maximize *FrameMaker* to fill the left-

hand monitor, keeping the graphics and e-mail programs on the screen on the right. Now it's much easier to shuffle among windows (Figure 2).

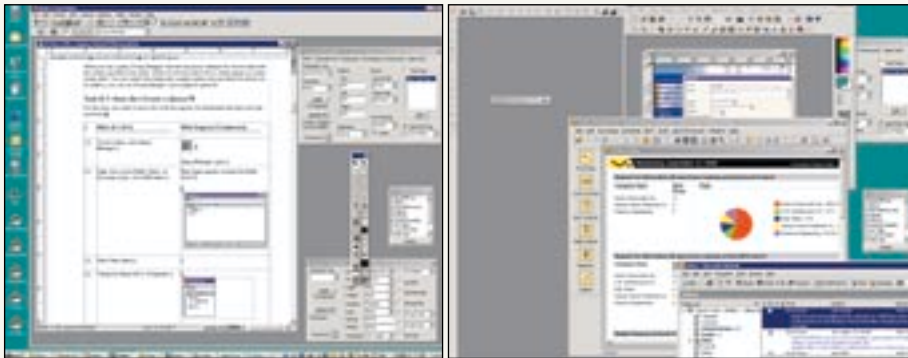
For precision graphics work, you can even expand one layout program to fill both screens. You can configure your monitors in either a contiguous left-right or up-down arrangement. Microsoft says you can add as many as nine monitors to a single computer, although I don't know of a motherboard with space for more than four.

After working for an hour or three with a dual-monitor setup, reverting to one screen will feel like going back to Windows 3.1.

Figure 1. An Overcrowded Desktop



**Figure 2. Spreading the Work over Two Monitors**



### Easy Setup

When I negotiated the terms of my current job, I specified the computer equipment I wanted. The dual monitor setup was not negotiable. The only problem was that I had to explain to our IT support person how to set it up.

The setup is easy to do. In fact, if you've never opened a computer case in your life, this can be a useful experience. All it takes is an empty PCI or AGP slot on your motherboard, another monitor (that old 15-inch gathering dust in your garage rafters will do just fine, but size does matter), and another recent-vintage video card that you can pick up anywhere for as little as \$35. Or you could buy that fancy new monitor and video card you've been lusting after.

And as an added bonus, you might out-technogeek the coders and have one of the niftier desktops in your division.

### Potential Problems

Before you go looking for a screwdriver, here are two warnings:

First, the dual monitor arrangement works on Windows 98, Windows 2000, and Windows Me, but not on Windows 95 or NT 4.0. You can set up multiple monitors on Windows NT 4.0 only if you use specific video cards. (See [support.microsoft.com/support/kb/articles/Q162/9/28.asp](http://support.microsoft.com/support/kb/articles/Q162/9/28.asp).)

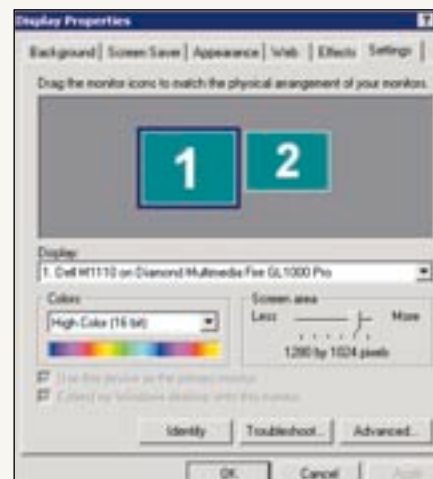
Second, you have to consider the AGP/PCI conundrum. Video cards come in two flavors: AGP (Advanced Graphics Port) and PCI (Peripheral Component Interconnect). Your current video card is one or the other. Most computers made in the past two years have one AGP card slot and two to five

PCI slots. The industry trend is toward AGP, but good PCI cards are still common. (AGP is quite a bit faster, but unless you play action games or edit huge graphic files, you'll never notice the difference.)

If your current video is PCI and you add another PCI card, you'll have no problem. However, when you add a second monitor, one becomes primary and the other secondary. The differences aren't great, but if your original video card is state of the art and your second video card is basic, you'll definitely want the original to be primary.

If your current video is AGP and you add a PCI card (or vice versa), the BIOS (Basic Input/Output System) on your motherboard might require that the PCI video (likely to be the older and cheaper one) becomes primary and the fancy AGP becomes secondary. Not a total deal-killer, but nowhere near perfect. You might be able to change the BIOS setting to make

**Figure 3. Display Properties Setup Showing Two Monitors**



the AGP primary. (Ask your IT person if you don't know how to do this; it's pretty easy.) On my machine, from the opening BIOS screen, I select **Advanced**, then **Video Configuration**, **Default Primary Video Adapter**, and finally **AGP**. (For more detailed information on this process, see [www.elementjournals.com/w98/9902/w989924.htm](http://www.elementjournals.com/w98/9902/w989924.htm)). However, the BIOS configuration for each motherboard is different. On newer motherboards, the BIOS might be preset to make AGP primary, which means you'll have no problem.

### Extending Your Desktop

Once you've checked out the BIOS and dealt with any problems, setup is simple:

1. Turn off your computer.
2. Open the case.
3. Insert the second video card in an empty PCI or AGP slot. (Make sure you get it all the way in! The most common problem is video cards not totally seated.)
4. Screw the card to the case.
5. Connect the second monitor to the new card.
6. Close the case.
7. Reboot. If everything is going right, your secondary monitor will show a message informing you that the second video is connecting.
8. Right-click your desktop and select **Properties**. The **Display Properties** window appears (Figure 3).
9. Click the **Settings** tab.
10. Check **Extend my Windows desktop onto this monitor**.
11. Click **Apply**.

Your second monitor comes to life!

The graphic display of the two boxes shows the relative positioning of the two monitors. You can drag them into a variety of configurations. Either one can be on the left. You can even put one over the other.

Write better, faster, and cheaper this way for an hour and you'll never go back. I promise. **!**

*William Blank is senior technical writer at Meridian Project Systems, Inc., Sacramento, California. He teaches advanced technical writing at California State University—Sacramento.*