Focus On FRONT-ENDS

Since we last looked at Front Ends — software to make computing simple — two new systems have appeared and another is on the way. Ron Massey lines them up.

Getting to grips with the QL, the more common commands associated with directories, copying, running and editing programs or other similar repetitive operations is not difficult; it is more a case of the repetition rapidly becoming time-consuming and boring.

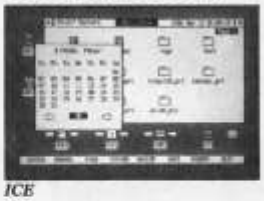
A front end, simplifying command input, and often including features not otherwise readily available to a basic operating system, has become an expected feature on more expensive machines.

Macintosh, one of the best examples of a well-designed system, has established an industry standard for its GEM front-end input systems and relies entirely on a combination of icons and pull-down menus.

Five front-end systems are now available for the QL and incorporate varying degrees of sophistication and occasionally overlapping features. The first such system available for the QL was Eidersoft ICE.

An acronym for Icon Controlled Environment, ICE provides a number of useful command additions to the QL operating system. Commands are cursor-selected from one of the 13 screen icons or from the menu line at the bottom of the screen and are entered by single or double clicking the space bar.

When the QL is first switched-on or each time it is re-set, you have the option either of defaulting to the ICE screen or, if the ALT key is held down until the Sinclair copyright logo appears, initiating a boot program or going directly to the default input windows, after pressing F1 or F2. A single new keyword has been added, via the EPROM, to SuperBasic — ICE. When invoked, the now familiar ICE page is returned to the screen directly from SuperBasic or the default screens.



ICE

The ICE screen consists of an icon for each of the main drive options, Microdrive, floppy and RAM disc, each of which is central to two arrow icons. Selecting either arrow will enable you to increment the drive number to be accessed.

Other symbols on the drive control row are a dustbin and an abbreviation for escape. Selecting the ESC symbol will cancel any files selected in the directory window; the BIN icon will delete any selected files.

Command inputs

Near the upper left corner of the ICE screen, an icon labelled "CALC" accesses the ICE simple five-function calculator. If selected with the screen cursor and spacebar, a window opens in the centre of the screen containing a graphic representation of a calculator.

Below this is another icon, labelled DATE. Accessing this icon produces a calendar in the conventional format which can be paged through successive or preceding months.

Directory icons are, wherever possible, related to the type of file to which they relate. Boot or files suffixed with -bas are labelled "SB", Archive files are represented by a two-drawer filing cabinet, Abacus files are represented by an abacus, executable files are labelled "EXEC". Other file types follow a similar convention.

Multiple command inputs are interactive in that a succession of icon selections will follow through a sequence of commands. Once the directory icons are available, for example, changing the drive number and selecting one or more of the directory icons will copy the selected items to the new drive number.

If a directory icon is selected by single clicking of the space bar, its colour will invert and the system will wait for further processing commands. Double-clicking the space bar at an icon will LRUN a SuperBasic program or EXEC-W a machine code or compiled file.

Further strengthening the similarity between ICE and GEM, Eidersoft offers a version of ICE incorporating a three-button mouse. Complementing its ARTice graphics program, the mouse replaces all cursor key and space bar functions.

Where volume directories are large, as is usually the case with disc directories, selecting the screen paging option, after obtaining the first page of 12 directory icons, pressing the right-hand mouse button will advance the count four pages at a time.

Adding further versatility to the ICE system, Eidersoft supplies a suite of programs called CHOIce. It provides an additional range of individual utilities for operating a RAM disc, mail-merging — combining a group of otherwise identical documents, each individually addressed or otherwise personalised — or printing labels.

One point which users may care to ponder is that Choice offers the possibility, memory permitting, of multi-tasking any combination of programs. If Quill and Archive were run in tandem, it is possible to switch between the two when and as required.

A German import marketed in the U.K. by Digital Precision, *Giga Desk* comprises complete operating environment incorporating the ABC two-button mouse, Giga Basic (EASE) and the Giga Desk software.

Giga Desk consists of what is becoming a conventional icon/menu screen, from which you can eliminate the bulk of keyboard inputs for file-handling and other repetitive processing tasks. Icon options enable

you to alter the default sizes of the various windows available to the system, to move them round the screen or to pan and scroll within the windows.

An interesting feature of the GD directory system is that, once you have your initial directory, which defaults to icons, you have additional options of sorting the initial display by alphabetical order; file size or date; or annotating any number of individual file entries with an indexing marker and doing additional sorts.

The DESK option accesses the almost mandatory calculator — this one uses RPL notation, but includes trig, log and memory functions — a tile game (!), an option called Panel and a final option called "About E.A.S.E."

Expecting a help or prompt page, I selected the "About E.A.S.E" option and had, instead, a copyright message. As that is a repeat, more or less, of the start-up message, I felt that it was somewhat less than helpful and something of a waste of valuable coding space.

The PANEL option accesses a number of commands relating to the display. You have options of selecting either high- or low-resolution modes, setting the drive defaults for either Microdrives or a disc station, printer port assignment, and scrolling or panning steps.

Curiously, Giga Desk is not particularly fast. More to the point it lacks much of the smoothness of other similar OL utilities. In this respect, it is consistent with Giga Chrome.

The remainder of the system, E.A.S.E.,

E.A.S.E.

furnishes the functions of a toolkit and adds a number of useful commands to SuperBasic. Also included is a system for producing sprites. They may be incorporated into games or used as animated icons.

A newcomer to the front-end scene and an acronym for QL Applications Traffic Supervisor, the Cope Software *QATS* is exceptional in that its menu system is entirely user-definable. Operating in a menu tree structure, you have the option of customising any number of front ends for particular applications, each with its own distinctive command structures.

Supplied with the main operating system either on an EPROM or as multi-tasking software, the system is installed in modules by connecting system services when and as required. A semi-intelligent system, when QATS is loaded, it will look at the peripherals attached to your system and, when the first screen asks for the drive on which the other coding is placed, the list of drives will contain entries for 'mdv' and, if available, 'flp' and 'ram'. Drive numbers are next selected from a similar parameter.

When up and running, the first menu will contain items pertaining to primary options. Since they are re-configurable, examples used in describing them will be taken from the system as supplied with the review copy of QATS.

Menus and windows are re-positionable and sizes may be changed to suit particular requirements, either temporarily or as default sizes and positioning. Each successive menu is numbered, indicating its position on the command tree. Successively, the main menu is headed by "1 START"; the next, by "2 Name selected from first menu", as well as the invisible command attached to it, and so on downwards.

If "P Psion" is selected, the first sub-menu will contain the names of the Psion programs and their relevant input letters.

Since I always run other jobs alongside Quill — Keydefine, the Qlone clock, and a Caps Lock indicator — I re-configured the Q Quill option from the Psion menu to produce another sub-menu, rather than starting Quill immediately. In that way I have the option of starting from any number of different Keydefine programs, according to the type of work I am doing.

An option recently added to the QATS system allows you to teach it the series of keypresses required to

QATS

produce a "learned" sequence of command inputs.

When start-up commands are attached to particular menu options while configuring the system, you have the further option of running them either as

Option	MOUSE ICE	QATS	GDESK	QIMP
Code Source				
EPROM	Yes	Yes	No	No
mdv or disc	CHOice	Yes	Yes	Yes
Command Input				
Keyboard	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Cursor keys	No	No	No	Yes
Mouse	Yes	No	Tes	No
Menu	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Icon	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Recall	Yes	No	No	Yes
Method	'ICE'	Reload services	—	<CTRL>
Display Options				
Chg Wind. size	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Config colour	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Config menus	No	Yes	No	No
Windowing	Fixed	Config	Config	Config
Drive Options				
No. support.	8	All	All	All
mdv	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Disc	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
RAM disc	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Hard disc	No	Yes	No	No
Files				
Indication	Icons	Names	Icons	Icons
Directory	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Sort	No	Yes	Yes	No
Re-name	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Wildcard	No	Yes	No	No
Back-up	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Information	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Memory				
Access	No	Yes	No	Yes
Edit	No	No	No	No
Dump	No	No	No	Yes
Program				
Start	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Interrupt	No	No	No	Yes
Re-start	No	No	No	No
Output				
Copy	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Format	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Print to screen	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
printer	Yes	Yes	No	No
print codes	No	Yes	No	No
BAUD rate	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Screen dump	No	No	No	No
System				
Job control	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Job Info	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Clock cont.	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Misc Options				
Calendar	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Calculator	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Diary	No	No	No	No
Notepad	No	No	No	No
Print-code library	No	Yes	No	No
Mail merge/other formatted output	CHOice	Yes	No	No

background jobs — EXEC — or as a foreground job — EXEC_W. Job priority is also installed at that time.

File-handling, connected with the COPY, DIRECTORY and DELETE commands, includes a powerful wildcard filter allowing you to extract a group of filenames and process them as a group. The conventional wildcard utility seen in the majority of similar utilities will extract from a directory all occurrences of *boot*, where it may be followed by an "_". If the wildcard option is input as "_ _ *boot*", it will extract all occurrences of *boot*, *_boot*, *or _boot_*.

One of the most impressive QATS options is its Output Control module. In common with the rest of the system, Output Control — OC — may be re-configured, either temporarily or permanently, to your exact requirements and provides a comprehensive system for controlling the output of your QL to any legitimate device.

Up to 256 commands may be attached to each of a similar number of printer character "Translate" options. This feature will enable you to produce graphic, or other special characters, with a single character entry into, for example, a Quill _lis file.

Every command available to your printer, or other output device, is attached to two menu pairs — a function list and the relevant control code attached to each function — the first for initiating a sequence — condensed typeface, for example — and the second for switching-off the sequence.

Output Control has a final option of formatting your documents, whether for labels or personalised letters, and may also include headers or other information common to a group of documents.

Personalised mailing lists may be made up from Archive name and address records and attached to a Quill _lis document.

Perhaps old-fashioned in the sense that option selection is not available with the presently-fashionable icons, QATS includes some of the most exciting and useful features I have seen in a single program system.

QIMP

QIMP — QL Icon Manager Program — from Talent is similar to ICE in that it uses a combination of icons and pull-down menus to access system commands. Memory requirement for the program is about 28K of resident procedure area. Although intended primarily for use with expanded QLs, QIMP, provided users remain acutely aware of memory restrictions with regard to the number and size of windows used at one time, should provide no problems for enjoying the benefits of its simplified command inputs. In common with other systems using this type of menu selection, the majority of the commands are input using cursor keys and space bar.

Icons are placed vertically on the left side of the screen for two Microdrives, two floppies, one RAM disc and a multi-purpose BIN. Main menu headers, FILES, DESK, WINDOWS and OPTIONS, select any one of the sub-menus with a relevant command list.

Windows

Calling for a directory, the main window size defaults to eight icons but can be re-defined to full screen windowing for up to 15 icons. Other features in the QIMP system include a SuperBasic program or file editor; output device control; a VIEW option — similar to the COPY TO SCR command; programs may be started from within QIMP by using the INIT CODE command in the OPTIONS sub-menu.

One important point mentioned in the documentation is that control will return to QIMP in some cases by pressing the <CTRL><ALT><7> key combination but this combination will not work if running programs which re-direct traps and exceptions.

Consistent with other Talent software, QIMP is a very useful utility.

While perhaps not so extensive as other similar programs, it offers a number of powerful facilities in a very user-friendly environment. One of the surprising features, more for its limitations than for its inclusion, is that, with the exception of QATS, these systems have included such a simple calculator representation option.

The only calculator worthy of the name I have ever had the pleasure to review was a part of the Eigen icon control program *Paragon*. Eigen calculators were user-selectable from either a conventional simple four-function calculator or a full-feature scientific version, available in either of two configurations.

Not being one to submit willingly to boringly repetitive typing, each of the systems reviewed has its own advantages. EPROM-based systems, such as QATS or ICE, are always on-line, whereas device-based programs require loading before they are available.

In that respect, QATS has a decided advantage in that it can be used either way. That will leave the sole QL ROM port available for other utilities such as toolkits.

Information

ICE £29.85

Mouse ICE £39.95 (standard) £59.95 (supreme)
Eidersoft, The Office, Hall Farm, North Ockendon, Upminster, Essex. Tel.:0708 851099.

QATS £20

Output Control £15

QATS EPROM £10
Cope, 3 Langham Mansions, Earls Court Square, London SW5 9UH. Tel.: 01-373 4647.

GIGA Desk System £89.95
Digital Precision, 222 The Avenue, London E4 9SE. Tel.: 01-527 5493.

QIMP £34.95
Talent Computer Systems, Curran Building, 101 St. James Road, Glasgow G4 0NS. Tel.: 041-552 2128.

QKICK To be announced
Ultrasoft, c/o Eidersoft