

Stuart Williams on the pleasures and pitfalls of setting up your own ST bulletin board

Modifying user access data

SYSOP CALLING!

Those who have gained a little experience in the world of modems and accessing electronic databases on the other side of their telephone lines, and have trod the Bulletin Boards of the UK and overseas, often get around to thinking of setting up their own system, after all, why pay to call the world when the world will call you?

Things are rarely as clear cut as that in the world of communications, and there are many things to consider before you take on the responsibilities of becoming an ST Sysop (SYSTEM OPERATOR).

The first thing to consider is what equipment and software you are going to need. To discover this, I logged on to some of the Boards run on the ST - it's not essential to use the ST, but since you're reading this magazine, it's a fair bet you have an ST to hand! Should you have a spare IBM PC or clone available, or a Tandy TRS80, you could put it to good use as your host system, and leave your ST setup for your other uses!

What is the recipe for success in equipping your ST Board then? First take one Atari ST - any model will do, although the 1040ST does have its advantages in that you may be able to make use of a RAM disc with it.

Second, ensure that you have sufficient disc storage to do the job properly! It is possible to run a small Board on a single 360k drive, but I don't recommend it, as you'll have a very small

message area and little space for software uploads and downloads! Twin double sided 720k drives should be enough for a modest system, at least until you can afford a hard disc - more on this later.

Thirdly, choose your software - I understand there are Public Domain packages available in the States, but the one everyone seems to be using over here is a commercial product, BBS V2.0 from Microdeal/Michtron at £49.95. Again, more on this program later, suffice to say for the moment it is an easy system to use from both ends of the line.

The software choice really dictates the modem selection, and since a modem which has auto-answer is essential, to enable it to answer the 'phone unattended, this is no problem; for our requirements a Hayes-compatible modem is ideal, and installation details for several such modems is ideal, and installation details for several such modems are included in a text file on the disc with BBS V2.0.

Most systems seem to be using the Miracle Technology WS4000 modem, though any of the new reasonable priced Hayes compatible modems should be suitable - ensure that you get one with auto baud-rate scan as standard, so that the modem will be able to set itself to suit the incoming call - it is possible to spend more than £500 on fast modems of up to 2400 baud full duplex, but since most users will have

300 baud and/or 1200/75 baud rates, a modem with those speeds will be quite sufficient and it should be possible to purchase one new for less than £200.

One final purchase (possibly the most important) is a telephone line! Few Sysops are able to manage an easy co-existence with their normal voice line - to do justice to the Board, 24 hour access to its users is an essential; attempts to use the system on a voice line part-time usually result in unwanted data calls all day from users who know the number but not the hours of operation, and the rest of the family is unlikely to appreciate this, especially when you tell them that after a certain time they cannot use the telephone!

Your local British Telecom 'phone sales department should be able to advise you on costs of installation and rental, which will be lower than that of a normal line since you do not need to rent a telephone with it!

Bear in mind that you do not need a special data line (which is very expensive to install) unless you are extremely fussy or have an incredibly noisy exchange!

Now you are equipped, it is time to plan the shape, or 'identity' of your Bulletin Board. To give your system that 'something special' that will attract users and keep them returning again and again, you might like to give it a specialist flavour - the Gnome at Home, for instance (which runs on a number of networked BBC Micro's) has

Desk Install **User** Mail

2 Users

Username : Sysop_____ Password : SYSOP____
 Address : Your street_____
 City : City_____ State: State
 Phone : phone_____ Zip : zip code____

Time per day: 1:00 Default Sig: 1_

Not-Registered Registered Asst. Sysop Sysop **Wizop**

Sig(s) 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16

Last Message: 2____ Last day: 11/20/85 Last time: 00:04:42
 Number call(s): 14____ Upload(s): 0____ Download(s): 0____

Search Delete Previous Next Exit

Sysop's eye view of the e-mail menu

a unique style in accordance with its name!

There are systems biased towards music and other hobbies, some for specific micro's only (though most boards are open to users of all computers) such as Mactel for the Apple Macintosh. Most BBS's however, seem to get along reasonably well with a diet of technical question sessions, general chat, and lots of free (Public Domain) software for download!

The software makes it easy to split your system into specialist messaging areas based on any subject you choose, including an Email section - incidentally, messages may be private (viewable by one person only) or public (where they will be available for general comment by all users). Naturally, the Sysop (or in the case of BBS V2.0 the 'Wizop!') sees all and knows all, so it is your responsibility to oversee what goes on the system.

Speaking of software downloads, if you have a lot of software available in your download areas, you will attract two kinds of people - those who use the Board as it was intended, for messaging, and who treat the download areas as a bonus, and the greedy hogs who spend hours sucking the software down the 'phone line and never have a word to say to anyone. These latter types should not be encouraged, as they spoil the hobby for other users by blocking your line for hours on end!

This leads us neatly on to the trials and tribulations you are likely to encounter as an ST Sysop, and the responsibilities you will be taking on.

I contacted several Bulletin Boards to obtain their comments on the life and times of the Sysop.

The general consensus seemed to be that a Sysop's lot is generally a happy one, with occasional irritations and frustrations, but that you have to be prepared to put in a lot of hours keeping

things running smoothly - the system can run unattended 24 hours a day, but there are inevitably problems to contend with, sometimes due to a user not knowing what they are doing (typically dropping the line in the middle of a session without properly logging off, which can cause the system to 'hang' for a while until it sorts itself out) or knowing too much - would-be 'hackers' occasionally try to 'crack' the system, usually after the latest showing of 'War Games' on T.V.!

Power failures, of course, result in the necessity of rebooting the system. It may also mean that some of the current messages will not have been stored, and a notice will need to be put up to remind users to send them again. Regular 'pruning' of the message areas (SIG's or Special Interest Groups) may be required to keep waste space to a minimum, or to wipe out traces of the occasional profanity left on the system by its less intelligent users!

Setting up the system to accommodate your modem

Desk Install **User** Mail

commands
 ~ (0-2) switch baud
 0=300, 1=1200, 2=2400
 / wait one second

To Enter control codes
 Just type them in. A CR
 is a CNTRL M (␣)
 Select the baud rate the
 Modem can work at. If
 none are selected, then
 that modem is disabled.

300 1200 2400

InitCode: ATSO=1\$ _____
 HangCode: ///+//ATH0\$ _____

Modem 1 Modem 2 Modem 3 Modem 4

OK

Owning a high technology piece of equipment is no guarantee of the common sense of the user, it seems, and the conscientious System Operator has to keep a careful look out for a small number of wallies who range from the childish to the obscene - fortunately they are rare and the majority of people who will log onto your system will be friendly and only too anxious to help other users out with a computing problem. On the best boards, this can create a really friendly atmosphere.

Also, you might wish to change the range of software available for download now and again, Public Domain Libraries are a good bet for supplies of interesting utilities etc.

Once you've created a decent download area, you will find users uploading programs of their own to your system, to be shared with other users, and this attitude is highly commendable and to be encouraged. Make sure no commercial software appears on your system, though!

If you decide to keep a careful check on who uses your system, you may wish to take advantage of the facility of BBS V2.0 to set the 'privilege level' of individual users to whatever you think fit - you can decide what, if anything, they can see or use on your system - YOU are in control!

I hope I haven't put you off from taking a shot at running a Bulletin Board, with all this talk of work and responsibility - there's a tremendous amount of pleasure to be had from managing your own system, not least of which is the making of literally hundreds of new friends - but you have to be prepared to spend a lot of time, some money, and a great deal of work to ensure you have a setup you can be proud of, and one that will attract the modem-using public in their thousands! Go to it, and watch the world beat a path to your door!