"Sprint: The Professional Word Processor" at a Glance

Fast and powerful, but only limited on-screen formatting

by **Robert J. Sawyer**

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This is one of the most difficult reviews I've ever had to write. On the one hand, I want to tell you to run out and buy Borland's *Sprint: The Professional Processor*. After all, it's lightning fast, chock-a-block with features, and an absolute steal at a nickel shy of $200.

On the other hand, Sprint has one drawback so overwhelming, so out of step with the times, that the program may never find more than a niche market. In this world where WYSIWYG (what you see is what you get) is king, what Sprint shows on screen bears only a passing resemblance to what it will print out.

Page breaks normally aren't indicated at all, lines wrap on screen at positions completely unrelated to where they will wrap on paper, and formatting commands, the display of which cannot be suppressed, always clutter your workspace.

Sprint is an upgraded, repackaged version of Final Word II, a wordprocessor sold by a company called FW Corporation (formerly Mark of the Unicorn). Final Word, in turn, is a direct descendant of Perfect Writer, a non-WYSIWYG CP/M program.

Perhaps Borland should have taken a lesson from Kaypro's history: for a short time, Kaypro bundled both Perfect Writer and WordStar with its CP/M computers. Even though PW was arguably a more powerful program (it had, for instance, unerase, multiple editing windows, and automatic file saving long before

WordStar offered such niceties), most Kaypro users opted for
WordStar because they knew that if they got something to look
right on screen it would print out properly. With Perfect Writer
(and Final Word and Sprint), what you see on screen is a mess of
formatting instructions that you have to mentally interpret as
you go along. If you want a numbered list, for instance, you
select "Begin Numbered" from a menu. The full text of that
command appears in your text in inverse video, pushing what
you've typed off to the right; the numbers aren't added until
print time.

Now, there are some Kaypro users who did stick with Perfect
Writer. For them, Sprint may well be the MS-DOS wordprocessor of
choice. They will feel right at home with Sprint's @Verbatim and
@AppendixSection commands, its use of swap files to continuously
write work in progress to disk, its approach to block moving, and
so on.

Editing commands resemble WordStar's

What Perfect Writer users won't find familiar is the basic
cursor movement commands. To provide consistency with other
Borland products, including Sidekick, Sidekick Plus, and the
editors in the Turbo family of programming languages, Sprint uses
commands that are largely the same as those found in WordStar
Professional Release 4.

You'll find the famous cursor diamond, ^V to toggle insert,
^QS and ^QD to go to the beginning and end of a line, ^QR and ^QC

to go to the top and bottom of a file, and even such arcana as
^QT to delete everything up to the next character typed and ^Q?
to show how many characters there are between the beginning of
the file and the cursor position.

I can hear the cry of the PW die-hards now: "But I liked
the old Perfect Writer commands!" Not to worry. Borland
believes in different keystrokes for different folks. Sprint has
a completely user-definable command structure: you can make any
key or combination of keys execute any command that the program
is capable of.

Sprint comes with ready-made alternative user interfaces
that mimic EMACS, Final Word II, SideKick, WordStar 4.0,
WordPerfect 4.2, and Microsoft Word 4.0. You just pick the one
you want from a pop-up menu.

EMACS is the mainframe editor upon which Perfect Writer was
modeled. Those familiar with PW will find Sprint's clone a
comfortable choice. It uses the familiar ^B to move back a
character, Esc-< to jump to the beginning of the document, ^S to
begin a forward search, Esc-H to mark a paragraph as a block, and
so on.

An impressive imitation

As for the WordStar interface, it's an impressive imitation,
right down to such details as putting the thesaurus on <Alt>1.
Almost all WordStar commands are duplicated, including the ^K0-9
place markers. However, this interface is really meant for those

for whom WordStar is already second nature. Instead of
organizing menu commands into logical groups, as real WordStar
does, Sprint's version just lists them alphabetically by command
letter. Very little help is provided. For instance, ^QA to
begin a find-and-replace brings up a list of possible option
characters -- G, U, N, B, W, and ? -- but no reminder of what
they stand for.

　　　You can also define your own user interface from scratch.
If you just want to change the command associated with a
particular function, press <Ctrl><Enter> while that function is
highlighted on a menu and type a new Control, Alt, or function
key combination.

　　　Those who like to get under the hood of their programs can
use Sprint's C-like high-level programming language to create
completely new wordprocessing functions, such as commands to
transpose sentences or capitalize a word. This isn't a task for
the faint-of-heart, though. To give you a taste of what's
involved, here's what the code to define a WordStar-style
beginning block marker looks like:

```
     BlockBegin :
       if (inbuff Marknumber 11)
         if after Marknumber 11 {
           setmark
           swap Marknumber 11
           set marknumber 10
           tomark
```

```
            }
         else (set Marknumber 10 ShowBlock)
      else (set marknumber 10 set marknumber 11)
```

Whew!

Sprint's native interface

After a day of using the mock-WordStar, I decided to
graduate to Sprint's own native interface. As I mentioned
earlier, it already supports almost all WordStar commands
directly (although the place markers have inexplicably been moved
from ^K to <Alt>M), plus it gives you access to features that
aren't available through the WordStar interface, because they
have no WS equivalent.

Sprint's native interface uses pop-up menus. Pressing <F10>
brings up the main menu, a box in the top right corner of the
screen. It lists the available submenus: File, Edit, Insert,
Typestyle, Style, Layout, Print, Windows, Utilities, Customize,
and Quit. Alternatively, you can go directly to any of these
submenus by holding down the <Alt> key and pressing the first
letter of the name of the one you want. Most submenus have their
own sub-submenus.

Shortcut keys for many of the common functions are
available. For instance, to insert a ruler line into the text
you can either work your way down the menu structure by typing

<F10>, selecting Layout, then Ruler, then Insert, or you can just issue the shortcut <Alt>R, bypassing the menus. Although they're not listed on the menus, WordStar shortcuts work, too: good old ^OO does the same thing as <Alt>R. You can suppress the display of shortcut keys on menus (others include Ctrl-F2 for save a file and Shift-F4 to close a window) if you prefer a cleaner screen.

Sprint's interface actually comes in two versions, basic and advanced. The basic is a subset of the advanced, leaving the more esoteric functions off the menus so as not to overwhelm a new user. A clever idea.

Status line includes current time

At the bottom of the screen, there's an inverse-video status line (which you can turn off if you want). It shows the name of the file you're working on (including drive and path), whether you are in insert or overwrite mode, the current time, what line number you are on, the total number of lines in the file, and the current column number (Sprint supports lines up to a whopping 32,000 columns wide). If the file has changed since the last time you saved it, an asterisk appears in the center of the status line. There is no ruler line display.

Sprint marks blocks the way Microsoft Word does, a style I've always found awkward. You anchor the cursor at one point, then drag it to another point as everything between becomes highlighted. Unlike WordStar, which allows you to mark a block

for future reference, you must cut or copy a Sprint block immediately. If you are moving the block, you must paste it at its new location before you erase anything else, or the block will be lost for good. In addition to free-form block marking, Sprint provides commands for marking individual words, lines, sentences, and paragraphs.

Sprint can jump to the end of a large file some 40 times faster than WordStar can and it does searches and replaces 10 times faster. This editing speed presumably results from not doing any formatting as you work. The trade-off comes at print time: there's an awfully long delay before printing starts while Sprint works out what the document should look like.

What's worse is that Sprint treats your text like source code. If it finds a problem (such as a command to start a function without a paired command to stop it), Sprint flashes an error message on the screen and refuses to print your document. So not only won't Sprint show you what you're document is going to look like while you're editing it, if you've made a formatting mistake, it won't give you a print out so that you can try to track down the problem. This is going to drive corporate computer support people bonkers.

Sprint can take full advantage of PostScript laser printers, but when using my Epson LQ-850 24-pin dot-matrix printer, one of 350 models specifically supported by Sprint, printing slows to a crawl if I'm using proportionally spaced justified text.

An impressive suite of features

Sprint's most impressive feature is its ability to have up to six user-sizable editing windows open at once. Beyond that, all the tools included with other full-featured wordprocessors are found here, including file management while editing, line sorting, one of the best box drawing capabilities I've ever seen, parallel and snaking columns (although you won't see them until the document is printed), mail merge, sophisticated macros, footnoting, and a 100,000-word speller and a 220,000-word thesaurus (which together look suspiciously like a beefed-up, non-memory-resident version of Borland's Turbo Lightning).

You can check spelling when you're done, or have the program beep each time you type a word that's not in its dictionary. Unfortunately, though, once the speller has landed on a word it doesn't recognize, you have to press another key to get it to offer suggested corrections -- a time-wasting step. Looking up suggestions takes a lot longer than in WordStar, and unlike WordStar 5, no word definitions are available. Also unlike WordStar 5 and WordPerfect, Sprint fails to catch doubled words when doing its proofreading.

Still, Sprint supports some common courtesies that MicroPro somehow still hasn't gotten around to implementing in WordStar, including widow-and-orphan control and a command to set a text element flush with the right margin. Automatic paragraph reform and screen scrolling are almost instantaneous.

Sprint automatically and incrementally saves your work to a

special disk file, unobtrusively writing out whatever new material you've created every time you stop typing for three seconds. That way, you lose only a small amount if the power goes off. Your original file isn't overwritten until you manually issue a save command, and, like WordStar, Sprint makes a backup file each time you save.

Superior unerase and search commands

Sprint's unerase falls somewhere between WordStar's (bad) and WordPerfect's (excellent). Although Sprint will only let you recall your most recent deletion (WordPerfect can resurrect your last three), it considers a series of words or lines deleted in a row to be one operation, so a simple ^U brings back everything, and, unlike WordStar, there seems to be no limit to the size of deletion you can recall.

Sprint's search-and-replace is the best in the business. It supports ? and * wildcards, an any-character-but-the-one-specified wildcard, and specified search ranges: looking for 198[1-3,5] will find all references to 1981, 1982, 1983, and 1985.

This program will make the most of whatever hardware you've got, providing full support for the Hercules Ramfont mode, showing true boldface, italics, superscripts, subscripts, and strikethroughs on screen; for Postscript Printers, allowing you to scale fonts on the fly and insert encapsulated Postscript graphics files; and for two- and three-button mice.

Despite this, Sprint actually has modest requirements. It eats up just 220K of free RAM (leaving lots of room for all those memory-resident utilities that Borland also sells, or for briefly popping out to DOS and running another program), works fine on floppy disk, and is as quick as a rabbit even on a V20-based Kaypro PC running at 4.77 MHz.

Sprint provides a file conversion routine for going between the native Sprint format (which is plain ASCII peppered with a few control codes) and pure ASCII, DisplayWrite 4 (which uses IBM's DCA/RFT format), Microsoft Word, MultiMate, MultiMate Advantage, WordPerfect 4.2, WordStar 4.0, and SideKick Plus's Outlook outline formats.

The conversion is actually provided by The Software Bridge, a third-party product also sold as a WordStar add-on under the name Star Exchange and a WordPerfect add-on under the name Perfect Exchange. Unfortunately, the translator has a bug when converting from WordStar files, putting a hard carriage return at the end of every page.

Some drawbacks

Although feature-laden, Sprint still doesn't offer everything. There's no word count facility (although any of the public-domain ASCII word counters should work fine with Sprint files), no math capabilities, and no graphics capability for non-Postscript printers. Sprint's character-based page preview is anemic by today's standards. After whirring your disk drives for

several seconds, it will show you line and page breaks, but,
unlike WordStar 5 or WordPerfect 5, gives no indication of font
sizes or typestyles.

According to Borland ads, the $199.95 price is an
introductory special and the alternative user interfaces are
included free for a limited time only. After that, they'll be
sold as an add-on package for $99. Considering that these
chameleon command sets are one of Sprint's most attractive
features, the decision to eventually un-bundle them strikes me as
silly.

When Borland raises the base price and demands an extra C-
note for the alternative interfaces, Sprint will cost about the
same as the established powerhouse wordprocessors. Can it
compete head-to-head against Microsoft Word, WordPerfect,
WordStar, and WordStar 2000? That depends in part on whether
Borland brings its policies on support and upgrades in line with
those of other vendors. MicroPro and WordPerfect offer toll-free
telephone support; Borland does not.

SuperKey, Borland's keyboard macro program, and Reflex, its
database manager, were just as exciting as Sprint now is when
they first appeared in 1985. Neither has ever had a major
upgrade and they now lag far behind their competition in the
features war. Further, after users loyally waited years for a
new version of SideKick, Borland had the gall to tell them that
SideKick Plus was a new product and not offer upgrades at all.

WordStar 2000 (in my opinion, the current features leader)
should have a new release in about six months, and 1989 should

see WordPerfect 6 with a completely graphic editing screen that will set a new standard in WYSIWYG. If Sprint is going to stay competitive, Borland will have to change its upgrade tune.

Despite these misgivings, Sprint is a remarkable product. If you can learn to live with a quirky, non-WYSIWYG display (believe me, I'm trying to), it just might be the wordprocessor you've been waiting for.

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Toronto writer Robert J. Sawyer has tried a lot of wordprocessors, including Microsoft Word, MultiMate, Perfect Writer, WordPerfect, WordStar 2000 and now Sprint, but he keeps coming back to WordStar.

Quick Reference Summary

Product: Sprint: The Professional Word Processor

Manufacturer: Borland International

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Sugg. List Price: $199.95 (introductory special)