Stardock

Developer's Guide

Version 4.1

January 26th 2004

Contents

1 Introduction

1.1 About this guide

SkinStudio is a hugely powerful application. It's original purpose was to help users to create custom skins for WindowBlinds. A quick step back here for the uninitiated novice - a skin is essentially a new look for your windows changing not only the window itself, but also the buttons, scrollbars, checkboxes and any other controls you can think of.

Since it's original launch SkinStudio has developed far beyond its initial capabilities and now provides a platform for the development of skins for a range of applications. With the advent of Stardock's Universal Skinning Format (USF) it is now even possible to design a single skin which can then be applied across several applications.

This Developers Guide is designed to be as generic as possible. SkinStudio is a constantly evolving product where features are added to reflect both changes to the supported applications and also to add entire applications that can be skinned.

Fortunately, once you understand the basic concepts of how SkinStudio works, then you will find that SkinStudio itself contains all the reference information that you need relating to specific features, and as such you can learn about these features as they are implemented rather than having to refer to a constantly updated Developers Guide.

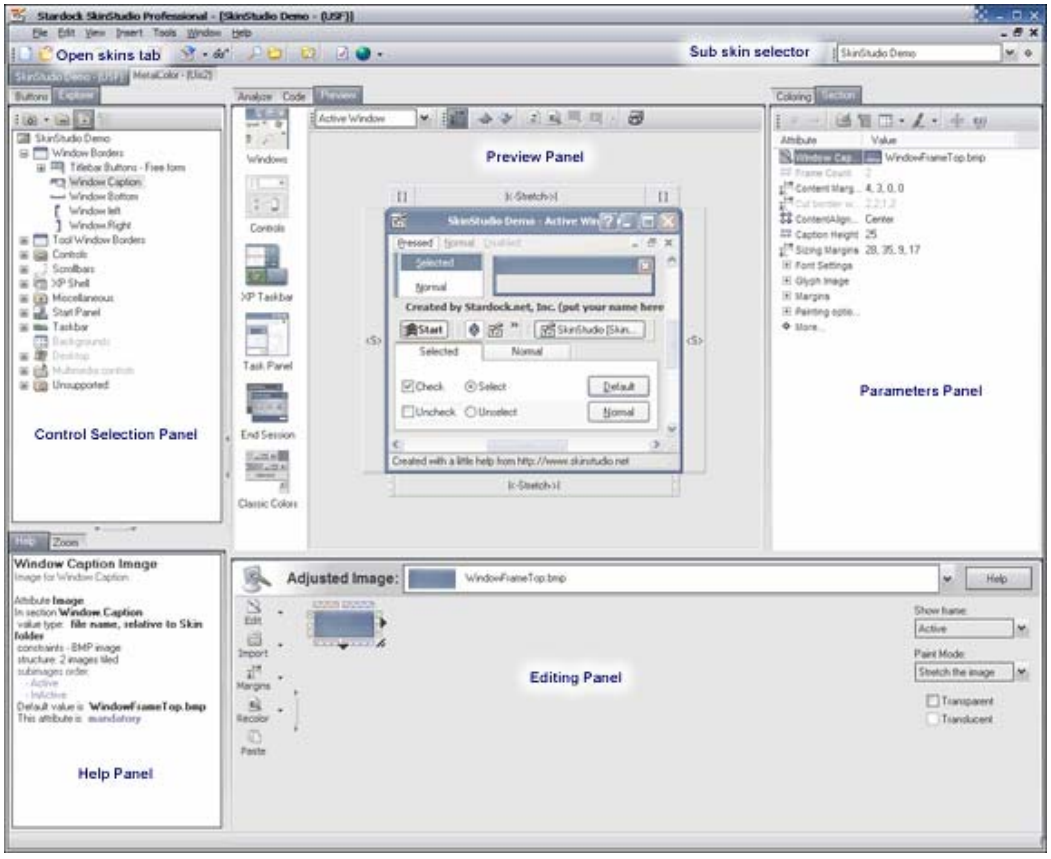
There are of course some advanced features which require more explanation, but once you have worked through the Basic section of the Developers Guide you should be comfortable with the basics of skin creation and will be ready for these sections.

2

Basic Skinning

2.1 Finding your way around SkinStudio

There are several elements to the SkinStudio user interface, but they all have a specific purpose and work together to provide a simple interface optimized for the easy creation of skins.



We will now go through these areas one by one and describe the purpose of each one.

Open Skins Tab

If you are working on several skins at a time, then you will see a tab at the top of the screen which allows you to select the skin that you wish to work on. If you are working on a single skin, then this tab will not be displayed.

Sub-skin Selector

SkinStudio allows you to save several different versions of a skin within a single skin file. Authors often use this to offer several different colors or features. If your skin has this feature then this drop down list will allow you to select the specific variant you want to work on.

Control Selection Panel

This section has two tabs. In the "Explorer" tab, all of the main controls within a Windows skin are listed. You can select items here and then the other panels will be updated to allow you to work on that skin element.

The "Buttons" tab displays all the permutations of window buttons that are available within the skin. This provides quick access to these common elements, though they are also accessible via the Explorer in the Window Borders section.

Help Panel

The content of this panel is what will help you most as a user of SkinStudio as it is a great reference that provides you with all the information you need for skin creation without having to fumble for this Developers Guide every time you need to find out something.

There is also a "zoom" tab in this section which will display an enlarged image of the screen where your cursor is located. This is a great tool when finely positioning or editing objects.

Preview Panel

This panel is split into two sections. On the left, you will see the different types of dialog that you experience in Windows from basic application windows to logoff dialogs. Clicking each of these will show how that element looks following your changes. You can also use these dialogs to select elements so that their properties are visible for you to edit.

Parameters Panel

When you have selected an element then you will see a list of all the editable attributes for that element such as the image used, margins etc in this panel. When you select a parameter than information relating to that parameter appears in the Editing Panel for you to change.

Editing Panel

All the other panels in the SkinStudio dialog are designed to help you find your way around the skin, but this is the area where you make the actual changes. When you select a parameter you will be able to make changes here that are appropriate, be they setting a text value, browsing for an image, or dragging margins.

2.2 Creating a Basic Frame

Now that you know your way around SkinStudio, the easiest way to learn about the creation of a skin is to work through it here.

This will not be an exhaustively detailed list of the process, but will give you enough to find your way through the process yourself. You will note that it is not the most beautiful skin but remember it's a demonstration of functionality - the main aim is to stimulate you to go and create something better, which shouldn't be hard!

OK, the first thing I have done is to design my frame in a graphics package.

You will see that this image has pink areas. When creating a skin, you need a way to specify which areas will be transparent when displayed on the screen.

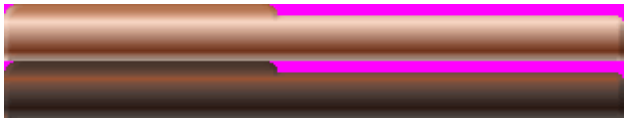
Any part of the skin that you want to be transparent you should color "magic pink" (Red: 255, Green: 0, Blue: 255) and this will be interpreted as transparent.

With SkinStudio I can import the file just like this and then slice it up to make the different parts of the frame. Here's how to do it.

I also created a version of the frame for inactive windows as we need to prepare for these too.

SkinStudio economises by combining all the images needed for the different states in a single image, where the images are placed one above each other.

Here's an example for the top of the frame showing the active state above the inactive state:



Selecting the image

1) In the Preview window, click the frame top. The Editing Panel will now display the image currently used for this part of the skin.

2) To replace the image, click "Import" in the Editing Panel window. You will then get a dialog appearing in the Preview Panel that explains that you can use a template image and select the area you wish to use for this part of the skin.

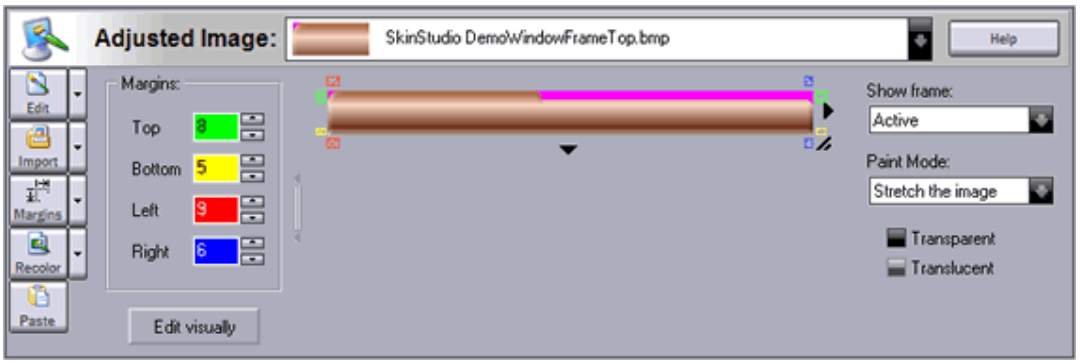
3) As we prepared this image to be as it was needed we can click the "Selection" button and then choose "Select all".

You can then click the "Cut image" button to select the full area of the image and use it in the skin. You will see a dialog that asks questions about frames. Because this image was prepared just as SkinStudio wants it, we can just click "All frames already in it - ready to use in the skin".

4) OK, now click the Preview tab. You will notice that the top bar looks a little strange. This is because although the correct image is being used, the "tiling" settings are not correct. You will know that windows can be different sizes, and therefore your skin needs to know how to react to changing window sizes. Should it tile or stretch the image? Should it do this to all the image of just a part of it?

Setting Tiling

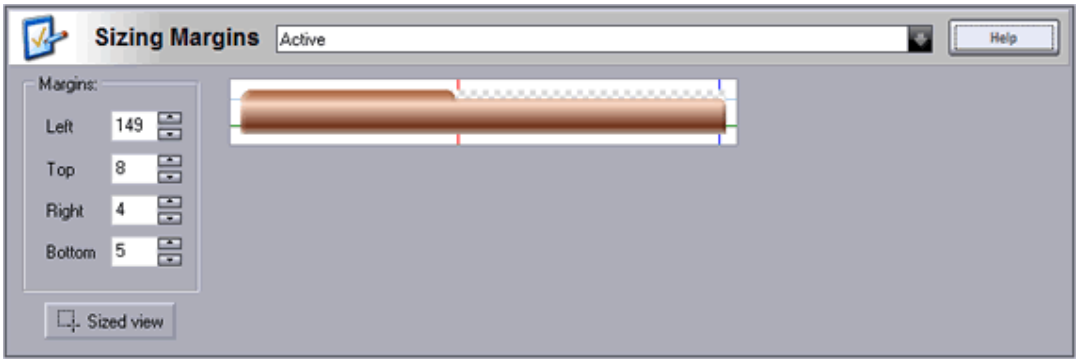
OK so lets fix this tiling. If you look in the Editing Panel you will see in the images, some colors round the edge and some other options.



At the bottom right of the image there is a drag icon which means you can see how the frame element will look when the window is stretched. Experimenting with this will reconfirm that the tiling is very wrong!

Let's start with horizontal resizing. For this theme I want the thick part of the bar to remain the same size. I also want the small curve at the right end of the bar to remain the same. The bit in the middle can be stretched. The stretching is already sorted in the "Paint mode" though I could try other versions if required.

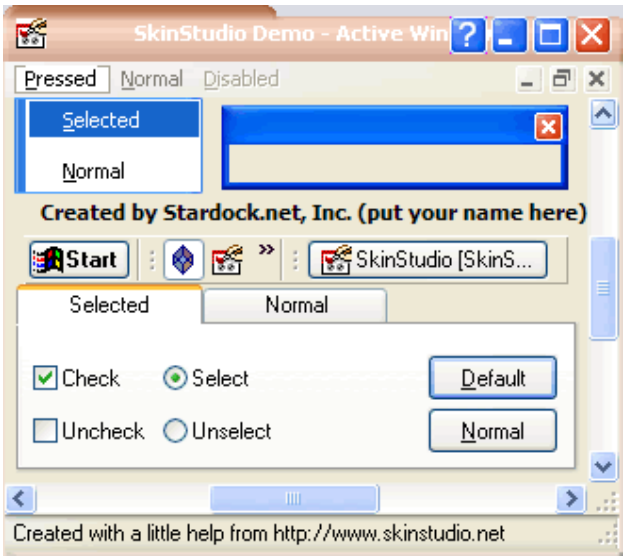
It's quite hard to type the correct margins through guesswork, so if you click "Edit visually" you get an easier solution. Once you have this it's really easy to drag the margins for both the horizontal and vertical resizing.



Once you have done this, you can click "Sized view" to return to the previous view and drag the handle to test how the window resizes. You can see that this is much more effective. I have found for my skin that margins of Left:149, Top:8, Right:4, Bottom:5 work just fine.

Remaining sides

You can now repeat this process to select the other sides of the frame by creating a multistate source image and then adjust margins if necessary. The bottom margin works the same as the top margin, and the side margins are the same except that you put the images for the different states side by side horizontally rather than on top of each other.



OK - so it's hard to see the frame against a white background, but believe me it's there.

One thing you will probably know from Windows is that the application being used will look like this, but other applications that are not active have a different frame. Typically these frames are just a darker version of the main skin, and that's what I created in the second part of the image for each side of the frame.

Over to the right of the Editing Panel and you will see a section called "Show frame". If you select "inactive" you will see the image used for that version of the frame.

You'll note that at this point the application title isn't looking quite right so we need some fine tuning.

Fine Tuning

Select the "Window caption" (top of the frame) and look at the properties.

You will see how all the parameters are given fairly logical name which makes editing easier. I actually want the application name to be left aligned so I need to edit some "Content" properties. To start will I will left align it with the "ContentAlignment" parameter.

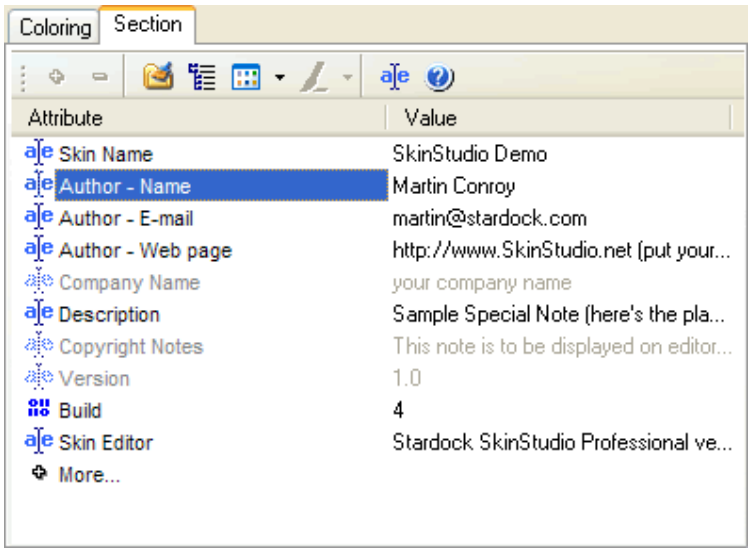
Hmm, now it's over the application icon and a bit high, so I simply edit the "Content Margins" until the preview shows the text in the right place. Settings of Left:34, Top:5, Right:0, Bottom:0 seem OK.

Almost perfect. Now, I just want to change the font so it stands out a bit more. This is really easy to do. If you expand the Font Settings section you will see a host of options you can set to fine tune the font. For my skin I am setting the font to Monotype Corsiva, the height to 18 and have disabled "Italics".

Made by me!

One thing you will have seen in the Preview is the author of the skin. Really by now you should be identifying yourself as the author.

If you select the name of the skin in the Explorer, you will see that in the parameters you can specify the author name and email address. The skin name will have been entered when you started creating the skin but there are several other personalisation elements you can add.



Note that if you go to Tools ... Preferences, you can specify this data so it is entered by default every time you create a new skin.

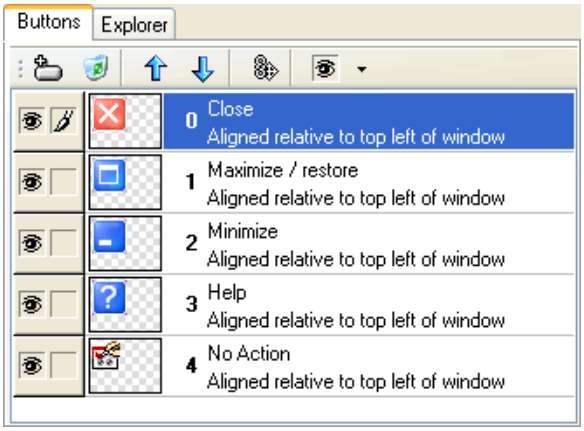
2.3 About Buttons

The glaring problem with the skin now is that the buttons need to fit in with the frame so let's fix that now.

Windows applications can have many types of buttons in the frame such as minimize, close and help icons but they all work the same way. They all look different depending on how you are interacting with them, and perform some sort of function.

This means that in SkinStudio there is a single simple process for creating all your buttons.

Clicking on the "Buttons" tab in the Control selection panel will show all the buttons in your theme.



This dialog allows you to select the button you wish to work on.

When you select a button a surrounding box fill flash around this button on the Preview.

You will also see that the parameters change to those associated with the selected button. Agian, they are fairly clear as to their purpose, but we will work through them now to edit some buttons for the theme, starting with the Close button.

Button Actions

The first property is where you define the action of the button. Most of the actions available to you are clear in their purpose. You will also see further details in the help panel. You may notice some interesting options here. We'll return to one of those later. Obviously we will just leave this as "Close" for now.

Images

Right, this is the time where we really need to have different images for different states so we need to prepare for this. Rather than separate images for each state of each button, SkinStudio efficiently uses a single image which represents all of the states needed. The first thing to examine is the number of states we need to prepare for. If you look at the "Show frame" section in the Editing Panel that you saw earlier, you will see that there are 6 potential states for this button (Normal, Pressed, Hover, Disabled, Inactive Normal and Inactive Disabled).

You can also see this by looking at the source image for this button: 

Hmm, that's a bit wierd - where did the "x" go? Well, actually this is another way that SkinStudio is being efficient. There are actually 2 different ways you can make buttons.

1) In many cases with buttons the actual button image remains the same, it's just the symbol on the image (glyph) that changes. Look at buttons 1,2 and 3 to see how this is the case. Where you have a simple glyph it makes sense to use this option to rationalise on the graphics creation. Use of glyphs also makes toolbar resizing more effective though this isn't an issue in most cases.

2) You can create the button image itself to contain the glyph. This is useful as it allows you to antialias the glyph which makes the image appear smoother.

Whichever way you choose, we can just deal with the button for now and then we'll get to the glyph (symbol) later.

Again, I'm going to select the "Normal state" parameter, and then use the import feature like I did with the frame. Using the "Selection" button I can select all of the image, and then use the "Cut Image" feature. Again, because of the way I have built the image I can confirm that the image has "All frames already in it - ready to use in the skin".

OK, whichever way you chose now looks far better, but you will need to adjust the glyph settings whichever option you chose. We will get to that in a minute.

Button size

The source image was 23x23 pixels, but this is still set to 20x20 from the previous image. Although this shows how well SkinStudio can resize images I want it the way it was so I'm going to set it to 23x23.

Button spacing

You'll see from the preview at this point that the buttons are right up against the bar.

To fix this we can use the button spacing parameter. It's only the top spacing I'm really concerned about so I'm going to increase this value from 6 to 9. Now it's perfectly in the middle of this section of the bar.

Align point

OK, we set the spacing above, but relative to what? The answer is the align point. Most of the buttons in a standard Windows frame are aligned relative to the top-right of the window. If fact the only one that isn't is the top-left aligned system icon which relates to the currently running application. This doesn't mean to say that the skin you make must conform to the normal way of things!

Sizing margins

We mentioned before that SkinStudio can resize the buttons. Just as you adjusted margins for the frames you need to tell SkinStudio where the margins are so it can resize the button effectively. Just specify the margins here as you did for frames. In this case they are just fine for me so I'll leave them alone.

Image Glyph

OK, earlier I highlighted the two ways to create a button.

At the moment, you will see (whichever type of button you created) that there is a glyph over the button.

If you expand the "Glyph Image" section, you will see that there is section ("Normal glyph") where you can specify an image just like you did for the previous images. You will see that the image is exactly the same format with one section of the image for each button state.

If you are NOT using glyphs then you can delete this reference to the graphic, otherwise you can either keep the existing glyphs or simply replace the reference with one that points to the glyph image of your making. This is the version I am using.

Other Buttons

You can now go through and edit all the other buttons in the taskbar. You probably don't need to edit the system icon as this will probably stay the same whatever skin you are creating.

The one button which is slightly different is the maximise/restore button in that it performs two functions and as such contains two button image files and two glyph image files. Looking at the parameters it should be easy to see how to edit this to your needs.

A New Button - Going one step further!

OK, well so far we've just replaced the standard Windows buttons, and not done anything radical beyond the appearance. This isn't showing off what SkinStudio can produce for WindowBlinds. What we are going to do here is create a brand new button with some brand new functionality.

On the Button tab of the Controls panel, click the first icon which represents a New Button. You will be presented with a list of possible button types. OK, I will choose a Roll Up/Down button. Clicking OK places a button on my taskbar.

Looking at it's properties you will note that the action type has been set as have defaults for the other properties. You can quickly change the size and position of the icon to match the others.

I want to do something a bit different, and place the button on the left of the window rather than alongside the others. To do this, the first thing I will do is change the AlignPoint of the button to the top left of the window.

Hmm, not ideal. I want the rollup button to be to the left of the system icon and make sure it appears to the left of the text. The first part is simple. On the Buttons tab of the Controls Panel, drag the rollup button from position 5 above the "No Action" System icon. Alternatively, you can select the button and use the up/down arrows above to adjust the icon position. Hey, we're nearly there already!

To fine tune this we just need to adjust the button spacing of the two buttons to make the gaps correct. The Close button is 6 pixels from the right margin, so I will set the left margin of the rollup button to 6 pixels as well.

OK, so we're pretty much there. You need to remember that the Preview is not always perfect, so the best thing to do is to go to the Tools menu and select "Test the skin". This will create a window with every control on it so you can look at your progress. Click your new button and the window rolls up, click it again and it rolls down.

You will note that the skin looks a bit wierd when it rolls up, but we can soon fix that. There is a parameter that allows you to specify precisely how big the bar will be when the skin is rolled up. Simply change the "Rolled up caption height" to the height you want the rolled up window to be. This will logically be greater than the caption height, but it's worth experimenting to see what works best for you. A setting of about 40 compared to the caption height of 30 works well for me.

Well, the frame is done ... now onto the controls.

2.4 Skinning the Windows Controls

OK, so the frame is now great. The skin still looks a bit wierd however, because all the other controls still have the default Windows look. The task now is to move through the different controls and skin them so they have a look that is consistent with the frame. The skills you learnt when creating the frame are pretty much everything you need to do this.

In this section I will provide a list of the controls and their purpose, but I will not go through fine detail of how to skin them unless there is anything radically different to what you have learnt so far.

Tool Windows

Tool Windows are the small windows with narrow frames that you sometimes see within regular windows. These are basically the same as the window frame we just created so you simply need to define the frame and buttons in the same way, either using glyphs or not depending on your preference.

I have just simplified the top bar, but can use the same source files for the other sides. I have also resized my buttons for use in the Tool windows.

System Buttons

This is the background to all Windows buttons on which Windows places the button text. Again this is a single image with five states: Normal, Pressed, Disabled, Mouse Over, Focus & Default. The final state is when you tab to the button to give it the focus, or if it is the default button.

Check Boxes and Radio Buttons

Each of these is defined by an multi-state image containing Normal, Mouse Over, Pressed and Disabled for both Unselected and Selected states. The checkbox also has Mixed states making this a 12 state image rather than 8.

ComboBox

The ComboBox is a control which you need to skin in two parts. You need to define how the box border will look and then define a multistate button for the dropdown. These will combine nicely to create a button.


Edit Border

And, as if by magic it is done! Actually this control uses the source image for the Combo box border as they are essentially the same.

GroupBox Frame

There are two types of frame, one which has a label, and one which doesn't. You need to specify a frame for both types, and then a single image to work as the background for any text. I'm going to use the same edge from the combo box and then create a new image for the text background. Remember to set any margins required!


List Views

Where data is provided in a list view of columns there is a control at the top of the data. This control has 5 states: Normal, Pressed, Reserved, Mouse Over, and Reserved.

You may guess by the "Reserved" name that sections 3 and 5 are not crucial but you definitely need to skin the other states.

Menus

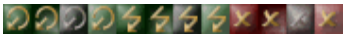

Menus are one of the most frequently used elements of Windows so you need to be really happy that they blend with your skin. This isn't a problem fortunately as again the skinning of the different elements is easy.

Let's look at how the menu breaks down into it's components. To start with you have the menu background and on top of this you have various bar items. Let's skin those first.

This is a dual state menu bar for active and inactive windows.

This is a multiple state image for the menu items. I have left it basically transparent so the menu bar shows through, but added a simple highlighter for the second state (Pressed) and the fourth state (Focus).

The next items are the control buttons which can appear in the menubar in multi-document applications. You need to create an image for the minimize/restore and close icons in all possible states (Enabled, Pressed, Disabled, Mouse Over). You can use your original buttons as inspiration here.

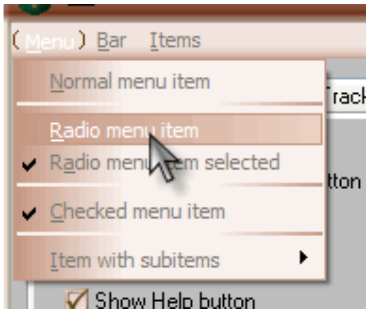


Now we need to look at the action menus which drop down. For this there are two components; the background and the individual items on the menu.

What it is common to do is to have no image for the items except when it is highlighted, which means you can use "magic pink" so the list background shows through. You also specify the appearance of the the menu separator bar in this image (section 2)

This is the background image I am using, and below is the image I am using for the items on the menu. You can see that there are 5 sections (Normal, Separator, Disabled, Mouse over, Default). You will also see that I have chosen to just set images for the separator and mouse over sections so the menu shows through in other instances.

You can see below that now we have a wonderfully functioning menu!



Progress Bar

The progress bar is simple to skin in that there are only two elements in the image; the progress bar frame and the bar itself. Through clever use of the margins you can create an image that tiles nicely as the progress amount increases. Using the "Test the skin" option is particularly here as you can see different stages of progress on the "Bars" tab to see how effective your tiling is.

Spin Buttons

The spin buttons appear on controls where you are able to increase or decrease values by clicking buttons. They are fairly simple to configure . You need to create a version for both horizontal and vertical spin buttons. Each have the usual range of states; Normal, Pressed, Disabled and Mouse over, and you need to do this for both ends (left/right or top/bottom). Note that this is another place where you can use glyphs if you prefer.

Status bar

This is the bar at the bottom of applications like Explorer and Internet Explorer which provides additional information related to your current activity. In a lot of cases, it will actually be quite visually similar to the menu bar background you used earlier. You may choose to use this as the base for your graphics. You can if you choose define different states for whether the status bar is Sunk, Raised or Flat. I have actually chosen to use the same image in all states so I am just going to use the menu bar background.

Status bars often have a "gripper" in the corner which you can click and drag to resize the window. You can specify this control here. It makes sense to use magic pink effectively as the status bar will be shown underneath this graphic.

i.e.  becomes 

Tab set

Tabs are commonly used to separate sections of a dialog where there is not much space. To skin tabs you need to skin the tabs themself, the page under the tab and the border of that page.

The tabs can all be skinned the same or you can even add dedicated graphics for specific tabs such as the first and the last tabs in a section.

For my purposes I am going to keep things simple and assume that the same tab will be used for each one.

The tabs have 5 sections to the image, Normal, Pressed, Disabled, Focus and Default.

The default image for the tab border is almost fine, I'm just going to make it browner than it's current grey shades. Editing exising images is often a quick way to tweak a skin to your needs. The Tabs page image is just fine as it is. It's not often that you're likely to change the look of this as it needs to be plain so it doesn't distract from the controls on the tab.

Toolbar

You are able to skin Toolbars of applications. There are three elements here and it is likely that you can use the images you have created in other areas as the source for these.

The background is often similar to the menu background that you created earlier. In fact, I am just using the Menu background file I created.

To create the grippers for moving toolbars I am going to use a single circle taken from my Status bar gripper. Using a single circle is adequate, because the image is tiled to fill the whole toolbar whatever the size.

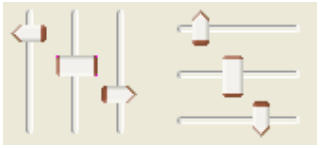
By default, buttons on toolbars only look different when you move over them. However, there is no reason why this has to be the case. I'm going to treat them as normal buttons and use the button image. I'm going to pad the image with some extra "magic pink" so that the buttons sit in the middle of the toolbar rather than butting against the edge.

You can see the combined effect of this below:

Trackbars

These are the sliders that you interact with to adjust values.

Wow - there are a lot of permutations of these. Fortunately, it's not too bad because the structure of the images are the same, so once you have a source image you can use this and rotate it to quickly create the other images until you have a full set.



Tree View expander

When in Explorer or similar acpplications there are called tree views where there are '+' and '-' symbols that allow you expand or contract that data element. The image for this simply contains the symbol for the plus and the symbol for the minus. It's that simple.

Scrollbars

This is the final control to skin of the main Windows controls. With what you've learn and created, this also is easy. To start with, in the Scrollbars section you need to skin the arrow buttons at the end of the scrollbars.

The image is 16 tiled images with Left, Right, Up and Down each having Normal, Pressed, Disabled and Mouse over states set.

Having sorted out the ends of the scrollbars, you now need to define the horizontal and vertical bars themselves. There are two elements to each of these; the background and the "Thumb" which marks the current position, and which you can drag to adjust the scroll position. The backgrounds are actually very good generic graphics, but I do want to change the thumbs. These have three states in the image; Normal, Pressed and Mouse over.

2.5 Skinning the Taskbar

Well, the window frames and the controls are OK now. As I said, it's definitely not the prettiest skin but it demonstrates the point!

Now onto the taskbar. There are two fundamental elements to skin here, the bar itself and and the Windows XP start menu. Let's start with the basics - the taskbar background.

Taskbar Background

Taskbars can be aligned to any edge of the screen, so SkinStudio allows you to specify an image for all sides. This is done in two sections. In the Horizontal Background you provide a dual state image for the Bottom and Top taskbars, and in the Vertical Background you specify the Right and Left taskbars. In this case the images appear side by side rather than on top of each other. You need to consider how this bar will tile if the user changes the height of the taskbar. I recommend that you have 0 margins at the top & bottom for the horizontal bar, and 0 left & right for the vertical. I recommend setting the Paint Mode to True size as well.

Taskbar Start

The Start button is like a regular button and as such has 5 states in the source image; Normal, Pressed, Disabled, Focus, Default.

Quicklaunch Button

These work in basically the same way as the same the Menu buttons so you may find that you can use a similar source graphic, though it's a 6 state image. The 3rd, 5th and 6th images are currently unused, but the first is the Normal image, the 2nd the Pressed, and the 4th the Hilighted.

You need to create versions that work on both horizontal and vertical buttons.

Sizing Bars

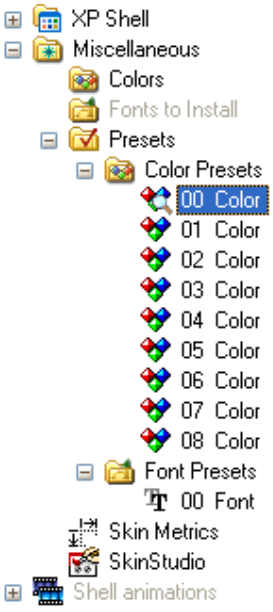
When the taskbar is not locked, then there is a thin bar at the outside edge that allows you to resize the taskbar. You need to define graphics as you did for the taskbar itself. There is an image for the horizontal sizing bar that contains the images for the Top and Bottom versions of the taskbar, and one for the vertical that contains the left and right versions.

Note that you may need to add the "Sizing margins" parameter if you need more flexibility in the scaling of your object.

System Tray

For the system tray, we are now following the familiar concept of setting an image for the horizontal and vertical versions of the bar. There is only one state in each image however so for example in the horizontal version you don't need to specify a version for the top and bottom version of the bar. You need to leave a transparent area at the left area of the horizontal bar and at the top of the vertical bar. The reason for this will be clear in a minute so read on and find out how much space to leave.

In Windows XP the system tray can collapse and be expanded. There is a control that appears over the end of the system tray to allow this be done. You specify this control as a 6 state image; Show Normal, Show Hilighted, Show Pressed, Hide Normal, Hide Hilighted, Hide Pressed.



In most cases you want the control to appear on the border of the system tray and the tray. To achieve this, because the control will be placed at the left hand edge of the system tray image, you should set the transparent area to be half the size of the control created. This means in the transparent area, the taskbar will be shown (under half of the image) and under the other half of the image the system tray image you created will be seen.

The final section in the System tray allows you to specify a color for the clock. This introduces a new area of SkinStudio - Presets. You can have Presets for colors and fonts. If you look in the Miscellaneous area of the Controls List you will see "Presets" and within that "Color Presets".

Clicking any of these presets displays the color information in the Editing Panel. You can edit these colors.

You can also add or delete presets by right clicking "Color Presets" and then selecting "Add Section". You should then select "Color" and "OK".

Returning to the System Tray section of the Taskbar you will see that there is a Clock section. You can select a color from one of the presets in the Value dropdown of the Editing Panel. You can also access options to Edit, or Duplicate this color here, or add another color.

You can also add a Font attibute to specify the typeface etc, so I am changing the font to Monotype Corsiva and making it size 18 to match the window font. I have also changed the Shadow text effect to "Outlined text"

Taskbar Button

Yet another variant on the button. You can use your other button images as inspiration for this. The states are Normal, Pressed, Disabled, Hilighted, Activated, and "Activated and Hilighted". It is wise to leave some space at the top and bottom of the image to stop it pressing right against the edge of the taskbar upon which it sits.

Taskbar Gripper

When you created the toolbar earlier you used a single circle for the resize bar. This control is for resizing toolbars within the Taskbar. Becuase it has the same purpose I'm going to use precisely the same image.

You can see that once adding this feature, the taskbar is almost complete

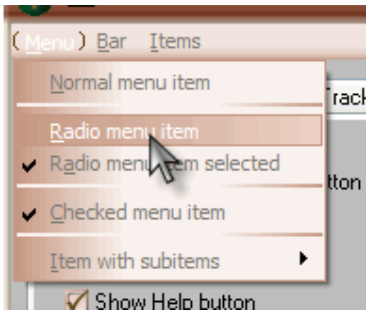
Taskbar Group Menu

In Windows XP, when several instances of the same application are loaded they may be combined into a single button on the taskbar. When you click on the button a menu pops up with all the instances of the application to allow you to select the one you want.

To skin this element, you need to define two images. The first is of the menu background. This is just a simple single image with sizing margins so it's appearance can be effectively varied depending on the size of the menu.

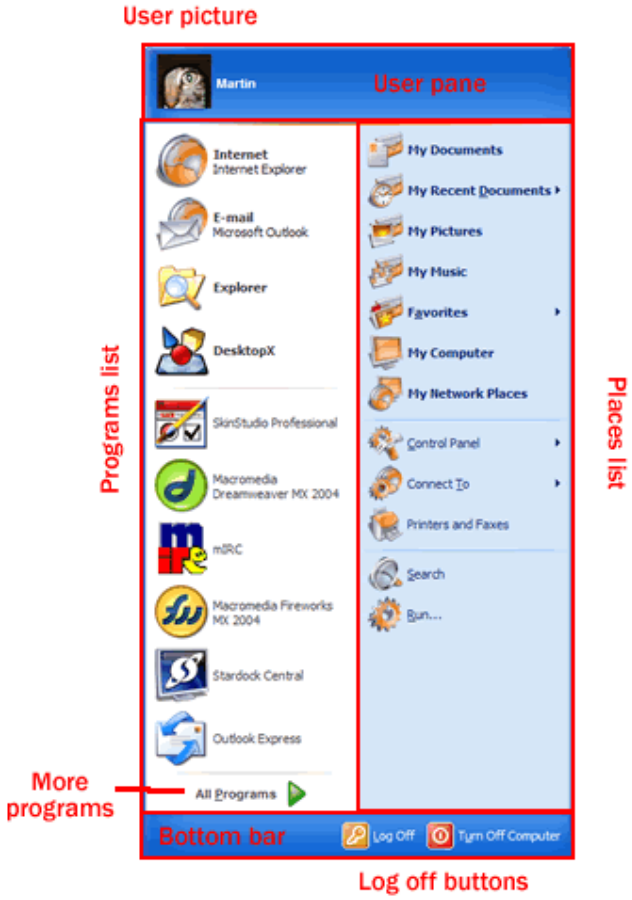
You then need to specify the image for the actual menu items. You need a multiple state image; Normal, Selected, Pressed, Flashing. Flashing is used when an application is waiting for your input or is providing an alert of some sort. Because there is always an icon in the menu it is common practice to devise the image so that only the area holding text displays any

effect without overlapping the icon. If you want to do this it is wise to leave a space of about 20 pixels as transparent.



2.6 Skinning the Start Menu

Right, the taskbar is storted, but we still have an old style Start Menu on Windows XP. The Start Menu breaks down into several components that can be skinned.



In addition to this you can skin the menus that appear when clicking items on the menu.

Bottom Bar and Logoff buttons

The bottom bar requires just a single image which is the background.

After this you need to specify the buttons for Undock, Log Off and Turn Off the computer. Personally I think these icons look good as they are. As the colors don't clash with my theme I'm going to leave these buttons just as they are.

One thing I am going to do is to add a feature which is possible using SkinStudio, but is not a standard feature used by Windows. I'm going to add a background image behind these buttons based on my standard button image.

To do this I have gone to the "Log off buttons background" section and specified my image which contains Normal, Pressed and Mouse over states. I have also specifies the appropriate Sizing margins.

This is placed behind the button and the text associated with them.

More Programs

The "More Programs" section has two elements, the background and the arrow itself.

The background is a single image. You can make this the same as or different to the Programs List background. I'm going to keep things simple and use the same image for both.

The More Programs image is the arrow that you use to access all the applications on your system. The image is a three state image, with Normal, Hilighted and Pressed.

Programs List and Places List

Both of these areas have a single image that is stretched to fill the area so be sure that you use appropriate sizing margins if the image is to stretched just as you want it to be.

The only other element you need for these two sections is a Separator bar which separates the sections within these lists. It is up to you whether you choose to use the same image for both or different separators for the two sections.

User pane

There are a few sections that you can use here to make the User Pane truly customised to your needs.

Initially you need to define a single image for the background. I'm going to carry through the theme I used with the Caption top. This also gives a distinct shape to the Start panel which is not available as standard in Windows.

Within the user pane you also need to define where the text will go that displays the user name and the font style for that text.

There is a distinct "Text Settings" section which allows you to choose the font from one of the presets. I actually duplicated my earlier preset, increased the font size a bit and added a shadow which looks great.

A sub section here allows you to specify an image to go behind the User picture as you could do with the Logoff buttons. Personally I don't want this, I just want my image to go on the background I have provided so I am using an image that is totally "Magic pink" which will become transparent when used.

Menu

The final element on the Start Panel is yet another menu. Various menus of files and options are available from the start menu, and you can configure this menu to look the same or different as all the other menus.

I'm going to use precisely the same background as my other menus for consistency. I need to define a new "Menu item" image as this one is 3 state (Normal, Selected, Reserved) so the other menu item image I created won't work. Once applied, my Start Menu is complete!


Martin
Internet
Internet Explorer
E-mail
Microsoft Outlook
Explorer
DesktopX
BootSkin
SkinStudio Professional
Macromedia Fireworks MX 2004
Macromedia Dreamweaver MX
Outlook Express
mIRC
Stardock Central
All Programs
My Documents
My Recent Documents
My Pictures
My Music
Favorites
My Computer
My Network Places
Control Panel
Connect To
Printers and Faxes
Windows Update
Accessories
Games
Graphics
Internet
Media
Office
Skinning
Startup
Utility
MSN Messenger 6.1
Plays your digital media including music, videos, CDs, DVDs, and Internet Radio.
Macromedia Dreamw...
Macromedia Firewor...

2.7 Skinning the rest of the shell

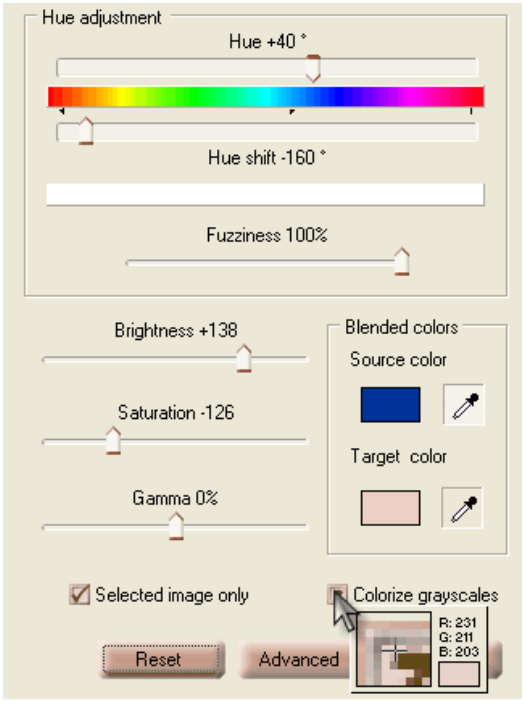
Windows XP introduced a whole range of extra shell elements and SkinStudio can skin these as well as those other dialogs that you see whilst using Windows.

Logoff dialog

This dialog is quite an useful style, though the color doesn't work with my theme. Rather that redesigning the image completely what I really want is a recolored version of the standard image. SkinStudio provides you with the tools to enable you to do this.

If you select the Logoff Dialog section and the image within this you can then click onto the "Coloring" tab. Once here, select the "Selected image only" button so you don't recolor the entire theme! You can then adjust the color. The easiest way to do this is to use the "Blended colors" options. If you click the "Ink dropper" for the "Source color" and then click on the dark blue of the source image we can define the blue as the color we want to replace. If you then click on "Target color" dropper, you can move to an area of the color you want to replace it with. You will probably find an appropriate shade in the Preview window somewhere if you want a consistent color. Alternatively, click on the color box and select from a standard Windows color picker.

The image below demonstrates the color selector you get when you click on the Ink dropper to select a color.



When you do this, SkinSudio will recolor the image for you. It may be necessary for you to tweak the hue, brightness or other settings slightly to exactly get the look you want, but this will speed up the process immensely.

Once you have an image you are happy with then simply click "Apply".

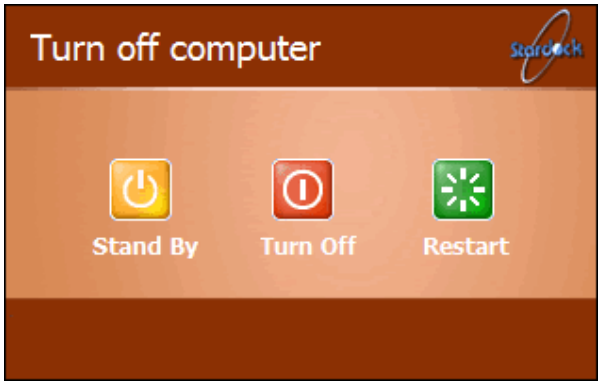
You can specify dialog buttons just as you did in the Start Panel, but as I did then, I am going to keep the default buttons that exist.

The final element of the dialog is the flag in the corner. This doesn't need to be a "flag" as such, it can be any image, or you can leave it blank. I'm going to create a logo to go in the corner like on my Start button.

Shutdown dialog

Once you have created the Logoff dialog, it is easy to complete the Shutdown dialog. By default the background used is to same, and if you are leaving the buttons the same you don't need to edit these images.

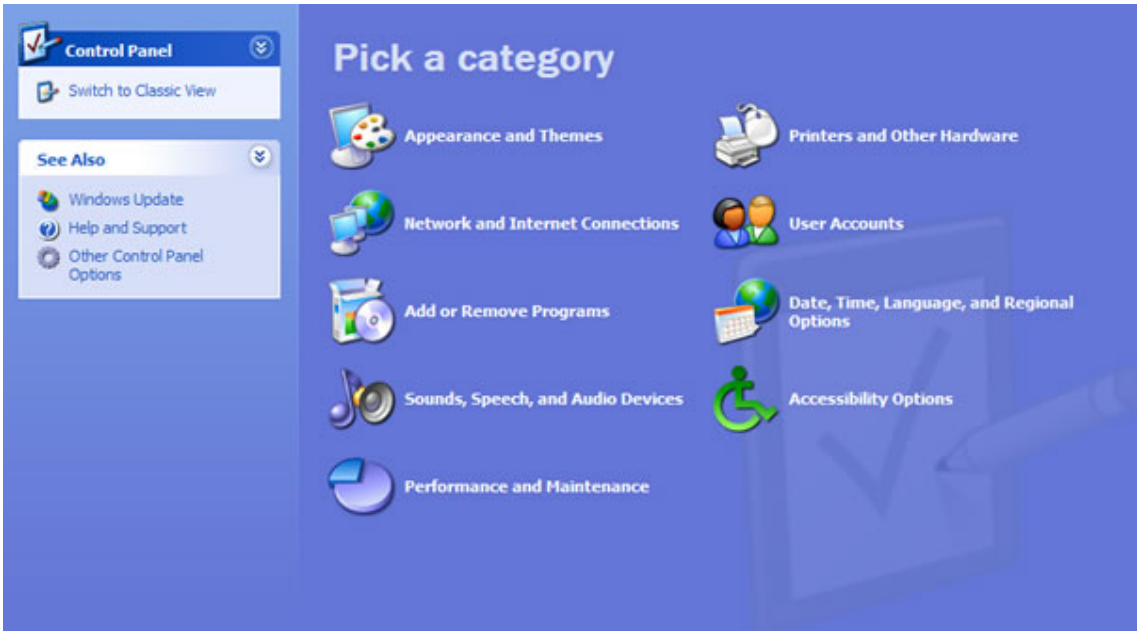
The only thing left to do is to specify the flag image. It is likely that you will use the same image as in the Logoff dialog, so all you need to do is to specify that graphic as the source image.



There is one more dialog - the "Please wait" dialog, but this uses the background and flag from these other images so you don't need to explicitly skin it.

Task Pane

On Windows XP, certain folders have special functionality. In these, the left side of the folder is shown as a Task Pane.



In this instance the task pane is on the left side of the image containing the "Control Panel" and "See Also" boxes.

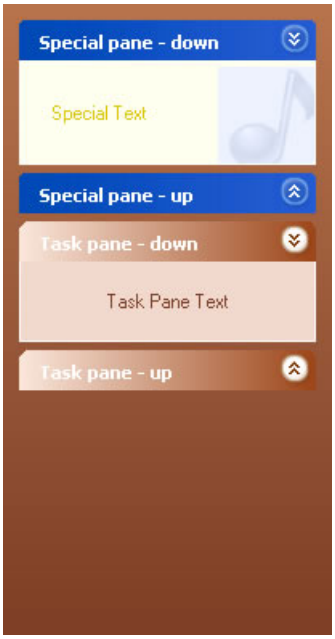
To start with in the actual Task Pane parameters you can specify two colors. The first color is the main color of the pane, and the second is the color it changes to at the bottom of the pane.

OK, on to the Panel Content section. Make sure you have the Task Panel Preview open so you can see the changes you make clearly. Focus on the bottom two Task Pane sections, not the Special Panes at the moment.

You can see you have 4 colors to change here: The background, the border and the text color when normally viewed and when the mouse hovers over it. If you want you can add a parameter to specify an image for the background, but I just want a crisp solid color.

OK, within the Panel Content section there is a section specifically for the Title Bar of the pane. Here you can specify a background image and the two text colors as you did before.

Following this you need to sepcify 4 images for the rollups and their highlights. I simply used colorisation again as I like the images. You can see that the task pane is now done and we need to move onto the Special Panel content and do the same.



The pane and colors are all the same types of settings so I'm going to use precisely the same images and colors.

There are 4 additional sections in the Special Panel Content for the images associated with the special folders in WindowsXP: My Movies, My Music, My Pictures, and Search. I'm not the artistic type so what I'm going to do is use the existing image and just recolor them so the background is the same as the pane.

Special Folders

Each of the Special Folders also has an image in the corner and these are defined here. For each, all you need to do is to specify the image. To be consistent however, I'm just choosing to recolor the existing images.

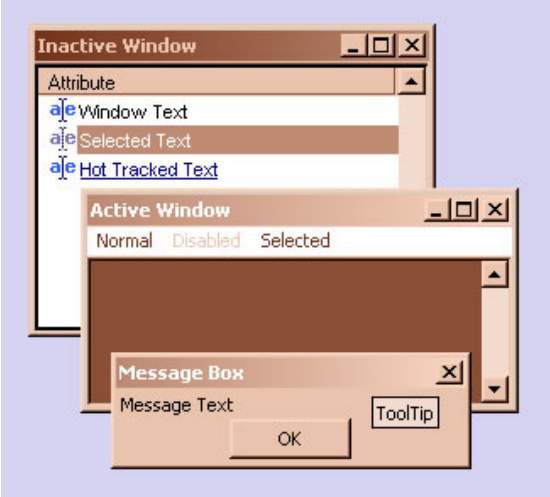
2.8 Finishing Touches

We've now skinned all the basic elements. Now we should just make a few final tweaks in order to make a truly rounded skin.

Colors

Although we have skinned the controls and standard elements, there are areas where the standard Windows colors appear. You need to make sure that these complement your skin.

If you go to the Miscellaneous section there is a subsection called "Colors". In this section you can set all the colors of the user interface. They are all clearly labelled, so setting them should be fairly easy. You should go to the "Classic colors" preview to see the effect of your changes.



Backgrounds

There are certain dialogs where, rather than a flat color, you can apply an image.

There is a specific section for Backgrounds. Here you can choose a single image for MDI Windows (applications where you can open more than one file in separate windows. You can also specify the background for Windows Explorer and for regular dialogs that popup from time to time.

Installing Fonts

Sometimes you may want to use a font in your skin that you can't be sure will be installed on the computer of other users.

WindowBlinds allows you to attach fonts to the skin itself, so that when a user without the font uses it, the font will automatically be installed.

In the "Miscellaneous" section, there is an area called "Fonts to Install". The has 5 parameters allowing to to attach up to 5 font files to be installed with your theme.

Wallpaper

If you want, you can attach a wallpaper that complements your theme. It is down to the users preferences as to whether this wallpaper will overwrite the user's existing wallpaper, but if you want to attach it you can do so in the "Desktop" section.

By default the attribute is not listed, so just click the "More" button and select "Add attribute". You can then select the Desktop Wallpaper item and enter the filename of the wallpaper you want to attach.

Classic Start Menu

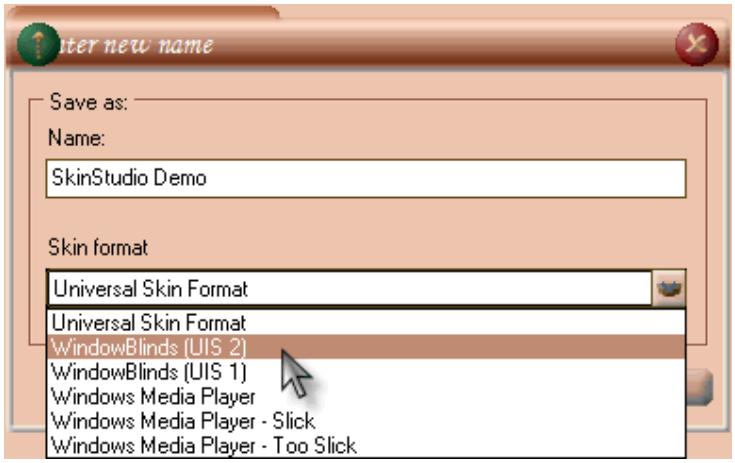
If the user chooses the Classic taskbar rather than the Windows XP taskbar, then you need to provide the buttons for this taskbar.

In the Desktop section there is a Classic Taskbar section. Within this there is a button image for the Start button itself and also the taskbar buttons. Each has 5 states: Normal, Pressed, Disabled, Focus and Alert to include in the image. In the start button the Alert image is replaced with a Default image.

2.9 Exporting your skin

Now we have created the basics for our skin, and we are ready to save it for use in any of the supported applications.

What is best, is if you first save the file as the type that you want to use. For example, my prime purpose for this skin is as a WindowBlinds skin. As such I will select "File ... Save As" from the menu and choose from the list of types.



This will open up an extra tab in SkinStudio for the WindowBlinds UIS version of the skin. You will notice that there are some differences in the sections and attributes that are available, but SkinStudio cleverly translates from the Universal Format to the specific format needs for UIS2.

The file will also be in your WindowBlinds directory so that you can select it in Display Properties as you would for any skin.

If you plan to save your theme for distribution you should use the File ... Zip for Distribution option. SkinStudio will select the appropriate file extension for the file and you can either choose the default location or click the "..." button to select a location to save the file.

When you have saved the file, consider uploading it to www.wincustomize.com to share it with others. Remember that if you have used other peoples materials to obtain their permission before uploading.

WinCustomize is a great resource for learning as you can download skins and examine them in SkinStudio to see how to create them.

OK. So now you have created your first basic skin. Hopefully it's more attractive than mine, but we all need to start somewhere. I hope you found this a useful introduction to the basic skinning techniques.