

## More Disk Space or More Headaches?

— Bill Davies (1992)

This is a product I really wanted to like. More Disk Space. The name is kind of stupid, but Alsysis is a techie-type company and I wanted to feel like I belonged in their league. I wanted to like it so much that I spent my scarce funds to buy it, even though I already owned Salient's AutoDoubler.

For those who don't follow the compression wars, the latest ante in this arena is "background" compression of everything on your hard disk. AutoDoubler fits into that mold, and now so does More Disk Space. So you no longer have to worry about manually compressing your files when you need more space, or so the theory goes. "Just take two of these and you'll feel better in the morning." Like the Jenny Craig of the hard drive world, these products offer a sexier, slimmer hard disk with none of the sacrifices that come with data dieting.

The notable difference between AutoDoubler and More Disk Space 1.0 is that AutoDoubler is a control panel and works all the time, whereas More Disk Space is an application combined with some patches to the Macintosh file system to let it do its work. If you leave More Disk Space (the application) running all the time then effectively it will compress your files all the time — except that the application switches to the foremost window when compression is occurring.

This is precisely why I wanted an alternative to AutoDoubler. I get nervous thinking about all this stuff going on behind the scenes all the time. More Disk Space is so simple it is scary — just choose "More Disk Space" from the menu at the Finder and it will launch the application and compress everything on your hard drive, including data, applications, system files, everything. This was attractive because at least I felt like I would have some control over how and when compression would occur.

There are several notable differences in approach between AutoDoubler and More Disk Space. AutoDoubler is easy to install — you just drag it into your Control Panels folder and restart. More Disk Space requires you to boot your computer from your unlocked master disk so that your serial number can be recorded. If you're not willing to unlock your master disk, you can't install it because it needs to patch your system file. (More Disk Space also installs a copy protection byte into your System file.) On the positive side, once installed More Disk Space is available even if you boot with the shift key held down, because it does not rely on any extensions or control panels to operate — instead it just patches your system file.

(Trivia note - I do tip my hat to Alysis for making the only System 7 startup floppy on an 800k disk that I have ever seen.)

Both products let you exclude entire hard disk volumes. AutoDoubler also lets you exclude by Finder “label” or by folder. MDS lets you exclude by adding file Creators and Types to an “exceptions” list. So far, there are a lot of exceptions running around and you’ll get some really strange dialog boxes if you accidentally compress something that doesn’t like being compressed. A rumored version 1.1 of MDS will let you protect your System Folder from invasion as well, but that version is a week or two away.

AutoDoubler assumes you want to let it recompress everything that you use during the day, whereas MDS gives you the option of manually initiating a recompression run when you decide you need more disk space. MDS can be set to shut down your computer after it has completed its scan, which lets you disappear while your data gets squashed.

In terms of ease of use and transparency of operation, MDS can’t hold a candle to AutoDoubler. Print merge documents done with Microsoft Word had problems printing because the main document could not access the linked document. Excel 3.0 spreadsheets would show the following progress percentages as Excel opened the spreadsheet file: 1%, 5%, 13%, 50%, 75%, 400%, 16500%, 98%, 100%.

MDS makes it fairly painless to compress applications, data, or both. (It’s just uncompressing them that kills you!) And it has a nice progress bar that looks just like the progress bar in Finder 7. When I look at this product, I think of all those ads for AppMaker or Cause which let idiots like me build a Mac interface. Of course, someone else who knows what they’re doing has to write the programming code to kick in when a button is clicked or a checkbox is checked. I think MDS has a pretty good Mac interface, but by the same token, I think that the programming algorithms hooked to that interface should have had a lot more testing and work before being unleashed on unsuspecting people like me.

The final selling point of MDS is its ability to make “transportable” applications. Alysis claims that you can compress an application with MDS and move the compressed application to another computer and have it run just fine *without* decompressing. That’s pretty powerful snake oil, and it got my attention. In reality, however, my recollection is that every time I saw the little black dialog box go by informing me that I was using a “compressed” application, a system crash was no more than 20 seconds away. So my reaction to this feature is, if you need smaller applications, higher smarter programmers who write tighter code. I found huge

invisible temp files left by MDS as it was trying to compress applications. Not to mention the fact that all the applications on one of my hard drive volumes got corrupted and had to be trashed.

In short, practice makes perfect, and the folks at Alysis need to practice more. This product is not finished. I booted from their floppy and selected "More Disk Space" from the menu and when I came back to my computer it was crashed in the worst way. That crash corrupted my hard disk directory which then netted more trouble overall. I constantly ran out of memory even though I have 20 megs of RAM and only the Finder was running. I found SuperDisk temp files in my trash, and I don't even own SuperDisk or have it anywhere near my computer. (Alysis says that this occurred because my System Folder had been compressed and some init was grabbing part of the Finder before More Disk Space could load. I really don't care what the technical explanation is, and all I really care about is the fact that I lost two days of work trying to get my computer operational again after this disaster.)

I checked with America Online and didn't read anything pointedly negative about MDS in the Alysis forum. I guess people are just polite, or else I'm abnormal.

I was starting to believe that I *was* truly abnormal, until today I read this in an online alert from a would-be competitor of Alysis: "More Disk Space causes StuffIt to create invalid archives. This is a direct result of a bug in More Disk Space. Until MDS addresses this problem, we recommend not stuffing any file compressed with MDS. The source of the problem is MDS's incomplete patches to the file system. It appears that MDS patches high-level file manager calls, but fails to patch at least one low-level call that StuffIt and many other applications use." (Accusatory message courtesy of Aladdin Systems Inc.) So maybe it wasn't just *my* hard disk...

That kind of sums it up, I thought. After reformatting my hard drive twice and installing a fresh system folder four times, I am still suffering random crashes when I double-click on something that was compressed with More Disk Space. I am on a search and destroy mission to eradicate any vestige of ever having this software on my hard drive. The software is not at all well behaved when a compressed document is accessed after MDS has been surgically removed. Come to think of it, the software was not all that well behaved even *before* it was surgically removed! I ask all you folks, if you have to sit and worry about whether your data is intact, is that the sort of "peace of mind" that computers are supposed to offer? Sure seems like an unnecessary headache to me.