

File Browser Comparison

The following is a comparison of file browser/utility programs that I have tried. I know there are others, but these are the ones currently installed on my system (Windows ME; 700 MHz Celeron; 512 MB RAM). Others may be added later. A “✓” (checkmark) will indicate whether the browser has a certain feature. A “✓*” (checkmark and asterisk) will indicate which browser best uses a certain feature, if one is preferred.

	Windows Explorer	2xExplorer Z1	Gyula's Navigator	Free Commander	TrackerV3
Dual panes		✓*	✓	✓	
Thumbnails	✓*			✓	
Image viewer	✓	✓	✓	✓*	✓
Text viewer/editor		✓	✓*		
Compare panes		✓	✓*	✓	
Auto-remove “Read-only”			✓*		
Built-in packer/compressor	✓		✓	✓*	
Built-in shredder		✓		✓*	
Show folder sizes			✓	✓	✓*
Folder tree	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓*
“Up” button	✓	✓	✓*	✓	
“Back” button	✓*	✓	✓		✓
Usable toolbar buttons	✓	✓	✓*	✓	
Background colors			✓	✓	✓
Simple interface	✓*	✓			✓
Attractive interface			✓*	✓	
Built-in search	✓*		✓	✓	✓
Buttons to choose drive		✓*	✓	✓	
Usable “help” file	✓	✓	✓		✓
Auto-refresh		✓	✓	✓	
File-type filters		✓*		✓	
Tool tips	✓	✓	✓	✓	
“Sticky” selection		✓			
Usable options (preferences)	✓		✓	✓*	✓
Usable Bookmarks		✓	✓	✓*	
File splitter/merger		✓		✓	
Attribute changer			✓	✓*	✓
Screenshot engine				✓	
File info displayed when selected	✓	✓			✓*
Usable “undo”	✓				
Cost	\$199 (XP) \$99 (upgrade)	free	free	free	free
Website	Windows XP	2xExplorer	Gyula	Free Commander	TrackerV3

Conclusion:

Regardless of what features are contained, Windows is by far the easiest to use, simply because most people are more familiar with its look, its features, and its terminology. Windows' normal "look" (or "interface") is the simplest and the most common. The developers of all the other file browsers will have to admit that the look and feel of Windows played a part in their development; many of the buttons and menus are based purely on what Microsoft started (which was based loosely on the old, late-'80s Macintosh systems).

However, there are many things that Windows cannot and will not do (or else these features are difficult to find and utilize).

For instance, Free Commander has a menu item that will take a .jpg picture of your entire screen, much like a simple "screenshot" program. And 2xExplorerZ1 has "sticky selection," which allows a user to select only the items from a list that he/she wants to select. This is a very handy feature when a user is often copying/pasting large numbers of select files.

So, the average user, and the new user will surely prefer Windows. It may not be the "best" file browser, but it's the best choice for most people.

But, depending on the level of advancement of the user, Windows can become extremely frustrating. The lack of "dual panes" can be tiresome. Of course, a user can open *two* "windows," and copy/paste across from one to the other. However, for the user (like me) who spends much of his time making backups of files, or moving files from one folder to another, this is a lot of extra clicking.

In my use, 2xExplorerZ1 offers the easiest method of copying/pasting (or cutting/pasting, or dragging-and-dropping) from one folder to another. Gyula's Navigator and Free Commander both do the trick, but don't seem to be as easy to use as 2xExplorer.

In Gyula, for instance, I couldn't find a way to select files by clicking/holding/dragging the mouse. You have to move one file at a time, or select files with the shift/arrow keys before moving multiple files from one folder to another. However, Gyula has the advantage that it will remove the "read-only" tags from files while copying/moving. This is wonderfully helpful if I'm copying files from a CD (since all CD files are automatically "read-only.")

For making backups, or updating backups, Gyula's "compare panes" feature seems to be the best. When a user clicks the "compare" button, both panes' files and folders that don't match the other pane's are automatically selected. The user can then copy/paste the differing files, as well as select which attributes to compare. The same feature in 2xExplorer works, but doesn't select folders – only files.

Users who deal mostly with image files (digital photographs), Free Commander may be the best, since the built-in image viewer is as good as Windows', or better. There are rotate and zoom tools built in, just like in Windows. (For users that deal exclusively in photos, try FastStone Image Viewer – the tools are much better, and it's free.)

Overall, Gyula and Free Commander had the most features, and both had several features that were better in quality than the other browsers. 2xExplorerZ1 also had most of the features listed above, and takes up less system resources.

As mentioned above, I have all five browsers installed on my computer. I only use TrackerV3 because of the image preview – each selected image or document is automatically previewed in the bottom section of the interface. When transferring files, I use Gyula or 2xExplorer. When I want to see a folder full of thumbnail photo files, I use Windows Explorer. For general use, though, I usually pick Free Commander or 2xExplorer.

It's nice to have choices.