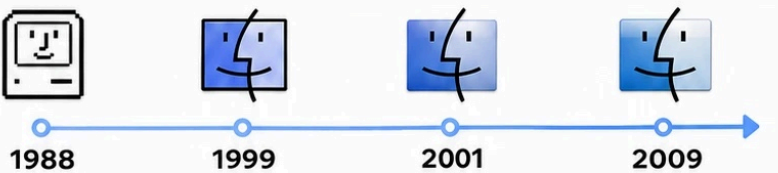
RetroMac

The Hitchhiker's Guide to RetrOmac

Turn your Mac into a time machine.



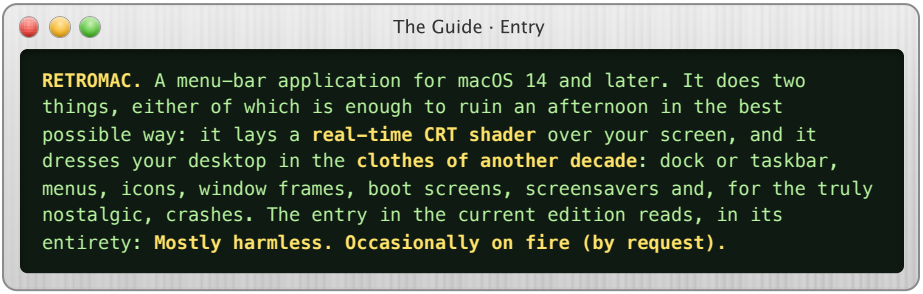


A Field Guide | Classic OS · Docks · Themes · CRT-Shader · and more

An unofficial guide, with apologies and gratitude to Douglas Adams.

A Few Words Before You Leave the Planet

Somewhere in the less fashionable corners of your Downloads folder, past the installers you meant to delete in 2019, there is a small app that wants to live in your menu bar. It is called **RetroMac**, and it has one ambition: to turn a perfectly sensible modern Mac into the computer you had when your problems were mainly about floppy disks.



Getting on board

Drag RetroMac into /Applications, open it, and the Setup Assistant will hold your hand for the first lightyear. macOS will then ask for three permissions, each optional and each with its reason:

- **Screen Recording** — so the shader can see what it is meant to make look old.
- **Accessibility** — so the taskbar can give every window its own button, and title bars can be drawn over other apps.
- **Camera** — only if you want to appear in video calls as though broadcasting from 1987.

Settings ▸ General shows which ones are missing and has a Grant button for each, which is more than most bureaucracies in the galaxy offer.

> **On money.** RetroMac is free software (GPL v3). An optional **Pro unlock** lifts the limits on premium themes and effects. There is no account, no tracking and no subscription, a combination so rare in this sector of the galaxy that several philosophers have refused to believe in it.

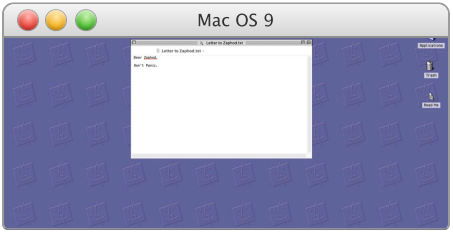
Desktops the Universe Tried to Forget

A **theme** is a complete desktop from another era: its dock or taskbar, Start menu, wallpapers, icons, pointers, window chrome, boot screen and screensaver. Pick one from the menu bar's **Themes** menu, or from the flyout's **Quick Access** tabs. By family, youngest era first:

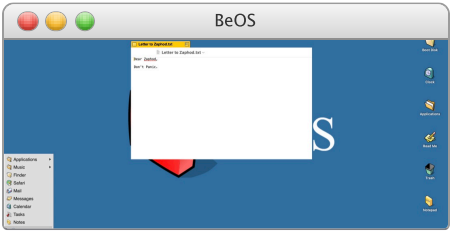
Apple	System 6 (true 1-bit), System 7.1 in 256 colours, Mac OS 8 "Copland", Mac OS 9 (twice: Classic and authentic), Mac OS X 10.0, Tiger, Snow Leopard, Mountain Lion.
Windows	3.1, 95, 98 with the Plus! schemes, Me, NT 4.0 Workstation, XP, Vista with its Sidebar, 7.
Unix & Amiga	BeOS, OS/2 Warp 4, SGI IRIX, Solaris 8 with CDE, QNX 6.2.1 Photon, NeXTSTEP, and the Amiga Workbench 4.1.
Other	Futurama, Halloween, and two of the maintainer's own favourites.



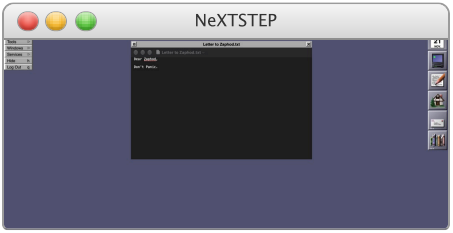
Windows 98. Rated: dangerously familiar.



Mac OS 9. Rated: platinum, polite.



BeOS. Rated: yellow, tabbed, wronged by history.



NeXTSTEP. Rated: grey, and proud of it.

Spaces: a theme can live on every Space or only on the ones you choose (Settings ▸ General). **Make your own:** a theme is a folder with a theme.json and some pictures; Settings ▸ Themes ▸ Advanced imports it.

Making Pixels Feel Their Age

Modern displays are flawless, which is precisely what is wrong with them. The **shader** fixes this by adding curvature, scanlines, phosphor bloom, NTSC dot crawl and the general sensation of sitting too close to a television in 1984.



CRT Royale: the shader most likely to make you check whether the screen is warm.

Settings ▸ Shader, in four handy parts

- **Presets & Effects** — thirty-odd presets (CRT Royale, Lottes, zfast, Trinitron, PVM, LCD, VHS, VCR, NTSC, film, the Game Boy's green), with intensity, vignette, bloom and the scanline and reflection overlays. Your own Metal presets are welcome too.
- **Screen & Apps** — the scope: the whole screen, one display, one window, or only the desktop. **Live Wallpaper Plus** runs the shader over wallpaper, icons, dock and Start menu while your windows stay sharp: nostalgia and work, in the same universe. Rules can switch presets by frontmost app.
- **Performance** — quality and frame rate, for laptops that would rather not glow themselves.
- **On & Off** — running now, on launch, per theme, and around sleep.

The Guide · On scanlines

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Scientists have long wondered why people who own 5K displays voluntarily
add horizontal black lines to them. The Guide's position is that it is
none of the scientists' business.
```

Boot, Crash, Repeat

Boot Phases

Every theme can start the way its machine did. One slider in Settings ▸ Themes decides how much ceremony you can stand:

- **Desktop** — straight to work, for travellers in a hurry.
- **OS Boot → Desktop** — the operating system's own start-up screen first.
- **Firmware → OS Boot → Desktop** — the full ritual. The Windows themes count this Mac's real memory in an AMI or Award BIOS; press DEL during the POST and you are in a CMOS setup you can actually walk around. The AmigaOne has its U-Boot (press any key for Boot Select), and Tiger strikes the Mac's start-up chord.

Escape or a click skips any of it. VoiceOver and Reduce Motion skip it for you.

Retro Crashes

Settings ▸ Crashes brings back the failures of the period: the 9x blue screen, the Illegal Operation, the NT Stop error with its memory dump, the Mac's bomb, the kernel panic, the Zip drive's click of death, and boot failures after a pretend restart (NTLDR is missing, ScanDisk, the Sad Mac). Choose how often and what may happen.

> **Important:** none of it is real. No app is quit, no document closed, no restart issued. Esc always ends it. This is more than can be said for the originals.

Screensavers

Pipes, FlowerBox, Flying Toasters, Flurry and the Starfield Simulation, all of which can also be installed as real macOS savers, so that your Mac can resume an argument with your monitor that was settled in 1998.

Places to Park a Spaceship

Each theme brings its own **retro dock or taskbar**, floating over the Mac's Dock or replacing it: Start menus in the 9x and Luna shapes, Quick Launch, a tray with clock and speaker, one button per window, the Control Strip, the Deskbar, the AmiDock. Your modern apps get **historic icons** from the theme's icon packages, so that a 2026 browser can blend in at a 1995 party.

Getting around

^⌥Tab	The window switcher of the theme's era, and nothing the era did not have. ^⌥⇧Tab goes backwards.
^Esc	Opens the theme's main menu: Start, the Apple menu, the Be menu.
^⇧Esc	Moves the keyboard into the dock or taskbar. Arrows to travel, Return to land, Esc to leave.
^F11	Exposé's desktop, where the theme has Exposé.

All of these can be changed in Settings ▸ Shortcuts.

Title bars and windows

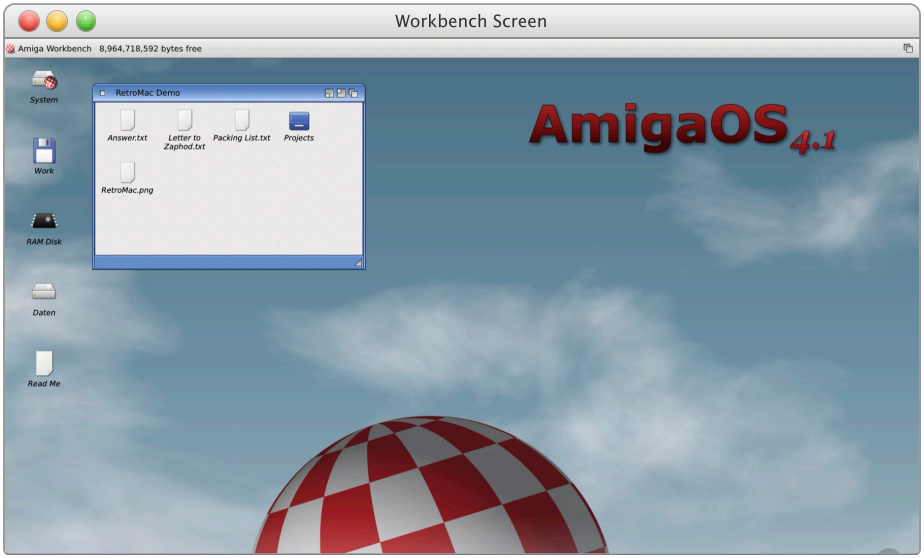
RetroMac can draw the era's title bars over your real app windows: Platinum, Luna, Aero, AmigaOS and friends, with buttons that really minimise, zoom and close. It is an experiment and says so. **Moving windows** can follow the era too: *as the era did*, or with a period-correct outline.

The desktop

Settings ▸ Desktop decides what the active theme puts there: wallpaper (bundled or your own), the menu bar's tint and Apple logo, desktop icons and their size, widgets such as the clock, calculator and notepad, and a **desktop companion**, for those who always felt a sheep was missing from their working day.

A Field Trip to the AmigaOne

In 2008 a small band of enthusiasts carried the Amiga's desktop onto PowerPC and called it AmigaOS 4.1. RetroMac's newest theme follows it as it looked after a fresh install, redrawn by hand, pixel by stubborn pixel.



The Workbench: a drawer open, the volumes on the left, the AmiDock at the bottom right.

- **The screen bar** runs along the top with the free memory. Hold the **right mouse button** on it for the Workbench, Window, Icons and Tools menus.
- **Drawers** are folders, in windows of their own; Snapshot remembers where you put things. **RAM Disk** is real and private, and holds ENV and your clipboard.
- **The AmiDock** starts as a fresh install had it, with the Extras, Internet and Players sub-docks and three Dockies: a clock, a CPU graph and WinBar.
- **Iconify** turns a window into an icon on the Workbench, which is where an Amiga kept the things it was not looking at.

The Guide · Amiga

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The Amiga multitasked in 1985, while other computers were still deciding
whether to. Its owners have been politely mentioning this ever since.
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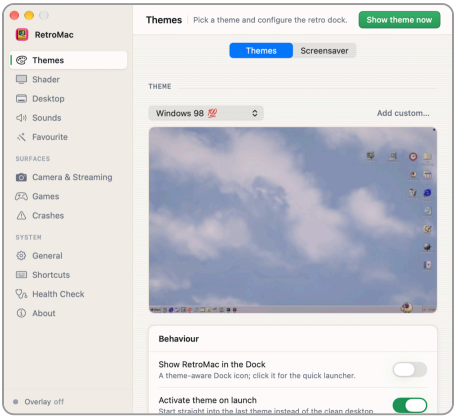
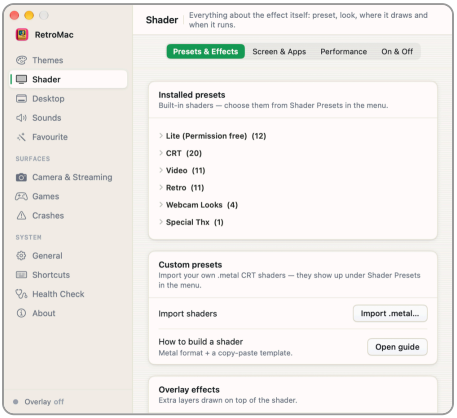
The Settings Window, in Order of Likely Panic

One window, a sidebar on the left, and every setting where you would expect it, which is unusual enough to be worth a footnote in several galactic encyclopaedias. Open it from the menu bar icon, or open RetroMac again from Applications.



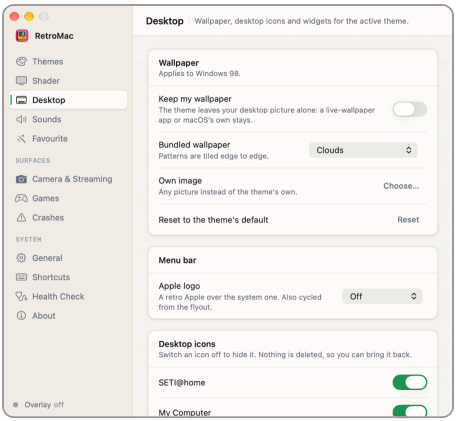
Themes: pick one, then dress its dock.



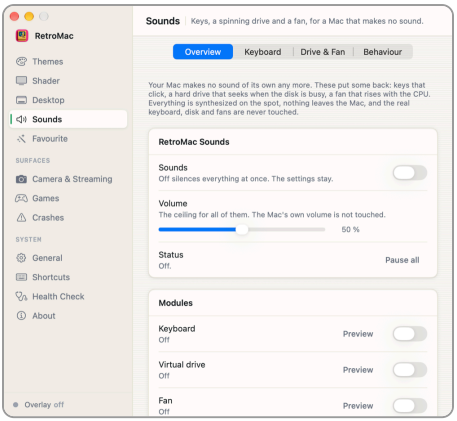
Shader: presets, scope, performance.

Themes	The theme and its dock: position, style, clock, indicators, apps in the dock; Boot Phases; the theme's extras (Plus! schemes, tray messenger, Re:Amp, Pac-Man, the Doom Slayer); what it changes in macOS and puts back; the screensaver. Advanced: transparency, icon scale, target display, importing themes.
Shader	Presets, scope, per-app rules, performance, when it runs. See Chapter 3, or just press things.
Desktop	Wallpaper, menu bar, desktop icons, widgets, companion — stored per theme.
Favourite	Your favourite look and what to hide, in one click. One more click brings the modern Mac back.
Sounds	The keyboard, the fan, the drive seeking, the chimes. Hard disks have never sounded so busy doing nothing.

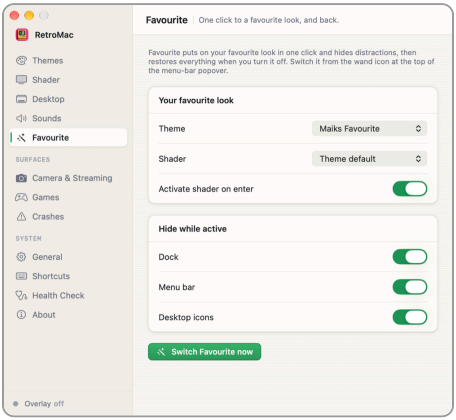
Rule of thumb: every switch takes effect at once. If nothing seems to happen, the Guide recommends checking that a theme is actually on before blaming the universe.



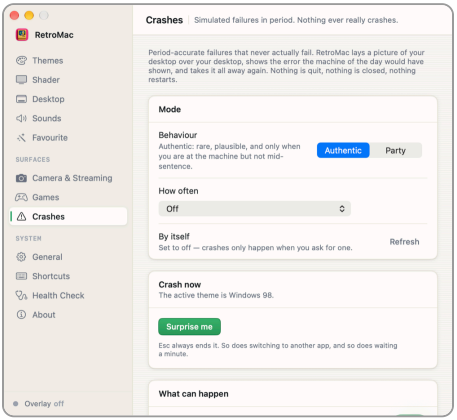
Desktop: wallpaper, menu bar, icons.



Sounds: a drive that seeks, a fan that hums.



Favourite: one click there, one click back.



Crashes: Authentic, or Party.

Camera	The virtual camera and the television.
Games	The CRT in games, where game data lives, ROMs and emulators.
Crashes	How often things pretend to go wrong.
General	Setup Assistant, start at login, Spaces, permissions.
Shortcuts	Rescue Desktop, the window switcher, keyboard access, hotkeys.
Health Check	Read-only: capture, GPU, displays, the theme. Consult before shouting.
About	Version, updates (with a beta channel for the brave), licence, credits.

Recreational Facilities

Long journeys are boring. RetroMac has thought of that.

Games

The Game Library brings **Doom, Heretic, Quake, Quake II** and **Duke Nukem 3D** through their free engines, with the shareware episodes downloaded for you. **Warcraft I and II** run on the bundled Stratagus engine with your own game data. There is an emulator installer and a ROM library for the rest of your misspent youth, and the CRT can follow you into all of it.



The Game Boy preset. Not responsible for any sudden urge to buy AA batteries.

Retro TV

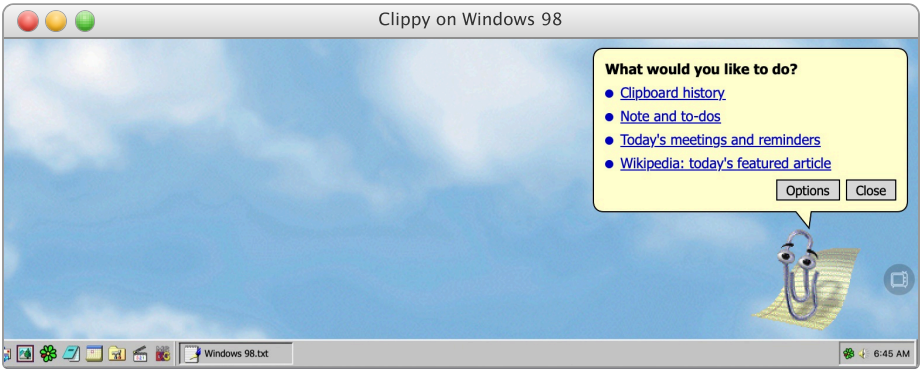
YouTube, IPTV streams and your bookmarks, playing inside a television with the CRT switched on and, if you like, a tube that warms up. Ideal for watching things you could just as easily watch normally, but where is the fun in that?

The virtual camera

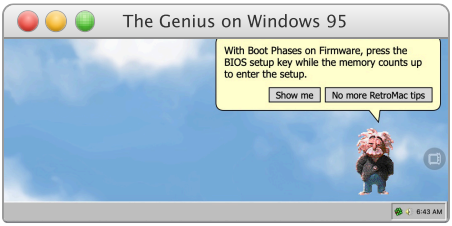
The shader, on your webcam, for Zoom, Meet, Teams and OBS: scenes, a source, a lower third. Colleagues will assume either a technical fault or a creative breakthrough. Both are correct.

Mostly Harmless: the Office Assistants

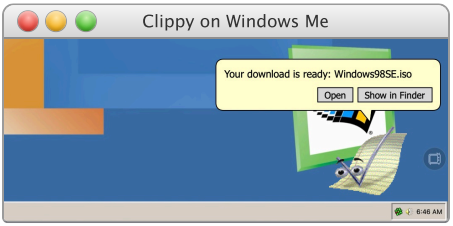
In 1997 a paperclip moved into Microsoft Office and asked everyone whether they were writing a letter. On the Windows themes he is back, and this time he only says what your Mac already knows. **No AI**, and nothing from the internet unless you ask for Wikipedia.



One click on Clippy and the balloon opens. It looks like it did in 1997. It is a lot more useful now.



The Genius, with a tip about RetroMac.



A finished download, ticked off.

What it does

- **Click it** for the last ten texts you copied, a note with to-dos, today's meetings and reminders, and Wikipedia's article of the day.
- **It speaks up** about finished downloads, a plugged-in disk, a low battery, a full disk, an old backup and the next meeting (with **Join**), and now and then it has a tip.
- **Double-click** to watch its animations, **right-click** for the rest. Leave it alone for five minutes and it falls asleep.

Settings ▸ Desktop ▸ Desktop companion: **Match the theme** brings Clippy to every Windows theme. The Genius comes with RetroMac too; F1, Genie, Links, Merlin, Peedy, Rocky and Rover download when picked. Prefer company that cannot talk? **sheep.exe** walks the taskbar.

Emergency Procedures

Sooner or later every traveller ends up somewhere they did not mean to be: a desktop with no Dock, a window behind a taskbar, a menu bar that has gone for a walk. This is normal, and it is why the Guide has a towel.

The Guide · Rescue Desktop

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Press ^⌥⌘R. Every theme and effect goes off, and windows you could not
reach come back, whatever state the desktop is in. Also in the flyout and
in the menu bar under More, and it works with no theme on at all. If a
rescue was interrupted, the next launch finishes it.
```

Things that put themselves back

- Everything a theme changes in macOS (Dock, menu bar, wallpaper, accent, pointers, Terminal profile) is remembered and restored when it goes off.
- If RetroMac ever ends without tidying up, a small watchdog puts the Dock, menu bar and desktop back at once, so you are never stranded on a planet with no Dock.
- Your cursors are captured and restored exactly. The Guide considers this a basic courtesy.

A traveller's checklist

Looks wrong?	Health Check first.
Lost?	^Esc opens the theme's main menu.
Too much ceremony?	Boot Phases to Desktop.
Look serious?	Favourite, then one click back.
Everything on fire?	Check whether you enabled Retro Crashes. Then press Esc.

So long, and thanks for all the scanlines. Updates arrive on their own through Sparkle; the source, the changelog and the theme documentation live at github.com/klotzbrocken/RetroMac, the rest at myretromac.app.