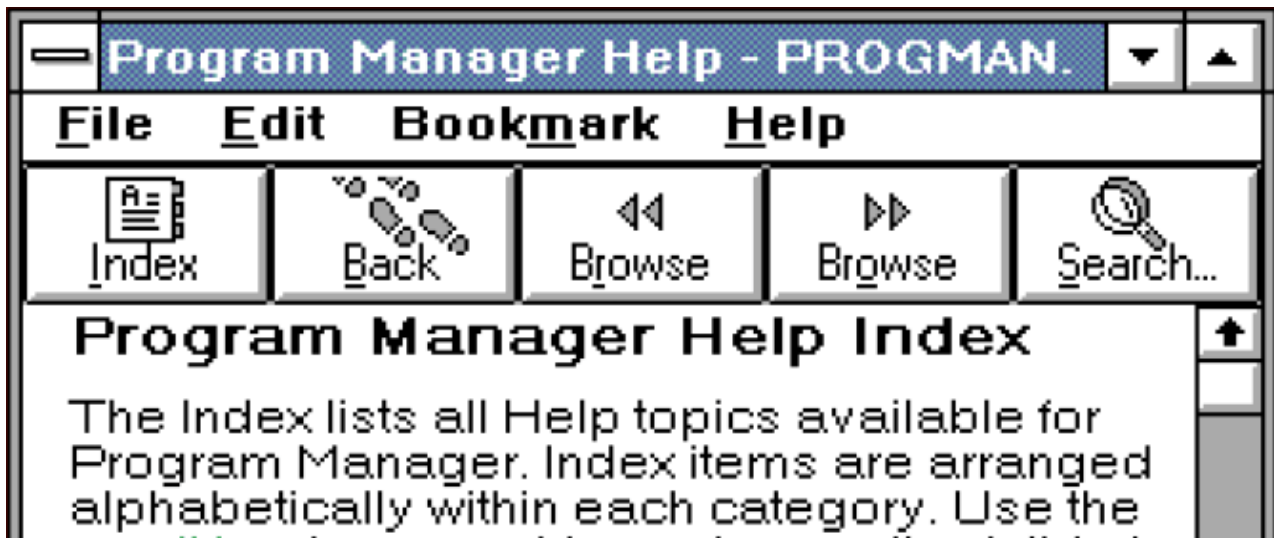


The symbolism of the magnifying glass is not universal

 devblogs.microsoft.com/oldnewthing/20250603-00/?p=111240

June 3, 2025

Windows 3.0 introduced WinHelp, a program for browsing online help files. The toolbar contained a series of buttons: Index, Back, Browse backward, Browse forward, and Search.



The icon for Index was a tabbed index card. The icon for Back was a trail of footprints. the icon for Browse was a pair of triangles pointing left (back) or right (forward). And the icon for Search was a magnifying glass.

The use of a magnifying glass to mean Search is fairly common nowadays, but back then, it was novel.¹ And the team learned that it was also not universal.

The fictional detective Sherlock Holmes is commonly depicted using a magnifying glass to search for clues. He is a well-known character in English literature, but not necessarily in other cultures.

The WinHelp team received a question from one of the overseas offices asking why the icon for Search was a frying pan.

To avoid confusion, they updated the WinHelp program in Windows 3.1 by simply removing the icons entirely.



The icons are all gone. The buttons just read Contents, Search, Back, History and Glossary.

¹ Many Web sites credit NextSTEP for introducing the magnifying glass icon to mean Find. NextSTEP was released on September 18, 1989, and Windows 3.0 was released not long after, on May 22, 1990.