

THE COMPUTER CORNER

No. 128. A Brief History of Windows

- by Stan Kaplan, WB9RQR
 715 N. Dries Street
 Saukville, WI 53080-1664
 (262) 268-1949
 skaplan@mcw.edu

I have mentioned before that Windows NT came out even before Windows 95, and thought you might like to see a brief chronological history of the whole Windows line to date.

YEAR	VERSION	NOTES
1985	Windows 1.0	Announced in 1983 and released 1985 as an extension of DOS, Windows 1.0 was the first GUI (Graphical User Interface) released by Microsoft. Also the first time use of bitmap displays coupled with a mouse pointing device to control Microsoft programs.
1987	Windows 2.0	Designed for use with the Intel 286 processor and expanded memory. GUI improved.
1990	Windows 3.0	The first widely popular version of Windows, used by many people with the newly available 386 PC. This version had improved performance and used up to 16 colors.
1993	Windows NT 3.1	NT stands for New Technology , an Operating System (OS) designed for business applications. This first version was designated 3.1 to be consistent with Windows 3.1, already in the marketplace when NT was released. However, Windows 3.1 was still a 16-bit operating system, while NT was a 32-bit OS. Integrated networking and high security made it a natural for business.
1993	Windows for Workgroups 3.11	Windows for Workgroups was simply an updated version of Windows 3x that incorporated networking and peer-to-peer workgroup support.
1994	Windows NT Workstation 3.5	Improved security and the first Microsoft OS to migrate from the old 8.3 character filename conventions (TIMECARD.DOC) to a maximum of 255 characters.
1995	Windows 95	Replacing MS-DOS, Windows 3.1 and Windows for Workgroups, this OS incorporated 32-bit Internet software support, plug-n-play capabilities and enhanced multimedia support.
1996	Windows NT Workstation 4.0	Upgraded, enhanced version of NT Workstation 3.5, using the very popular Windows 95 GUI (Desktop).
1998	Windows 98	The first version of Windows designed specifically for consumers (as opposed to computer jockeys). Much improved over Windows 95.
1999	Windows 98SE	The SE stands for Second Edition, an improved version that fixed many bugs in Win98. The first consumer OS that used device drivers that also worked with NT.
2000	Windows Me	Me stands for Millennium Edition , an OS designed for home users. The last OS to be based on the Windows 95 code base. Widely considered Microsoft's poorest OS.
2000	Windows 2000 Professional	Designed to replace Windows 95, 98 and NT Workstation 4, this OS was built on the NT code base with full plug-n-play support. Good networking support, too.
2001	Windows XP	XP stands for Experience . Also built on the NT code base, XP was designed to merge Microsoft's business and consumer operating systems into a single entity. Three versions were released in 2001. XP Home Edition is a simplified version, while XP Professional is full-featured with enhanced security and networking. XP 64-Bit Edition is the first Microsoft OS that can use the new 64-bit processors. Windows XP Media Center edition, released in 2002, sports all the capabilities of XP Professional but with enhanced multimedia support. Also released in 2002 was the XP Tablet PC edition, designed specifically for notebooks and handwriting recognition.

That is a thumbnail chronological history of Windows, but it leaves out an important fact. When one looks at the underlying code of Windows, there have been only two versions! Look at the next table.

DOS-BASED	NT-BASED
Win 1 –3x	Win NT
Win 95	Win NT Workstation
Win 98, all versions	Win 2000, all versions
Win ME	Win XP, all versions

Windows through version 3x (the x stands for .0 - .3), 95, 98 and ME all are DOS-based operating systems. That is, MS-DOS is the underlying master controller, and Windows cannot talk directly to the hardware. When you tell Windows 98se to write to a floppy, it sends a request to DOS to do the job. DOS then asks the BIOS (Basic Input/Output System) to talk to the hardware to get the job done. When the process is done, DOS reports back to Windows and Windows then tells you the bald-faced lie, “I’ve completed your job, boss.”

Humans can even give commands directly to DOS in all DOS-based OS in the table except ME, where DOS still exists but has been effectively hidden from human view. As the saying used to go, “DOS RULES”.

NT is a different story. There is no underlying DOS-based OS that Windows has to talk to. It can do everything itself, including talking directly to the hardware in many cases, even bypassing the BIOS.

The whole point here, though, is that there is very little new under the sun. The latest and greatest XP you are running on your home computer is based on NT code that was written back in 1994. Oh, there have been enhancements, for sure. But the underlying base is still old stuff. Maybe it is time for Microsoft to do something really new? Like an OS that doesn’t take 3 – 5 minutes to boot itself up? Happy computing!