

Demystifying Windows 7: Where did the 7 come from?

On 22nd October 2009, Microsoft released the latest version of their Windows operating system, Windows 7. Already it has received incredible praises and reviews, with one viewer of the BBC's technology programme *Click*, describing it as "Windows XP with bells and whistles". It has also raised some general questions, some which always seem to appear after a new version of Windows is released. One in particular is "Why name it Windows 7?".

Since its launch in October 2009, Windows 7 has gathered incredible praise from its users. But one question I have heard, and have in fact been asked on numerous occasions, is "Why the name Windows 7?" Some have tried to answer the question by counting back all the versions of Windows on their fingers then declaring that "Windows 7 is in fact Windows 10" or another number. Unfortunately, life is not that simple, especially as computers are involved! To truly answer the question, we need to go back to 1985 when Windows first emerged onto the world.

In 1985, Microsoft released Windows 1.0, which was not actually a proper operating system. It was in fact an extension to MS-DOS (you remember MS-DOS - that black screen with grey text where the expression "Bad command or file name" gained worldwide notoriety!). MS-DOS was an operating system, but was operated using text commands from the user. Windows 1.0 provided a prettier user interface to MS-DOS, with colour, and the concept of programs running in their own "windows", the latter being to a limited extent, but improved in Windows 2.0, released in 1987. Both these versions of Windows did not gain much popularity, with many software developers simply maintaining their applications to run on MS-DOS.

This popularity began to change in 1990 when Windows 3.0 was released. Computers had improved graphics capabilities and this was reflected in the Windows 3 series. My first experience with Windows was Windows 3.1 when I was about 6 years old!

It is at this point that the progression of Windows becomes more complicated. Up until this point, MS-DOS and Windows both used a file system known as FAT, File Allocation Table. A file system is a method for storing data on computer storage, such as a hard drive, and is way beyond the scope of this text! Microsoft introduced a new brand of Windows, known as Windows NT (where NT stands for "New Technology"), aimed at the business market, but rather than use FAT, it used NTFS, NT Filing System. The first version was Windows NT 3.1, matching the version of its FAT counterpart, Windows 3.1.

The next milestone for Windows came in 1995 with the release of Windows 95, with its revolutionary new user interface, the main styles of which still live on today in Windows 7 such as the Start Menu, and the three buttons found on the top right of each window. Windows 95 used FAT as its filing system, so I know what you're thinking: what about NTFS? Well, the next release of Windows NT came in 1996 in the shape of Windows NT 4.0. This gives us a clue as to the actual version number of Windows 95 as "95" only corresponds to the year of production: Windows 95 is in fact Windows 4.0 as well! Note that this is not Windows NT 4.0! Windows 95 and NT 4.0 both had the same user interface, but had the big difference in their filing systems, being FAT and NTFS respectively, as well as some advanced networking and management features in NT. Windows 95 started what is now commonly known as the "Windows 9x" series, so rather

than refer to filing systems, I shall now refer to “Windows 9x”, which used FAT and “Windows NT”, which used NTFS.

In 1998, Microsoft released the next version of Windows, Windows 98, part of the Windows 9x series. Version 5.0? No - it was in fact Windows 4.1. “Why?” I hear you ask. There were indeed new features in Windows 98, but some of these features could be added to Windows 95. For example, all Windows Explorer windows looked like Internet Explorer, but this was only the Windows Desktop Update which could easily be applied to Windows 95 when installed with Internet Explorer 4. This set the standard seen in Windows today where you could navigate the entire Internet from your My Documents folder!

The year 2000 saw the next release of Windows NT, known as Windows 2000. This was Windows 5.0. Later in 2000, Windows 9x also received a new release, Windows Me, or Windows Millennium Edition, which offered some of the features of Windows 2000 for home users. The keyword here is “some”, which might suggest why Windows Me was Windows 4.9. Unfortunately, Windows Me was a failure: I can testify to that!

From this point, things get a bit easier. After Windows Me, Microsoft discontinued using FAT as a filing system, and all subsequent versions of Windows now use NTFS, therefore all versions of Windows are now based on Windows NT. The next major release of Windows was version 5.1, commonly known as Windows XP, probably one of Microsoft’s most popular products with both home users and business. I did not know what to think when I first saw screenshots of Windows XP, with its bright blue and green interface! But when I first started using it, I thought it was great! In fact, at the time of writing, my home PC runs Windows XP, my first experience of Windows XP, is over 6 years old and still works reasonably well! Final point on Windows XP: have you ever wondered what XP stands for? It stands for Experience!

Although all versions of Windows are now based on Windows NT, Windows took another branch at this point. Rather than aimed at Home and Business, this time is more Client and Server, where client refers to a standard desktop PC, and server to a more powerful computer connected to other servers and many clients, such as a web server, which “serves” web pages when requested. This server range is known as Windows Server. Although there have been other server versions of Windows in the past, Windows Server 2003, released in 2003, seemed, in my opinion, to promote the range the most. Windows Server 2003, still used a lot today, is basically a cranked up version of Windows XP, offering more services and powerful features aimed at network management and maintenance, as well as increased security. Regarding the version, it is Windows 5.2, probably due to the “cranked up” Windows XP (version 5.1).

The next major version of Windows came in 2007 with the release of Windows Vista. Windows Vista offered an improved user interface, Windows Aero, as well as many new features, and so is therefore Windows 6.0. I was skeptical of Windows Vista to start with, but I gradually warmed to it, and am now a fan! I personally feel that a lot of the criticism of Windows Vista came from the fact users were not used to the new features - after all, thinking about it, Windows XP was a jazzed up version of Windows 95 (or do I mean NT 4.0!)! Admittedly there were also many issues with hardware not working, so that is probably another major reason!

Windows Server also gained a new version in 2008 as Windows Server 2008. It too carried the version 6.0. It came with many new features, one of which being Hyper-V, Microsoft's server virtualisation system.

This takes us to where we are now in 2009. In October, Microsoft released Windows 7 offering an operating system described as "what Vista should have been". So is it Windows 7.0? Well, before I answer that question, let's look at Windows Server 2008 R2, released in September this year. It offers reduced power consumption especially on the virtualisation side, Hyper-V. Windows Server 2008 R2 carries a version number of 6.1, and in fact so does Windows 7. So Windows 7 is in fact Windows 6.1!

So why not 7.0? The reason from Microsoft is a reason similar to why Windows XP was numbered 5.1: to ensure maximum compatibility with third party applications which check the Windows version to determine whether they can run or not on that version of Windows. For example, if an application checked for a version of Windows 6.x, a version of 7.x may cause the application to fail. In that case, I hear you ask, why not name it Windows 6.1? Unfortunately, it's not a very catchy name, and seeing as the last version of Windows to use version numbers was Windows NT 4, it would not be overly obvious where the 6.1 came from! That is until now, of course, when you have read this article! But, there are plenty of new features in Windows 7, including the new Taskbar, which combines the previous Quick Launch Toolbar with main Taskbar functionality, Libraries, which allow the user to view categories of data quickly and easily, amongst many others ranging to simpler data access and multitouch support. Therefore, plenty of reasons to justify the Windows 7 name!