

Microsoft Detours to 'Longhorn' on the Way to 'Blackcomb'

Microsoft's road map for future releases of Windows needs to be carefully understood and kept in mind by enterprises developing their OS upgrade strategies.

Core Topic

Hardware Platforms: Client Platforms

Key Issue

How will desktop and mobile client platforms evolve during the next five years?

Microsoft's original road map for Windows anticipated two releases after Windows 2000 ("Whistler" and "Blackcomb," named after mountains in Canada). Now, in the middle of the two, is a new Windows project — "Longhorn."

Microsoft intended to alternate major and minor releases of its newest operating system (OS), delivering them about 18 months apart. Whistler, now known as Windows XP, was supposed to be the minor release following Windows 2000 and Blackcomb the major release after that.

Gartner thinks of Windows 2000 Professional as Windows NT Workstation v.5.0, Windows XP as Windows NT Workstation v.5.1 and Blackcomb as Windows NT Workstation v.6.0.

Microsoft's Grand Visions

In the mid-1990s, Microsoft had a grand vision, known as Cairo, that was intended to form Windows NT v.5.0. Cairo gradually got bigger and bigger, until it was shelved in favor of getting a competitive product, Windows 2000, out of the door. Windows 2000 was needed to deal with the threat from Java and thin-client systems. However, internally, it seems that Blackcomb is Microsoft's new grand vision.

Cairo was too grand a vision to accomplish in the time allotted to it — i.e., the two years after the launch of NT v.4.0 in 1996. Because of competitive threats, the project slipped by two years and Microsoft did not ship Windows 2000 until February 2000. This left a four-year gap of technology and revenue between the release of NT v.4.0 and Windows 2000. Microsoft cannot let this happen again. Its stock has been down or flat since 1999 and it needs the revenue that new products bring.

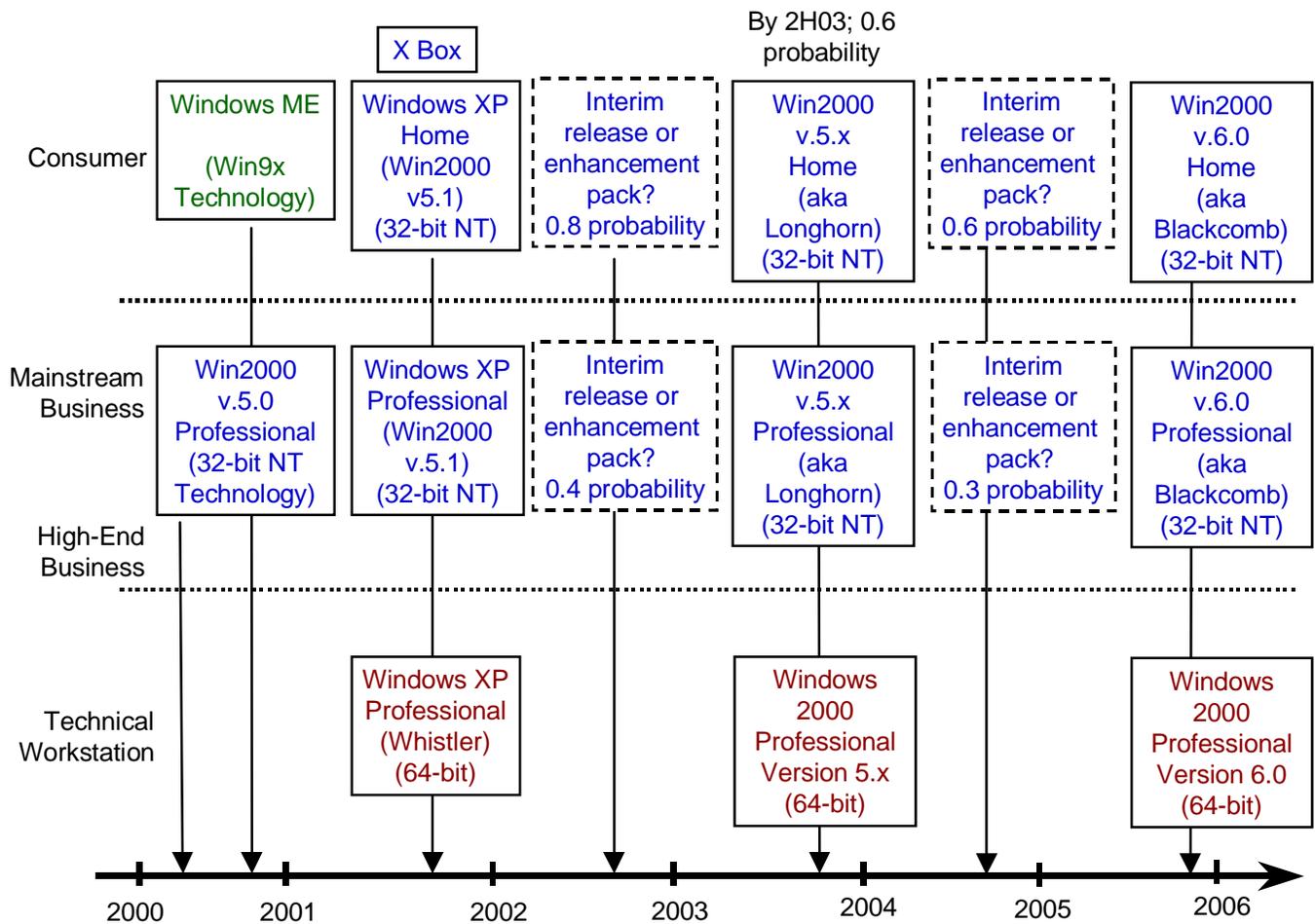
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Why Detour to Longhorn?

Microsoft has to keep current to make sure Linux, Mac OS X and other possible challengers do not sneak up from behind and get a foothold while Microsoft's OS technology languishes. It makes perfect sense for Microsoft to ensure it has a reasonable plan for interim releases. It understands that the more revolutionary a release, the more difficult it is for enterprises to implement. Smaller releases allow enterprises to absorb the new technology more easily. Where Blackcomb was supposed to be Windows v.6.0, Longhorn represents another point release to the Windows 5.x codebase. We believe Microsoft will endeavor to release a new enterprise client OS every 24 months, and a new consumer OS or enhancement pack every year (see Figure 1).

Figure 1
Microsoft's Client OS Road Map



Source: Gartner Research

Good News for Enterprises

This new road map is very good news for enterprises, which face significant problems adopting any new client OS technology, especially for major releases. Windows 2000 is a case in point,

with many enterprises skipping it and going straight to Windows XP as their first Windows v.5.x OS. The magnitude and complexity of the technology shift has made major releases difficult to adopt. Some enterprises still cling to the idea that they can have a single client OS across all their desktops, instead of adopting strategies of managed diversity. This lures them into creating huge projects with large budgets, requiring lots of labor and delaying implementation of new client OSs.

If Microsoft ships more point releases, it will make it easier for enterprises to maintain a somewhat-diverse environment and manage change more effectively. However, given a two-year release schedule and a four-year planned, supported, product life cycle, we reiterate our recommendation that enterprises not try to skip point releases, and, instead, embrace them by bringing them in on new PCs in a strategy of managed diversity.

Bottom Line: Enterprises should understand Microsoft's client OS road map and which are the major and minor releases. Since enterprises can more easily absorb minor releases, enterprises should view an extra Windows v.5.x release favorably. Most enterprises should adopt a strategy of managed diversity that embraces new releases of the client OS for new machines.