Steve Ballmer did not write the text for the blue screen of death

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Somehow, it ended up widely reported that Steve Ballmer wrote the blue screen of death. And all of those articles cited my article titled "Who wrote the text for the Ctrl+Alt+Del dialog in Windows 3.1?" Somehow, everybody decided to ignore that I wrote "Ctrl+Alt+Del dialog" and replace it with what they wanted to hear: "blue screen of death".[1]

Note also that people are somehow blaming the person who wrote the text of the error message for the fact that the message appears in the first place. It's like blaming Pat Fleet for AT&T's crappy service. It must suck being the person whose job it is to write error messages.

Anyway, the `Ctrl`+`Alt`+`Del` dialog was not the blue screen of death. I mean, it had a *Cancel* option, for goodness's sake. What message of death comes with a *Cancel* option?

Grim Reaper: I am here to claim your soul.

You: No thanks.

Grim Reaper: Oh, well, in that case, sorry to have bothered you.

Also, blue screen error messages were not new to Windows 3.1. They existed in Windows 3.0, too. What was new in Windows 3.1 was a special handler for `Ctrl`+`Alt`+`Del` which tried to identify the program that was not responding and give you the opportunity to terminate it. Windows itself was fine; it was just the program that was in trouble.

Recall that Windows in Enhanced mode ran three operating systems simultaneously, A copy of Standard mode Windows ran inside one of the virtual machines, and all your MS-DOS applications ran in the other virtual machines. These blue screen messages came from the virtual machine manager.

If you had a single-floppy system, the two logical drives A: and B: were shared by the single physical floppy drive. When a program switched from accessing drive A: to drive B:, or vice versa, Windows prompted you to insert the disk for the new drive:

XyWrite

Please Insert Diskette for drive B:

Press any key to continue _

Another job of the virtual machine manager is to arbitrate access to physical hardware. As long as two virtual machines didn't try to access the same resource simultaneously, the arbitration could be resolved invisibly. But if two virtual machines tried to access, say, the serial port at the same time, Windows alerted you to the conflict and asked you which virtual machines should be granted access and which should be blocked. It looked like this:

Device Conflict

'XyWrite' is attempting to use the COM1 device, which 'Procomm' is currently using. Do you want 'XyWrite' to take control of the device?

Press Y for Yes or N for No: _

Windows 3.1 didn't have a blue screen of death. If an MS-DOS application crashed, you got a blue screen message saying that the application crashed, but Windows kept running. If it was a device driver that crashed, then Windows 3.1 shut down the virtual machine that the device driver was running in. But if the device driver crashed the Windows virtual machine, then the entire virtual machine manager shut itself down, sometimes (but not always) printed a brief text message, and handed control back to MS-DOS. So you might say that it was a black screen of death.

Could not continue running Windows because of paging error.

C:\>_

The window of opportunity for seeing the blue `Ctrl`+`Alt`+`Del` dialog was quite small: You basically had to be running Windows 3.1 or Windows 3.11.

Next time, we'll see who actually wrote Windows 95 blue screen of death. Spoiler alert: It was me.

[1] I like how _The Register_ wrote "Microsoft has revealed" and "Redmond's _Old new thing blog_", once again turning me into an official company spokesperson. (They also chose not to identify me by name, which may be a good thing.)

DailyTech identified me as a Microsoft executive. I'm still waiting for that promotion letter. (And, more important, the promotion _pay raise_.)

First honorable mention goes to Engadget for illustrating the article with the Windows 95 dialog that Steve Ballmer didn't write. I mean, I had a copy of the screen in my article, and they decided to show some other screen instead. I gues nobody bothered to verify that the dialogs matched.

Second honorable mention goes jointly to Gizmodo and lifehacker for illustrating the article with the _Windows NT_ blue screen of death. Not only was it the wrong dialog, it was the wrong operating system. Nice one, guys.

And special mention goes to BGR, who entirely fabricated a scenario and posited it as real: "What longtime Windows user can forget the panic that set in the first time their entire screen went blue for no explicable reason and was informed that 'This Windows application has stopped responding to the system.'" Yeah, that never happened. The `Ctrl`+`Alt`+`Del` dialog did not appear spontaneously; you had to press `Ctrl`+`Alt`+`Del` to get it. The answer to their question "Who remembers this?" is "Nobody." BGR also titled their article "It turns out Steve Ballmer was directly responsible for developing Windows most hated feature." He didn't develop the feature. He just wrote the text. I also wonder why giving the user the opportunity to terminate a runaway program is the most-hated feature of Windows. Sorry for giving you some control over your computer. I guess they would prefer things the way Windows 3.0 did it: A runaway program forces you to reboot.

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