

The history of the Windows PowerToys

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During the development of Windows 95, as with the development of any project, the people working on the project write side programs to test the features they are adding or to prototype a feature. After Windows 95 shipped, some of those programs were collected into the first edition of the Windows 95 Power Toys. As I recall, the first edition contained the following toys:

CabView

This was a handy internal tool which also served as a test of the shell folder design.

CDAutoPlay, DeskMenu, FlexiCD, QuickRes

These were side toys originally written by shell developers for their own personal use.

Command Prompt Here, Explore From Here

These were proof-of-concept toys which tested the shell command extension design.

Round Clock

This was a program to test regional windows.

Shortcut Target Menu

This was a feature idea that didn't quite make it.

I wasn't around when the decision was made to package these toys up and ship them, so I don't know what the rule was for deciding what was PowerToy-worthy and what wasn't. Nor do I know where the name PowerToy came from. (Probably somebody just made it up because it sounded neat.) Upon the enormous success of the PowerToys, a second edition was developed. This time, people knew that they were writing a PowerToy, as opposed to the first edition of the PowerToys which was merely cobbled together from stuff lying around. The second edition of the Windows 95 PowerToys added FindX, Send To X, the Telephony Locator Selector, XMouse, and Tweak UI. Later, the kernel team released their own set of toys, known as the Windows 95 Kernel Toys. Alas, the original blurb text is not on the Microsoft downloads site, but [here's an archived copy](#). (In reality, it was I who wrote all of the Kernel Toys, except for the Time Zone Editor, which came from the Windows NT Resource Kit. I also wrote the somewhat whimsical original blurb.) This was all back in the day when it was easy to put up something for download. No digital signatures, no virus checking, no

paperwork. Just throw it up there and watch what happens. Today, things are very different. Putting something up for download is a complicated process with forms to fill out in triplicate and dark rooms with card readers. I wouldn't be surprised if an abandoned salt mine in Montana were somehow involved. Nowadays, every team at Microsoft seems to have their own PowerToys, trading on the good name of the Windows shell team who invented the whole PowerToys idea. (As far as I can tell, we don't get any royalties from other divisions calling **their** toys "PowerToys".) A quick check reveals the following PowerToys available for download from Microsoft; I may have missed some.

- [Microsoft PowerToys for Windows XP Tablet PC Edition](#) [link fixed 11am]
- [PowerToys for the Pocket PC](#)
- [PowerToys Fun Pack](#)
- [PowerToys for Microsoft Office OneNote 2003](#)
- [Microsoft PowerToys for Windows XP Media Center Edition 2004](#)
- [PowerToys for Windows Media Player for Windows XP](#)
- [Windows XP Creativity Fun Pack PowerToys Wallpaper Changer](#)

(Plus, of course, the [Windows XP PowerToys](#), which does come from the shell team. The Internet Explorer team originally called their stuff PowerToys, but they later changed the name to [Web Accessories](#), perhaps to avoid the very confusion I'm discussing here.) What's frustrating is that since they are all called "PowerToys", questions about them tend to go to the shell team, since we are the ones who invented PowerToys. We frequently have to reply, "Oh, no, you're having a problem with the XYZ PowerToys, not the classic Windows PowerToys. We're the folks who do the classic Windows PowerToys." Even [the blog name "PowerToys"](#) has been co-opted by the Visual Studio team to promote their [Powertoys for Visual Studio 2003](#). [Some people claim](#) that Tweak UI was written because Microsoft got tired of responding to customer complaints. I don't know where they got that from. Tweak UI was written because I felt like writing it. That page also says that sometimes PowerToys vanish without warning. That's true. A few years ago, all the Windows XP PowerToys were taken down so they could be given a security review. Some of them didn't survive and didn't come back. Other times, a PowerToy will be pulled because a serious bug was found. Since PowerToys are spare-time projects, it can take a very long time for a bug to get fixed, tested, and re-published. For example, the HTML Slide Show Wizard was pulled after a (somewhat obscure) data-loss bug was found. Fixing the bug itself took just a few days, but testing and filling out all the associated paperwork took six months.

There's no moral to this story. Just a quick history lesson.

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