

Another retired computer: The Alpha Rawhide

 devblogs.microsoft.com/oldnewthing/20070228-00

February 28, 2007



Raymond Chen

This computer didn't die like the previous one; it merely outlived its usefulness. In its prime, the machine was a force to be reckoned with. It was about the size of a small refrigerator and generated about as much noise as a vacuum cleaner. It contained four, count 'em, four Alpha AXP processors, each running at a mind-boggling 400 MHz. It had one **gigabyte** of RAM and thirteen gigabytes of hard drive space (striped over over a dozen fast SCSI drives). Hey, back in the 1990's these were impressive hardware specs. When it was in active use, the machine ran a batch file that simply grabbed the latest source code to the shell, compiled it (if there were any changes made since the last iteration), and then repeated. It was called the "hourly build machine" since it took about an hour to compile the shell from scratch. And if there were any errors in the build, it sent mail to the shell team saying, "The Alpha AXP build is broken. Go fix it." It ran other tests on the side to verify that, for example, resources didn't change that would either generate compatibility problems or cause the localization team to get upset. Since very few people on the shell team had Alpha AXPs, the "hourly build machine" was the best chance of catching Alpha-specific build issues before the official build lab noticed the following morning. When support for the Alpha AXP was officially dropped, the responsibility for producing hourly builds had long since fallen to two other machines, but the Alpha AXP continued to grab the latest source code and index it, making the index available to the entire Windows team. (And since it didn't have to do any compiling, it grabbed the source code to the entire operating system, not just the shell.) Having a search engine running against the entire source code to the operating system you're working on is very handy. Ultimately, though, the machine was retired. What was once impressive hardware specifications became barely yawn-worthy. The machine sat in my office and served as a table for several years. (I can't even say "an expensive table" since the value of the computer was probably nil by this point.) It travelled with me through several office moves, until I eventually decided to put the machine out to pasture. I wiped the hard drives of all sensitive information and cajoled one of my colleagues who owned a pick-up truck into helping me load it up and taking the machine to the archives department where it now spends its time swapping stories of old times with IBM PC XT's and other hardware from times past.

(The archives department serves an important function beyond merely being a repository of Microsoft history. It occasionally becomes necessary to actually **run** an operating system from times past for various reasons, be they educational, nostalgic, or legal.)

Raymond Chen

Follow

