

What is the difference between a directory and a folder?

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Windows 95 introduced Windows Explorer and along with it the term *folder*. What is the relationship between folders and directories? Some people believe that Windows 95 renamed directories to folders, but it's actually more than that. Windows Explorer lets you view *folders*, which are containers in the *shell namespace*. *Directories* are one type of folder, namely, folders which correspond to file system locations. There are other types of folders, such as *Control Panel* or *Network Neighborhood* or *Printers*. These other types of folders represent objects in the shell namespace which do not correspond to files. In common usage, the term *virtual folder* has been applied to refer to folders which are not directories. In other words, we have this Euler diagram:

Folders
Directories Virtual folders = Folders – Directories

In general, code which manipulates the shell namespace should operate on folders and items, not directories and files, so as not to tie themselves to a particular storage medium. For example, code which limits itself to files won't be able to navigate into a Zip file, since the contents of a Zip file are exposed in the form of a virtual folder.

Update: The Web server “helpfully” closed some tags prematurely. Apparently it doesn't want you to nest tables. Replaced nested table with DIV.

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