About the Basic Language

Extracts from Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, with added texts.

BASIC (Beginners All-purpose Symbolic Instruction Code) is a family of general-purpose, high-level programming languages whose design philosophy emphasizes ease of use.

In 1964, John G. Kemeny and Thomas E. Kurtz designed the original BASIC language at Dartmouth College. They wanted to enable students in fields other than science and mathematics to use computers. At the time, nearly all use of computers required writing custom software, which was something only scientists and mathematicians tended to learn.

The emergence of early microcomputers in the mid-1970s led to the development of the original Microsoft BASIC in 1975.

BASIC fell from use during the later 1980s as newer machines with far greater capabilities came to market and other programming languages (such as Pascal and C) became tenable.

The golden age of Basic

Almost universally, home computers of the 1980s had a ROM-resident BASIC interpreter, which the machines booted directly into.

When the Apple II, PET 2001, and TRS-80 were all released in 1977, all three had BASIC as their primary programming language and operating environment. Upon boot, a BASIC interpreter in immediate mode was presented.

Commodore Business Machines included Commodore BASIC, based on Microsoft BASIC. The Apple II and TRS-80 each had two versions of BASIC, a smaller introductory version introduced with the initial releases of the machines and a more advanced version developed as interest in the platforms increased.

As new companies entered the field, additional versions were added that subtly changed the BASIC family. The Atari 8-bit family had its own Atari BASIC that was modified in order to fit on an 8 kB ROM cartridge. Sinclair BASIC was introduced in 1980 with the Sinclair ZX-80, and was later extended for the Sinclair ZX-81 and the Sinclair ZX Spectrum. The BBC published BBC BASIC, developed by Acorn Computers Ltd, incorporating many extra structured programming keywords and advanced floating-point operation features.

The Atari ST did not include a version of Basic, and the gap was filled by two main products in competition, GFA Basic and STOS Basic. Competition was hard, and 'clans' of users defending their preferred language appeared. GFA Basic was a clear winner on this platform, as it was more modern and structured.

The Amiga computer included a very bad implementation of Microsoft Basic, Amiga Basic. Most of the users hated it as it was slow and did not provide ways to use the possibilities of this fantastic machine. GFA Basic was ported onto the Amiga, but failed to be popular due to the poor quality of the adaptation. The two main competitors on this platform then became AMOS Basic and Blitz Basic, two very different approaches to programming. Blitz Basic was a very fast and efficient, yet 'serious' implementation of the language, destined to make all kinds of applications, including professional ones. AMOS Basic on the other hand, was designed and marketed as a game creation tool, and as a consequence did not entirely respect the system display (no game did at the time) and was ferociously criticised for it.

The fall of Basic

In 1991 Microsoft introduced Visual Basic, an evolutionary development of QuickBasic.

It included constructs from that language such as block-structured control statements, parameterised subroutines, and optional static typing, as well
as object-oriented constructs from other languages such as "With" and "For Each".

The language retained some compatibility with its predecessors, such as the Dim keyword for declarations, "Gosub"/Return statements, and optional line numbers which could be used to locate errors. An important driver for the development of Visual Basic was as the new macro language for Microsoft Excel, a spreadsheet program.

To the surprise of many at Microsoft, who still initially marketed it as a language for hobbyists, the language came into widespread use for small custom business applications shortly after the release of VB version 3.0, which is widely considered the first relatively stable version.

Basic became a 'professional' tool for 'professional' programmers. When you are a professional programmer, telling people that you write Basic code is seen as a kind of shame, and you are seen as a beginner. This is enough to explain the decline of the language, which should have stayed a hobbyist tool, and not sold under the pretence of being pro.