The origin story of the Windows 3D Pipes screen saver

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Gizmodo calls it "the best screensaver of all time." They're referring to the Windows 3D Pipes screensaver, a mesmerizing network of pipes constructed in 3D before your very eyes. How did this iconic screen saver come to be?

One of my old friends told me how he got 3D Pipes added to Windows.

At the time, he was on the Windows OpenGL team. They had successfully implemented the API with hardware acceleration, but had nothing to show it off. Windows NT 3.5 was very close to shipping with OpenGL support, but there was nothing in the product that let the user know that this feature even existed. He had to find a way to advertise the feature without risking product stability.

That's when it occurred to him to use a screen saver. This provided a point of visibility to the user, and it was relatively low risk, because if there was a problem, they could just tell users, "Sorry, don't use that screen saver." (This was in the days before widespread Internet access, and long before it became commonplace for operating systems to auto-update.)

He announced a team-wide screen saver writing contest: Build your best screen saver, and the one that gets the most votes will be added to Windows NT.

The Windows OpenGL team took the contest to heart, and it wasn't long before they had written 3D Text, 3D Maze, 3D Flying Objects, and, of course, 3D Pipes. He sent email to the entire Windows NT development team with instructions on how to install these new screen savers and where to send in their votes.

By a stroke of luck, one of the people to see these new screen savers was a member of the marketing team who tried them out the night before an already-scheduled visit in New York City with a major computer industry magazine. He loved them and wrote back, "You can call off the vote. We're adding *all of them* to the product!"

And with that one piece of email, 3D Pipes and all the other 3D screen savers got added to Windows.

As the Gizmodo article notes, you can now run a reconstruction of the 3D Pipes screen saver right in your Web browser. Enjoy the nostalgia.