

A Short History of Liberty BASIC

Written in 1999

By its author, Carl Gundel

Way back in 1991 (yes, that long ago!), I decided to write a version of BASIC. I did this for at least a couple of reasons that I can remember.

The most important reason was that I had never written a programming language before, and I wanted to prove to myself that I could do it. I had written simpler things like a CNC machine simulator, and a query parser for a SQL-like database and so I felt I was ready to try something more grand.

The other reason was because I was disappointed that software for Windows was so expensive (typically \$500 or more in 1991), and there was no Windows version of Microsoft QBASIC. I didn't actually plan to sell my version of BASIC at first. That came later. Because I didn't plan to create a commercial product, I decided to do the development in my favorite programming language, which is Smalltalk. Though this choice didn't help me write a really high performance programming language, Smalltalk did provide incredible leverage in helping me get a new version of BASIC up and running from scratch in my spare time. This only took me 3 months, but it was really more like one month's work at a full time job! If I had decided to write it in C, I wonder if it would have ever seen the light of day!

Once this was working, I realized I had something useful. I decided to sell it. Consider that when I started this project, I hadn't even heard of Visual Basic yet. I needed a name, and I wanted to make a grass-roots appeal. I finally decided on Liberty BASIC, thinking "It's so cheap that it's almost free."

I decided to advertise in magazines. I tried Computer Shopper, and a couple of very small specialty magazines. I spent thousands of dollars and got one phone call. Ouch. I began to realize that shareware was the only answer I could afford. I decided to upload to as many bulletin board systems as I could (this was before the Internet). I think I sold 2 copies in 1992, 5 copies in 1993, and 15 or so in 1994. I also decided to port Liberty BASIC to OS/2, which was a hot platform at the time (and still is in some places outside the United States).

Suddenly in 1995 I began to see up to 12 sales a month. Not only this, but PC Magazine nominated Liberty BASIC as one of five finalists for programming shareware of the year. I landed a contract at IBM and quit my full time job with hopes of being able to make Liberty BASIC into a self-sustaining business. I put up a website, and began to see steady growth.

In 1996 Liberty BASIC was again nominated for shareware of the year by PC Magazine. I got a phone call from the NRI Schools division of the McGraw-Hill publishing company. They wanted to use Liberty BASIC in their programming correspondence course as a Windows replacement for QBASIC! This was really phenomenal promotion. A friend of mine even took their course and learned how to use Liberty BASIC. As well as things were going (most shareware authors don't do nearly so well), this didn't make me enough money.

The following year I found myself back in the full-time workplace. I continued to work on Liberty BASIC

in my spare time (sales were still as strong as ever). An impressive online community began to surface. The Internet began to make its value evident as people from all over the world began to put up websites about Liberty BASIC. The very kind of grassroots vision I had years before was beginning to materialize!

Over the years I have tried hard to keep Liberty BASIC simple and easy to use. I have had countless well-meaning people suggest all kinds of features that would make Liberty BASIC competitive with professional development tools. I have resisted this kind of wholesale expansion because I don't want Liberty BASIC to grow outside of its niche. I believe that the very kind of community that thrives around Liberty BASIC does so because of its simplicity and lightheartedness. I have had professional developers look at Liberty BASIC and ask why anyone would want to use it (one has to wonder if they were ever children). The reason is simple. Liberty BASIC is fun and easy to use. It is the spiritual descendant of the BASIC languages we used on home computers in the 70's and 80's.

Liberty BASIC is still accelerating, thanks to the enthusiasm and dedication of so many all over the world. I'm grateful and moved by the enthusiastic support of so many people. Thank you all! Things just keep getting better. Long live Liberty BASIC!

- Carl Gundel