

Windows XP Service Pack 2 RC2.

Service pack 2 will solve a majority of computer problems that plague the industry today. The main focus on SP2 is security. After the outbreak of Slammer Worm, Microsoft took what they were going to implement in an unreleased version of Windows (Code named Longhorn) and decided that it was critical to all current users of Windows. That they be protected in a way that this new OS was to perform. SP2 was made top priority and the release of Longhorn and other Microsoft patches would be pushed back, way back. In fact releasing SP2 would delay Longhorn by almost a year, and Delaying SP1 for Windows Server 2003 also. Although the release date is unclear, Microsoft says late 2004 is the time frame in mind for release of SP2. In our professional opinion, it is better to wait a full year for SP2 (from its original release date) than to suffer thru another year of problems.

The improvements in SP2 are far beyond critical level. GhostNet spends approximately 10 hours a week repairing damage to computers that SP2 should all but eliminate. A new dashboard system called Security Center will integrate with most common Anti-virus utilities and ICF (Internet Connection firewall). Meaning Windows will alert you when your system is not protected and keep you in the know a lot better than previous versions. Security Center will only work with Windows firewall which is much improved over previous editions, and thus one of the major benefits of SP2.

The built in Firewall features of Windows XP are now something to look up to instead of just turning off and running from. The new firewall will boast a full range of features similar to that of some of the top firewall features we see in retail software. The new firewall has even a feature that protects your system during the boot process, a vital time for spyware and viruses to infiltrate your machine. In previous releases of the ICF (internet connection firewall) the service was disabled by default, with SP2 it is enabled by default. This is the one improvement in Windows that we have needed for a long time as far as im concerned.

Other features of SP2 will include a neat way to divert pop-ups from being displayed, instead showing a little un-obtrusive yellow dialog box that announces there was a pop-up attempt. Giving you the ability to show the ad if you so desire. Inadvertent downloads plaguing users with spyware, malware, and viruses will also become a thing of the past, as IE will filter and also give users the option to either install or deny this type of file download. In the past 99% or users did not even know that a file or program was being downloaded and installed on their machine using this method.

A much-needed feature for Outlook Express, (Microsoft's free and hardly supported email client), and Windows Messenger, (Microsoft's included instant messenger client) also becomes available,. When someone sends an email or message containing potentially harmful attachments they are filtered out and in made unavailable, eliminating the virus outbreak caused by accidentally opening infected email or attachments thru an Instant Messenger.

Windows XP initially was shipped without Bluetooth support, Bluetooth is an up and coming alternative to IR connections that allows devices to communicate between each other wirelessly. With SP2 users will see a dramatic improvement in the way that Bluetooth devices are detected, and dealt with. Leading to a better wireless experience.

Automatic updates are something that Microsoft has always been on the cutting edge of. The first time that you boot with SP2 you will get a full screen forcing you to make a decision about automatic updates, that strongly recommends turning on Automatic Updates. Also Automatic Updates are set up to automatically download and install critical updates, this is very good advice, and these options should be left with the settings that are recommended by Microsoft. If you do decide to turn off this feature, Windows will bug you incessantly. There are also many vast improvements to the server-side of the windows updates website, making it easier to track both needed downloads, and keeping track of previously installed downloads. Another useful feature of SP2 and Automatic Updates is the ability to install on shutdown. Essentially this means instead of having to install updates and reboot right when you are working on something else, the new way is to just have windows automatically install these updates when you shut down your computer, and thus you're protected the next day when you turn your machine back on.

Users with Windows XP MCE (Media Center Edition) will also benefit from several functionality updates to their software, a reworked UI, wide screen support, and a new Online Spotlight that will add features to your media center thru downloads offered on the internet. In addition to a few other improvements in the functionality of MCE.

There are several other updates that will also improve the way wireless networks operate, the look and feel of Add or Remove Programs in windows, as well as some changes to the actual code of windows that we may or may not see, including better support for 64 bit systems, remote access technology, how windows handles system memory (RAM), improved attack resistance to network based attacks. An update for Direct X 9.0 will be released, as well as Windows Media Player 9 will be introduced to the mainstream user.

At GhostNet we anticipate the release of SP2 with lots of both positive and negative results. On the bright side, security will be greatly improved all the way around. And the ability to stop hackers, or viruses, and spyware to take over will be greatly improved. The downfall of SP2 will be its enormous size of about 222 megabytes thus taking several days for a dial-up user to download and install. And secondly the new ICF will inadvertently deny access to a whole slew of programs and applications that use the Internet for legitimate purposes, only to be let thru the firewall by settings you must manually change in the program itself. Set up and adaptation of this Firewall will be that of most firewall's that you may purchase elsewhere. Furthermore, if you have questions about installing, configuring, using, or adapting to SP2 we encourage you to call us at GhostNet, and we will be more than happy to answer any questions you may have.

