

MICROSOFT WINDOWS 7

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On October 22nd 2009 Microsoft released a highly anticipated new version of their best known and most widely used product, Windows operating system. The latest rendition is called simply *Windows 7*.

Windows as a brand has a long history. The first operating system, predictably named *Windows 1.0* was released in 1985. Its successors, *Windows 2.0* and *Windows 3.0* brought major improvements and a possibility for developers to write 3rd party applications. The widespread Windows operating system on home-user personal computers (PCs) was on the rise and with the subsequent *Windows NT 3.1*, where "»NT« stands for new technology" (Microsoft, 2002), Microsoft *Windows NT 3.1* "was the number one operating system installed in PCs" (Bellis, M., p.2). Home users were later treated to *Windows 95*, two versions of *Windows 98* and *Windows Millennium*. Meanwhile Microsoft was developing separate editions of their operating system for businesses. In 1994 and 1996 they released *Windows NT Workstation 3.5* and *Windows NT Workstation 4.0*, respectively and then in the year 2000 they released *Windows 2000*. (Microsoft, 2002).

Building on the *Windows 2000* foundation, the following year saw the release of *Windows XP*, where XP "...stands for »experience « symbolizing the innovative experiences that Windows can offer to personal computer users." (Microsoft, 2002). It was released in two versions, *Home Edition* and *Professional Edition*. Since then every major version of Windows comes in both 32 and 64-bit editions. More than five years later, in January 2007 Microsoft launched *Windows Vista* in six editions (*Starter*, *Home basic*, *Home Premium*, *Business*, *Enterprise* and *Ultimate*). Vista brought significant changes in structure, user interaction, security and visual graphics. With high system requirements and issues with compatibility with pre-Vista hardware, it was not received with high praise. Recognizing this Microsoft began to work on the improvements and corrections. Two Vista service packs and thirty two months later *Windows 7* was released.

Since its release, *Windows 7* has caused a lot of interest not only because of its new features but also because of its name. *Windows 7* is not simply the seventh reincarnation. In fact there are number of different explanations as to the nature of the name. One suggests that "it's the seventh version of Windows since Windows 95. Count with me: Windows 95, Windows 98, Windows ME, Windows 2000, Windows XP, Windows Vista and Windows 7". (Ward, K., 2009) Another theory is that by naming it *Windows 7* they have strengthened the brand Windows where it is difficult to use shorthand as in the cases of *XP* and *Vista*. "Writers are taught not to leave numbers hanging, and if they did there would be confusion with something else. Who refers to Windows 95 as 95, or Windows 2000 as 2000? Nobody. By choosing *Windows 7*, Microsoft compels more people to use Windows as part of the product name. Always." (Wilcox, J., 2007). Microsoft

themselves contribute to the confusion by stating that they got the number seven by counting major code releases of Windows code. The problem with this is that Vista was code version 6.0 and *Windows 7* is code version 6.1. So clearly it is not a major code release. But Microsoft explains that "Windows 7 is a significant and evolutionary advancement of the client operating system. It is in every way a major effort in design, engineering and innovation. The only thing to read into the code versioning is that we are absolutely committed to making sure application compatibility is optimized for our customers." (Nash, M., 2009)

Windows 7 comes in three mainstream editions: *Home Premium*, *Professional* and *Ultimate*. This differentiation was first used with the launch of Vista. In essence it means that all editions have the same basic features, but then each edition has additional features which a home user might or might not need. Inevitably there is a difference in the price. This review will look at *Windows 7 Professional*, which differs from *Home Premium* in that has a built-in XP Mode to run older programs and some additional network features. In comparison to the *Ultimate* edition it lacks the built-in option of 35 languages. This might cause some annoyance if one's mother tongue is not English. Then again, local Microsoft branches distribute localized editions. *Windows 7 Professional* full edition is currently being sold in the United Kingdom at around £140.

So how do Microsoft claims of "... major effort in design, engineering and innovation" manifest in reality? The installation process has been simplified with less user interaction needed. It is also quicker than its predecessor, largely because the installation is about 2 gigabytes smaller than Vista. "The new smaller size is a deliberate ploy to make Windows 7 more attractive to netbooks." (Bright, P., 2009, p.3) The reduction in size is mainly due to the removal of older drivers. Most of newer hardware uses the same driver for *Vista* and *Windows 7*. This also means that there are now new ways to install Windows, such as USB keys. After installation the first really noticeable feature is a faster boot time. Though *Windows 7* has the same engine/core as Vista in has been streamlined with a noticeable increase in performance "with clean installs." (Miller, P., 2009).

With the operating system loaded, we are greeted with a familiar sight. "Windows 7 will look familiar to Vista users; it retains the Aero Glass theme with its translucent, textured window borders." (Bright, P., 2009, p.4). Noticeably, the sidebar, which was introduced in Vista to store gadgets, has been removed. Gadgets were useful but the sidebar was awkwardly done, as it had a fixed set of positions. Microsoft retained the gadgets but in *Windows 7* user is able to position individual gadgets anywhere on the screen.

"The most remarkable new feature of Windows 7, and the one that people will interact with most often, is the new taskbar." (Bright, P., 2009, p.5). What they did is they took a page out of

Apple's *Mac OS X*. By combining the old Quick Launch toolbar and a traditional taskbar they created a place where users can both launch applications and switch between them. New applications can now simply be pinned to the taskbar with a single click. Admittedly this feature is old news to Apple *Mac OS X* users who have been using *Dock* for years, but Microsoft went a step further. By right-clicking on the programme icon, one can access the jump list with previously opened documents and "a special context menu that can be customized by applications to provide quick access to application features." (Bright, P., 2009 p.5). It is slightly annoying that by dragging the document onto the programme icon one cannot open the document.

In addition, the taskbar offers another new feature called *Aero Peek*. If a user has multiple windows opened and wishes to view one window, they simply hover over the programme icon and preview of all its windows. By placing the mouse over one of them, that preview is singled out on the desktop and all the others are just shown as outlines. It is a useful tool for juggling through open windows, especially as the programme icon indicates that there is more than one window opened. *Mac OS X* does not offer the same feature, but "you could kinda-sorta compare *Aero Peek* to Leopard's *Exposé*." (Trapani, G., 2008) When it comes to managing open windows, *Windows 7* has one more trick up its sleeve. It is called *Aero Shake* - by shaking one window it minimizes all the others. Simply shake the window again and they all re-appear. *Start Menu*, which is a part of the taskbar, has stayed the same. *Windows Search*, which also functions as an application launcher, has been somewhat improved, but it cannot compare to Apple's more comprehensive *Spotlight*.

More on the User Interaction (UI), *Windows Explorer* and *Control Panel* received quite a facelift and "retaining good things like the clickable breadcrumb bar and ubiquitous search box." (Bright, P., 2009, p.6). Unfortunately, there are visual inconsistencies throughout the built-in applications and "many built-in applets (for example, the mouse control panel) are still stuck in the old style." (Bright, P., 2009, p.4)." Overall, Microsoft has failed to establish a cohesive styling and operation model to its own applications." (Miller, P., 2009).

When it comes to software, *Vista* came with a lot of bundled applications such as *Windows Media Player*, *Windows Photo Gallery*, *Windows Mail*, *Windows Media Center*, and *Windows Movie Maker*. Microsoft removed most of them from *Windows 7*, apart from *Media Player* and *Media Center*, and put them in *Windows Live Essentials*; a downloadable optional package. The two that remained received a comprehensive upgrade. Both were given a face lift, where "various features have been rearranged, so nothing is in quite the same place as it used to be, and there are still some very questionable UI decisions." (Bright, P., 2009, p.10) On the technical side, the

support for more codecs was added so now it is possible to play most of the downloadable media. The support for streaming to local and network devices was also added.

"The time-honoured Windows stalwarts, *Paint*, *WordPad*, *Calculator*, and *Notepad* are all still there, and all have shiny new versions in *Windows 7*." (Bright, P., 2009, p.10) *WordPad* has now become more useful since it can read and write *Word 2007* files, *Open Office* files and xml files. *Paint* is now also able to save files as .png and the *Calculator* gained some arithmetic functions. The rest of the bundled software remained largely unchanged from *Vista*. Microsoft has also kept almost all of the initially proposed features, though in some instances the features were implemented in a slightly different form.

Perhaps this is one of the reasons why *Windows 7* was received with high praise through its *Beta*, *Release Candidate (RC)* and *Ready to Manufacturing (RTM)* stages. It "has sold so well that it has beaten the Amazon UK pre-order record previously held by J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*." (Savov, V., 2009) Apart from the evident public interest, where does it lie in the market? "Recent figures showing *Windows 7* more widely used than *Mac OS X* show that people are rapidly switching to Microsoft's latest system." (Lister, J., 2009) Of course, these numbers do not indicate anything other than that *Windows 7* is more popular than its predecessor. Because users cannot simply migrate from *Mac OS X* to *Windows* and vice versa (hardware incompatibility), one cannot take the market share from the other. Similarly, *Linux* users stay loyal to their distributions as well. Microsoft simply has to convince their clients to upgrade.

It would be difficult to say that *Windows 7* is not a good product. Apart from new and I dare say very useful features, there are also numerous other improvements, hidden away from the plain sight. First there is a new architecture which makes the size smaller and memory usage smaller. There is also a new graphic driver, which enables support for multicore cards, and helps with battery life on notebooks. Some changes have also been made to increase security and of course built-in *XP Mode* virtual machine.

Inevitably there are also some drawbacks when it comes to the new UI, along with some visual inconsistencies. "So while *Windows 7* may not right all of *Vista*'s wrongs, it is absolutely superior to its predecessor." (Bright, P., 2009, p.15). What Microsoft has done is they took some bits from its rivals and integrated them into their polished version of *Vista*. They made *Windows 7* a true *Mac OS X* rival – technically and visually.

So, is it worth upgrading? For those who still use *Windows XP* there should be no doubt. Improvements made since 2001 make *XP* look "look clunky and ancient in comparison" (Bright,

P., 2009, p.15). With *Vista* users, justifying an upgrade is less clear-cut. If the new taskbar, *Aero Peek* and *Shake*, plus other improvements do not mean much, then it is not worth spending the money. In fact, with the amount of similarity with *Vista*, *Windows 7* should be called *Windows 6,5*. But at the end of the day, that doesn't really matter. *Windows 7* is, overall, a fantastic OS. It builds on a solid platform, and just makes it even better.

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