

RANDOM

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COMMUNICATIONS WITH A PURPOSE

THOUGHTS

Looking to the future: Office 2007 and Vista

What could be more mundane, more pedestrian, than a plain old word processor? If that's what you think, then you haven't yet seen Microsoft Word 2007. This version of Word is a sharp break from the past. It has features that many will delight many, confuse some, and dismay a few.

The first place I look when I see a new version of Word is in the settings panel to see what I can change. It took me a few moments just to find the settings panel. Unfortunately, Word's default is still to create a hyperlink when you type an e-mail address or a Web address. I always turn this feature off because Word is a word processor, not a website design tool. On paper, the links don't work and, when you import a document with links into some publishing programs, those links create problems. Note to Microsoft: Make this feature optional, not the default.

Dealing with the new format

All of the file types in Office 2007 are based on XML specifications, but the files are also compressed. This means that older versions of the applications can't open the files, but that's not as serious as it sounds.

It's easy to save files in the earlier format and, if someone with an older version of Word needs to open a new file, Microsoft provides a free conversion tool.

Compression makes the files much smaller and, according to Microsoft, less likely to be damaged. It also makes them impossible to read if you don't have Word. Files from Word 2003 could be opened in text editor such as Ultra Edit and the actual text would be visible among the control codes. Even if you export a document in the new transfer file format (XPS), there's no plain text inside.

If you want plain text, you can get that with a couple of different file formats. Word offers to write files in more foreign file formats that in the past, too, and the ability to save a file directly as a PDF is particularly useful.

The assistant is dead! Long live the assistant!

Maybe you knew it as "Clippie" (the paper clip) or perhaps you replaced it with a cat (my favorite), a dog, the world, a guy who looked like Einstein, or one of the other assistants. Now they're all gone, replaced by an interface that has made them obsolete.

Instead of having to ask for help, you'll find that the interface probably puts the tool you need on screen when you need it. If not, the help system really does provide help now.

The ugly old styles are gone, too. Word 2007 comes with built-in formats that appear to have been designed by someone with working eyes and a sense of style. Selecting a style is made easier because you'll see samples that show exactly what the format looks like. Hovering the mouse cursor over a style example previews the paragraph that the cursor is planted in to show you what the format will look like. If you like it, click; if not, hover over another example.

If you choose to create a new style or modify an existing style, the tools will all look familiar. That's because Microsoft's designers avoided making change just for the sake of change. If something worked well as it was, you'll find that it still does.

By default, there no visible ruler. You can turn the ruler on if you want, but it also appears all by itself when you're doing something that needs a ruler. Setting tabs, for example; otherwise, it doesn't add clutter.

Far beyond word processing

It hardly seems fair that a word processor can do the kind of design and layout that Word 2007 can. Word isn't going to replace Adobe InDesign anytime soon, but it has picked up some capabilities from Microsoft Publisher.

One feature that has garnered some complaints is called Building Blocks. The intent is to allow Word to assemble documents from frequently used or predefined content such as disclaimer text, pull quotes, sidebars, and cover pages. More than 20 years ago, this feature was available on DEC PDP-11 minicomputers with Word-11; it was called Document Assembly in those days.

In addition to allowing users to repeat common text without having to type it each time, this feature can also enforce consistency across all of the documents created within a business or organization.

Whether you cheer about the new Word or grumble about it may depend on how you use the program. I know some editors who haven't liked a word processor since Wordperfect 5.1, but most of them are using Word XP or Word 2003. Some say that Word XP was OK, but Microsoft ruined it with all the interface changes for 2003. And for 2007, they say, it's even worse. For certain specific groups of people that may well be true.

But for most users, the changes are positive. It's the power users who are in for the greatest shock. Those who made extensive use of add ins, who wrote macros, and who designed their own toolbars will struggle some with the new version. But if you're someone who just uses the program on a daily basis to create business and personal correspondence, you're going to find that Word 2007 liberates some of the more obscure features that used to be hidden several layers deep in unfamiliar menus. You'll be able to do more with the program, do it faster, and get better results.

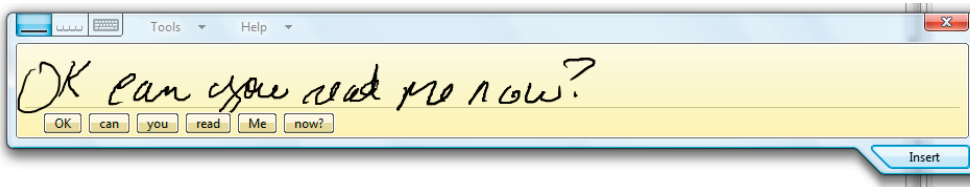
While I sympathize with professionals and power users, there are two points to bear in mind: First, regular users by far outnumber professional users; and second, professional users spend a lot of time with the word processor. They figured out how Wordperfect worked. They figured out how Word XP worked. They figured out how Word 2003 worked. They'll figure out how Word 2007 works, too. **B**

Vista: Now or later?

Two kinds of users have Vista these days: Those who bought new computers and got Vista because it's what the computer came with and people like me who knowingly upgraded to a new and largely untested operating system. Should you join the party? It depends on your tolerance for pain.

New users will find features they like and features they loathe. Overall, I like most of what I've seen.

Vista is the first operating system that's really ready for tablet computing. Microsoft and the hardware manufacturers began pushing tablet computers a few years ago. Neither the hardware nor the software was ready. Now it is.



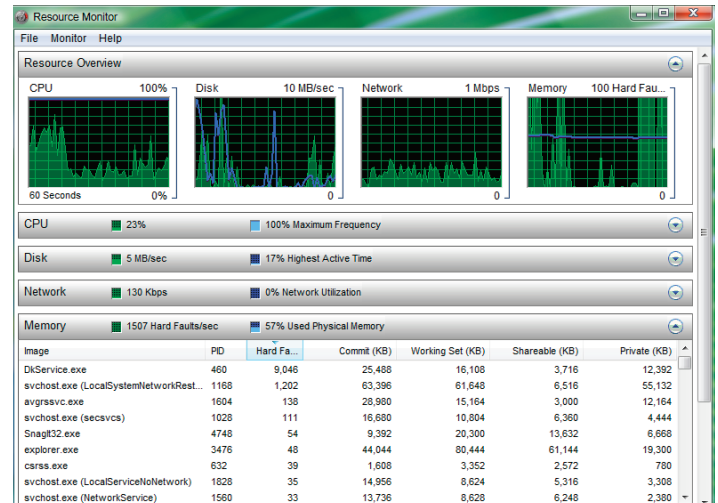
Now this is cool. Really. I don't own a tablet, but the next time I need to replace a notebook computer, I'll give one serious consideration. As you can see, my handwriting isn't exactly the best, but Vista can make sense of it.

Another big plus is that Vista can see all of the machines on the LAN and does so with ease most of the time. Sometimes the notebook computer disappears and then re-appears. The Macs always seem to show up as long as they're turned on.

On the other hand, I kept seeing an update every day for Microsoft SQL Server 2005 Express Edition Service Pack 2. Vista said that it installed the update twice on June 3, twice on June 4, once on June 5, once on June 6, and twice on June 8. On June 9, Microsoft wanted to install it once again. I disabled the update, which is one I didn't need, and haven't been bothered since.

One test I always run with new operating systems is the Wordperfect 5.1 test. That was the best version of the best DOS word processor and some people still want to be able to use it today.

Die-hard WordPerfect 5.1 fans can still use their favorite word processor in Vista. Some pundits claimed that Wordperfect 5.1 would not run in Windows XP, but it did because Satellite Software International (and later the Wordperfect Corporation) wrote good code. Wordperfect 5.1 was released late in 1991 and that it still runs on the latest operating system is a statement about the quality of Wordperfect's code.



Here's something that looks ominous but isn't. A hard fault (also known as a page fault) occurs when the "page" (in memory) of a referenced address has been swapped out to disk. It is not an error, but if you regularly see a high number of hard faults (more than 500 per second), adding RAM will improve the machine's performance. If Vista must constantly swap data between RAM and the hard drive, it will be slow.

This was a momentarily high number. Most of the time, page faults are in the range of 0 to 100 per second. That's well within the acceptable range.

New installation

You may be tempted to install Vista on top of XP. Don't. It will probably work, but the installation will work much better and much more reliably if you choose to make it a new installation.

Vista is clearly the future. The only question is whether you're ready for it. There are some big differences and getting from where you are to where Vista is will take a bit of work.

If you're cautious, wait until you buy a new computer. If you're ready now, visit the Microsoft Vista website to see if your hardware, software, and applications will work with Vista. And ... bon voyage! **B**

on the market by A.J. Stinnett

CORNER

If you've enjoyed reading these brief comments by A. J., you'll be happy to know that I'll turn the next issue of Random Thoughts over to him for what I think is a worthwhile article.