

RANDOM

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COMMUNICATIONS WITH A PURPOSE

THOUGHTS

The Vista vista: Is this vantage an advantage?

So far, in writing about Vista, I have managed to put forth a variety of contradictory opinions that range from liking it and suggesting that most people would be well served by specifying Vista on their next computer to cautioning that it might be better to wait a while. Now I've leaned back toward cautiously recommending Vista. So if you try Vista and like it, I can point to my recommendations in favor of it; if you try Vista and hate it, I can point to my cautionary remarks. It's now time to make up my mind.

THREE GOOD THINGS ABOUT VISTA: The look and feel, security, and faster ways to find your files.

THREE BAD THINGS ABOUT VISTA: Indexing, security, and the lack of support for some hardware and software.

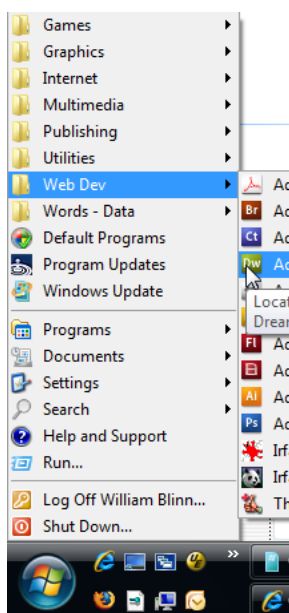
Interestingly, two of the items in each of the lists are mirrors of each other. The ability to find files faster (an advantage) requires constant indexing (a disadvantage) and security is both helpful and cumbersome. That may explain some of my ambivalence.

Security: A real-life example

Vista is the most secure Windows ever. At long last, Windows has the equivalent of the Unix *root user* (more or less) and nobody runs as root, not even an administrator. *Regular* users must invoke

supervisor status for some tasks and even administrators must invoke superuser privileges to accomplish security-related tasks. This is good because it keeps malware and careless users from touching critical components, but sometimes this gets in the way and then it becomes necessary to outsmart the operating system.

I prefer the Classic Start Menu (at left) to the new Start Menu even though the new menu allows users to type the first few letters of an application's name and then press Enter. I like this feature on my Mac, but I want a hierarchical menu on my Windows machine. And I want



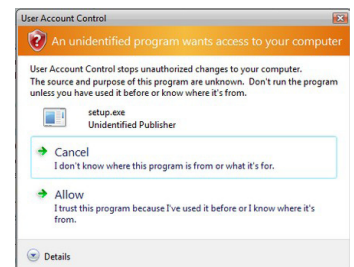
to be able to move things around on the menu, both for me and for all users of the system.

On Windows XP, I could quickly navigate to the *All Users* menu directory or to my own menu directory and start moving things around. Those directories do not exist in Vista and it took me several minutes to find the menu entries for my user account. Finding the equivalent of the All Users directory took much longer because it is so well hidden that I needed some power tools to find it.

I expected to find All Users in the Users directory, but it wasn't there. Then I asked the Windows Explorer to show me all files. Still nothing. The next step set off a stream of anxious warnings from the Windows security system: I asked the Windows Explorer to show me the protected operating system files. This is a dangerous step, even for those who know enough not to change, move, or delete certain files because accidents do happen. I was able to see the directory I'd been looking for and to navigate to the All Users Start Menu.

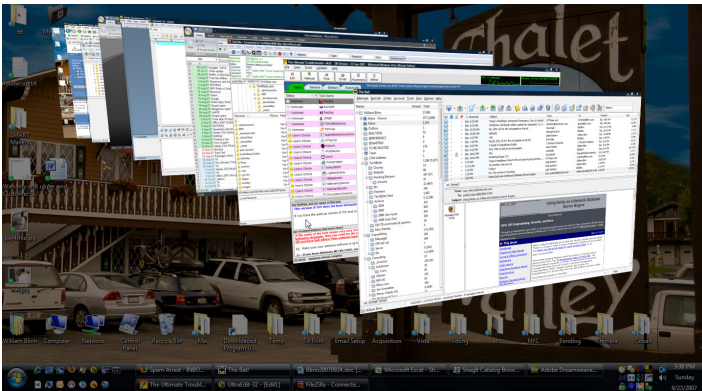
Having identified the location of the directory, I changed the settings back so that protected operating system files would no longer be visible and tried typing the location into the Explorer's address bar. Although the location is hidden, I could still navigate to the directory this way, so it was easy to create a shortcut that will take me to the directory whenever I want to edit the Start Menu.

Vista's user account control function also awakens whenever you try to run certain protected applications or whenever you try to install an application. If you are an administrator, you'll be able to approve most functions by selecting *Allow* but if you're a user without administrator rights, you'll need to provide an administrator's user ID and password.

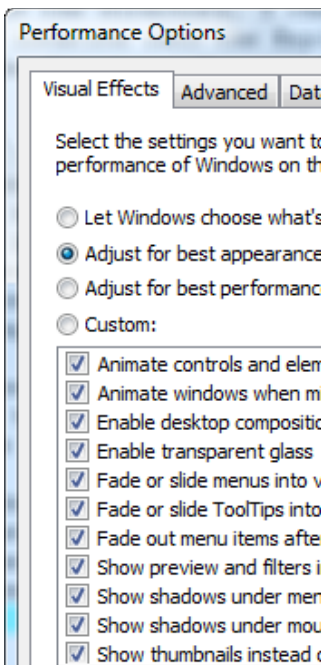


Aero can fly; it can also crawl

The look and feel of Vista represents a significant change from that of XP, but only if you purchase more than the basic version of Vista and only if you have sufficient hardware to support Aero. As attractive as the 3D graphical interface is, it uses an enormous amount



of system resources. If speed is more important to you than a pretty interface, you'll want to turn off some of the 3D features. To do this, visit the Control Panel's *Performance*



Information and Tools applet and fine tune the visual effects.

The list is long (left) but you'll find three prepared options: Optimize for speed, optimize for performance, and let Windows decide. The default is to let Windows decide and the result it an attempt to reach a balance that provides the most attractive interface at the lowest performance cost.

Apple's graphical user interface has many of the same features as those found in Aero, but OS X doesn't seem to have the same performance issues. With Vista, your choices seem to be (1) pretty but slow, (2) not quite as pretty but lots faster, and (3) ugly but

really fast.

Mac users don't have to choose because Apple does all of its fancy footwork in hardware on the video card. Microsoft layers all the cool stuff on top of the Windows graphical device interface. The transparency and other effects don't make the system easier to use, but they do give it a better appearance and may be worth the speed cost.

Running with scissors

When you run certain applications that need to write files to protected areas of the file system or perform tasks that represent a possible threat to security, Windows may deny the application's request. When this happens, the application fails and the operating system reports the problem. Security and usability are always at odds with each other. This security feature can halt a virus, but it may also frustrate some users.

Fortunately, giving the application more privileges is easy enough. Simply right-click the application's executable file or the link in the Start Menu, then choose *Run as Administrator*. If you are an administrator, the application will take on superuser permissions without further

prompting. If you are a standard user, you'll be asked to provide an administrator's credentials.

Indexing is fast and slow

If you aren't particularly careful about where you store files, indexing will help considerably when you need to find a file. The downsides include the amount of disk space index files take (with today's gigantic hard drives, this is trivial) and the processing cycles the indexing uses (how much indexing needs to be done [a lot initially], the speed of your computer's CPU, and the speed of the disk subsystem.)

Many new users complain about constant disk activity for the first few weeks after installing Vista, but the disk thrashing subsides when Vista needs only to update the index with information about new and changed files.

Vista will begin to sing and dance following another iteration of the process described by Moore's Law: Intel cofounder Gordon Moore said that the number of transistors that could be put on a chip would double every 18 months, not that speed would double every 18 months. There's a correlation, of course, but more transistors doesn't necessarily mean more speed.

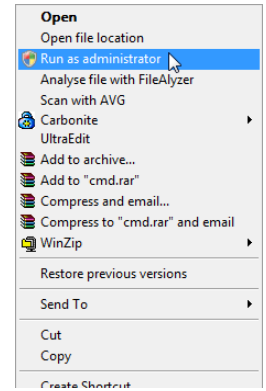
Newer computers may not always be faster in terms of raw processing power, but they do handle more data, come with more memory, have larger hard disks, and present information in more attractive ways.

Coming soon: Windows Vista Service Pack 1

If you're waiting for Vista Service Pack 1 to be released before moving to Vista, your wait will end early next year, probably in January. In early September, Microsoft unofficially said *SP1 will contain changes focused on addressing specific reliability and performance issues we've identified via customer feedback, supporting new types of hardware, and adding support for several emerging standards. SP1 also makes additional improvements to the IT administration experience.*

A beta release of SP1 went out to some external testers in the last week of September.

BOTTOM LINE: I like Vista as is, but I don't recommend updating an existing machine from XP to Vista unless the computer is no more than a year old and all components are certified for Vista. I recommend a fresh installation if you do upgrade a machine instead of installing over XP. And I recommend having Vista installed on any new computer you buy. **B**



on the market by A.J. Stinnett

CORNER

"The most important duty of a manager is to anticipate crisis."