

Nybbles & Bytes



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Through the Gates:

Enter to the Trove of Bills Treasures and Travails

A monthly column dedicated to revealing some of the unknown or lesser known features or foibles of the Microsoft line of products.

By: David A. Vydra

Now that Microsoft's Windows 7 has reached the release to manufacturing (RTM) stage, it's time to take a quick glance at some of the features.

You might think that, because there are so many similarities between Windows 7 and Windows Vista, Windows 7 is essentially just a big Windows Vista service pack. But in reality, Windows 7 is a solid, well-performing operating system, free of many of the glitches that bedeviled the launch of Windows Vista. Speed improvements, interface enhancements and easier ways to manage your documents make this a new operating system in its own right, and one that's well worth the upgrade.

Installation and performance

Using the Windows 7 RC1 I performed a fresh install, rather than an upgrade, which took approximately 45 minutes (including the usual restarts one has come to expect from Windows installations). The install was largely uneventful, with two minor anomalies. After Windows 7 installed, it did not recognize my video card and used a generic VGA driver. This was problematic on a laptop, because the display cannot use the full 1280 by 800 resolution. However, Windows 7 soon resolved the problem itself: It automatically downloaded the proper driver via Windows Updates. After a reboot, all was well. The problems were similar with every prerelease version of Windows 7. RTM should be a slight improvement over RC1 in this respect, because with RC1 some drivers had to be manually installed. In RTM, Windows 7 should do it by itself.

On the plus side, performance (even on my aging custom system) was surprisingly zippy and certainly superior to that of Windows Vista on the same machine. Aero worked like a charm, windows and dialog boxes appeared quickly, and I experienced no slowdowns. The Control Panel and its applets opened nearly immediately, without the delays common in Windows Vista.

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Checking out the new taskbar

At first glance, Windows 7 doesn't look much different from Windows Vista -- but spend a few minutes with it, and you'll find some significant changes. The most noticeable is the new taskbar, which replaces both the old Quick Launch bar (for launching applications) and the old taskbar (for switching among running windows). The new taskbar combines the two features, doing double-duty as a task launcher and task switcher, similar to the Mac OS X Dock. In general, it succeeds admirably. Large icons on the taskbar are used to launch applications, as well as to switch to different windows running in those applications. As with the old Quick Launch toolbar, you click an icon to launch the associated program. If you've already launched the program and have more than one window open in the taskbar, the application's icon changes to show multiple icons stacked against one another. For example, if you're running Microsoft Word with three open windows, you'll see a stack of three Word icons. Hover your mouse over the stacked icons, and thumbnails of all the open windows appear above the taskbar. Hover your mouse over any one of those thumbnails, and it displays at its full window size. To go straight to any window, click any of the thumbnails or windows. You can also close any window directly from its thumbnail by clicking a small red X that appears on the upper-right portion of the thumbnail.

Putting the Jump List through its hoops

The taskbar has an associated feature called Jump Lists that makes it even more useful. When you right-click an application's icon in the taskbar, a menu of actions associated with that application opens -- and the list varies according to the application. For example, when you right-click Microsoft Word, you'll see a list of recently opened files, but when you click Internet Explorer, you'll see a list of your most frequently visited sites. In addition to lists of files, you'll see tasks you can perform. For example, if you right-click on Windows Media Player, a task will let you play music. You'll also be able to close all open windows or pin the program to the taskbar if it's not already pinned there. Similarly, recently used programs that appear on the Start menu each offer a list of recently opened files, the same as the one that shows up for applications on the Jump List. An arrow appears next to applications that use this feature. Click the arrow to see the list, and then click any file to re-open it.

The new taskbar and Jump List have some hidden features. For example, you can manually pin files to a Jump List for a program that normally doesn't handle that file type by simply dragging the file onto the program's icon on the taskbar. You can then open the file using the program to which it has been pinned. It's a simple way to open a file using an application that normally doesn't handle that file type, without being forced to permanently change the file association.

Other interface tweaks

There are interface tweaks throughout Windows 7. One soon to become a favorite is the way windows are minimized, maximized and moved. Drag the title bar of a window to the top of the screen, and it maximizes the window. When you drag the title down from the top of the screen, it returns to its previous, non-maximized size. Drag any window to the right or left edge of the screen, and it takes up that half of the screen.

There are plenty of other improvements. You can now turn the preview pane in Windows Explorer on and off by clicking a button, a task that in Vista takes multiple clicks. The Control Panel also has some new tricks -- when you're on the main Control Panel screen and click any category, the category's main screen slides into place on the right and displays a list of relevant actions on the left.

Extras

Windows finally has a usable backup program. Windows Vista's backup was one of the worst applets ever built into an operating system, but the one in Windows 7 has enough features that you might actually use it. You can now customize your backups by choosing to include or exclude specific drives and folders. You can also easily make entire system images. And when you plug in a device that can be used for backup, such as a USB hard drive, a wizard can be launched that walks you through creating a backup -- just choose the "Use this drive for backup" option that appears when you plug in the device. Also notable is what's missing. Microsoft has removed a number of applets and features from Windows 7, which is both good news and bad. On the good-news side is that a number of features, such as "People Near Me", have thankfully been embalmed and interred. On the bad-news side is that some very nice applications have been removed as well, such as Windows Mail and Windows Movie Maker. They can be downloaded for free, though.

The bottom line

There are a great many details that we have yet to cover and/or discover. Bear in mind that, as you look on the bookstore shelves, there is an ever increasing number of tomes all about Windows 7. And, I dare say, the majority are more than an inch thick. So, I doubt that we want to attempt to be in competition with them. In the coming months and years we will have sufficient data thrown our way. There is much to learn and plenty of time to learn it in. And yes, there will be a "Family" version available. Three copies for one "Low" price. When the particulars are finalized we will give you a heads-up. Meanwhile, just for fun here is an Anti-Windows7 site to check out. Just read between the lines and use a grain of salt; <http://windows7sins.org/>. Enjoy!

This concludes our brief foray into Windows 7. Next month I have the hope of reviewing Office 2010. Presuming everything works of course.

Portions of this column may have been garnered from several publicly available sources, verified and edited for content. Where an article is used in its entirety without editing, the author and source are acknowledged..

Worms and Bugs and Things!

The worms crawl in.

The worms crawl out.

The worms play pinochle on your snout.

Remember that little ditty? I am sure that most of you and even your parents sang it or heard it at some time or other. Meant to be scary and a Halloween staple, it still endures. Today, with the three CSI programs so popular as well as a few others that delve into the same investigative processes, we have been made aware of the usefulness of bugs and such in criminal forensics. Entomology, the science of bug study, has grown as a useful tool in the discovery of evil doers. Actually, the field of Forensic Sciences has grown beyond the earliest envisioned capacities. There are many branches that now have specialists. So, it should be not surprising that there are also dedicated computer forensic studies.

The study of bugs and worms in computers does not involve creepy crawly critters. Oh, wait! It does! Have you ever heard of web crawlers? There are many of these around. Also, worms bring their own crawlers with them. But, these are mostly limited to crawling about inside your computer and finding the stuff you really don't want others to be having access to. Security vendors employ thousands of people dedicated to the uncovering of worms and their ilk. There is likely a lesser degree of forensics involved with the pursuit of viruses than there is with bug chasing.

If you remember, worms fall into the auspices of the virus family. Finding them requires constant vigilance and looking under rocks as opposed to cracking code. With the discovery of a new virus, the real forensics begins. Reverse engineering is a main-stay along with back tracing to find origin. Others will look for the “kill switch” to be added to their application so that you may be safe.

Heavy duty computer forensic researchers are the ones that really “save our bacon”. These are the people that look for the bugs in the software that you use. Application errors that create open doors for the purloining of personal data. Every month Microsoft issues patches to close the holes that forensic researchers have found. And, of course, patches are continuously released for many of the other applications and utilities that are installed to make our PC experience easier, smoother, enjoyable and/or productive.

There are thousands upon thousands of dedicated people working to provide us with a secure environment. Yet, despite this, tens of thousands of users are zombieized and hijacked or bot-netted. And, while I don’t believe we should be issuing constant reminders and alerts, doing so one more time is what this is all about.

Personal responsibility, awareness and discretion are more important today than they ever were. With the proliferation of “Social” networking sites, the line between secure and insecure has become blurred. All you need do is look around to see others that have been caught in the web. Stories such as; I am not going to use “Face Book” anymore because someone I know had their ID stolen from their account. Or, somebody else is using my “Twitter” account! In many of these instances it is most likely a hoax floating around the email boxes of the world. That is not to say that this never occurs. But, generally, it is in a form different than you might expect. Supposedly, someone has created an “algorithm” that can take generally available data and deduce your Social Security Number. All that is needed is your date and place of birth. Is it possible? I would have to believe it is, until such time as it is disproven.

Careless data entry into a “Forms” page on any web page can lead to dire results. As with all precautions, personal information should be included at a bare minimum. If it is a site you accessed for the purpose of opening an account, insure that it is a secure form. Only fill in the “Required” data and leave options blank. For a Bank, Credit Card, Utility, etc., SSN is most likely a requirement. If the form is not secure or not a page you opted to open, depart rapidly. Personally, I do not use any of the Social Networking products. If you believe you need to use one or more I highly recommend using only the barest minimum of data to begin. More importantly, use the “**Highest**” available security settings that are provided. Provide access only to those that you know. Restrict access to the friends of those you know until you verify these persons were specifically invited to become part of the group. It is cool to show off the grandkids. Using “My Space or Face Book” is not the place to be doing this if you are careless in setting up your page.

That is the “Operative” word; “Careless”. Putting yourself and your life’s experience into an open forum requires “Vigilance”. Not only in what you enter, but how much detail you provide. Also, there is the matter of access. This is a prime need area for the practice of vigilance. It is a good idea to have the latest browser at your disposal. Regardless of which one you prefer, keep it updated. Remember this, put it in the back of your memory or the front of your memory, the top, the bottom or either side but remember! Everything, I repeat; *EVERYTHING* that you put into the public venue is subject to interception in one form or another. Last, but not least, anti-malware software; have it, use it, update it!

Contributed by David Vydra

Editor—NEOPC Nybbles & Bytes Newsletter



Coming Events

September 2009

Event Date	Event
09/08	NORTHEAST OHIO PC CLUB ***MORNING FUNDAMENTALS SPECIAL INTEREST GROUP*** (SIG). FAIRVIEW PARK SENIOR CENTER 9:30 - 11:30AM. FUNDAMENTALS OF COMPUTER USE - OPEN FORUM - ANY AND ALL TOPICS DISCUSSED - BRING A QUESTION, BRING A TOPIC - GUESTS ALWAYS WELCOME - ALWAYS COFFEE. ALWAYS FREE AND OPEN TO THE PUBLIC. SECOND TUESDAY OF THE MONTH.
09/09	NORTHEAST OHIO PC CLUB (NEOPC)-GENERAL MEETING, PORTER PUBLIC LIBRARY, 27333 CENTER RIDGE ROAD, WESTLAKE, OH. 6:30PM-SOCIAL (PASTRIES AND BEVERAGES); 7:00PM-CLUB ANNOUNCEMENTS; 7:15PM-MAIN PROGRAM: "DIGITAL PHOTOGRAPHY BY TODD JOHNSON. TODD'S TALK INCLUDES A SLIDESHOW OF THE ADVANTAGES OF DIGITAL PHOTOGRAPHY OVER FILM, HOW TO TAKE BETTER PICTURES, THE BEST WAYS TO GET IMAGES INTO YOUR COMPUTER AND KEEPING THESE IMAGES SAFE.
09/18	WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 16, 2009 LADIES ONLY SPECIAL INTEREST GROUP MEETING AT WESTLAKE PORTER PUBLIC LIBRARY FROM 2:00 P.M. TO 3:30 P.M. THE LIBRARY IS LOCATED AT 27333 CENTER RIDGE ROAD, WESTLAKE, OHIO. ALL LADIES ARE INVITED, WHETHER OR NOT MEMBERS OF NORTHEAST OHIO PC CLUB. COME WITH YOUR QUESTIONS AND/OR COMMENTS ABOUT SOFTWARE YOU HAVE.
09/22	NORTHEAST OHIO PC CLUB ***EVENING FUNDAMENTALS SPECIAL INTEREST GROUP*** (SIG). FAIRVIEW PARK LIBRARY (LOWER LEVEL) 7:00 - 8:30PM. FUNDAMENTALS OF COMPUTER USE - OPEN FORUM - ANY AND ALL TOPICS DISCUSSED - BRING A QUESTION, BRING A TOPIC - GUESTS ALWAYS WELCOME - FREE AND OPEN TO THE PUBLIC. FOURTH TUESDAY OF THE MONTH.
09/25	▶▶ FINAL DAY TO SUBMIT YOUR ARTICLE FOR INCLUSION IN THE NEXT "MEMBERS PODIUM" COLUMN FOR THE AUGUST, 2009 ISSUE OF NYBBLES & BYTES. BE SURE TO SEND YOUR ARTICLE TO INFO@NEOPC.NET AND INCLUDE THE PHRASE "MEMBERS PODIUM" IN THE SUBJECT LINE.

NEOPC- General Meeting - Scheduled Presentations :

<u>Date</u>	<u>Programs</u>
September 9	"Digital Photography" by Todd Johnson. Todd's talk includes current software for Windows XP and Vista Operating Systems.
October 14	"Kindle and Ebook" By Shawn Walsh. Shawn's talk on the use of Kindle e-reader for ebooks.
November 11	"Genealogy" by John Dailey. John's talk includes a discussion of CAGG and GCGS Groups.
December 9	"How to Buy a Computer" by Tony Kurkov. Tony's talk is timely right before Christmas 2009.
<u>Proposed Programs:</u>	
January 2010	"2009 Income Tax Updates" by Ian Abbott. Ian's talk will help with Income tax preparation.
February 2010	"Skype" by Bruce Brockman/ YANTOTC. Bruce's talk includes the use of computers for communications for local and long distance phone calls.