

Microsoft Vista: The Next Windows
by Daniel K. Kehoe

Although it probably won't hit the streets until early 2007, Microsoft has already started the marketing push for Vista, the long awaited follow-on to the Windows XP operating system.

Initial reviewers of Vista agree Microsoft has spent some time addressing issues that users of the Windows family have been stumbling over for years. As well they should, as Vista (under the code name "Longhorn") has been in development for quite some time. What is interesting to industry observers is how a great deal of the glitter promised during the early Longhorn days has been sacrificed as development progressed. The Longhorn project took two steps back and one step forward when development of a brand new code base stopped and was restarted based on the Windows Server 2003 code. But that's not all bad—much effort has been spent on critical issues like system- and user-level security, something called "virtual folders," and ensuring Vista's move toward integrating local PC search capability into the Internet browser. One casualty of the retooling was a powerful new disk format called WinFS, so NTFS lives on as king, probably until Service Pack 2 of Vista.

Visually, the Vista operating system will continue the move toward a media-accommodating platform. In certain versions of Vista (there will probably be six, four consumer variations and two for corporate users) the new "aero glass" windows themselves look and feel very Mac-like with a translucent treatment. If nothing else, Vista will look appealing to users forced to stare at their PCs all day long. Oddly, though Windows has won the desktop battle, with the release of Vista, Mac OS will have won the user interface war.

Early tests on beta releases indicate that Vista will probably outperform Windows XP on the same hardware (how about that—you don't necessarily need to upgrade your hardware to gain new functionality), but it is still early in the game with much to be added that could weigh down Vista. Users expecting to see the new translucent windows must have a graphics card with 64MB of video memory. Without one, the windows will look like a slightly made-over version of XP windows.

The bottom line for users is that Vista will probably be a performance improvement but it will not be a paradigm shift or require significant retraining. It should feel about like the move from Windows 95/98 to Windows XP did. Most of your mainstream applications should install and work unchanged under Vista, but look for Vista-certified versions of your favorite software to appear which will take advantage of new links into the operating system. One indicator that Vista is roaring to completion was its pre-release to software developers in October 2005—a move that ensures Microsoft will have plenty of Vista-enhanced software to parade around on announcement day.

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