

Review: Windows 8 a big misstep for Microsoft

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Windows 8 screenshot

The venerable PC is at a crossroads. Sales growth has slowed to a crawl. And consumers and developers are increasingly turning their time and attention to smartphones and tablets.

Pressured by that trend, [Microsoft](#) is updating [Windows](#) to make PCs work more like smartphones and to bring Windows to a whole new class of devices: iPad-like [touch-screen](#) tablets. Last month, the company launched what it calls a "consumer preview" of [Windows 8](#), the next version of its flagship operating system. The preview is not a final version - that isn't expected until at least this fall - but it's close.

I've been playing around with the Windows 8 preview for several weeks. I loaded it onto a several-year old Dell laptop, in part because that's what

I had available and in part to see what users of traditional PCs can expect from the new software. I hope to eventually test out the software on a tablet.

My conclusion: For [PC users](#), Windows 8 is a major misstep.

Perhaps its biggest problem is that it has two separate and largely incompatible parts. It feels like Microsoft took a nice dress and attached it to an equally fine pantsuit and tried to pass it off as one garment. It just doesn't work.

The two pieces are a new interface called "Metro" and the old, traditional desktop inherited from past versions of the software.

The desktop interface looks and works much as it did in Windows 7, except that you won't find a Start button or Start menu, both of which have been core features of the software since Windows 95 debuted about 17 years ago. And you no longer see the desktop when you start up Windows.

Instead, you see the new Metro interface, which Microsoft developed originally for its [Windows Phone 7](#) [smartphone](#) operating system. The interface is composed of a series of application squares or "tiles" arrayed on a flat background. The app tiles are more than just static program icons; they can display [snippets](#) of updated information, such as your next appointment or the current temperature.

When you launch an application designed for the Metro interface, it runs full-screen by default, not inside a window. You can split the screen between two applications, but that's it. Unlike with the desktop, you can't see more than two applications at a time on a single screen.

I actually like the Metro interface on Windows Phone 7 devices. But on

a traditional PC, it's a poor fit.

Metro was originally designed to be used with a finger on a touch screen, not with a mouse or trackpad. In order to see a particular app tile on the Metro start screen, for example, you may have to scroll left or right. That's not a problem if you can simply swipe left or right on a touch screen, but it's not such an easy or quick thing to do if you've got to use a trackpad or mouse to click on a scroll bar. I'd much rather use the old-fashioned Start menu.

Another problem with Metro is that, at least for now, most of the Windows applications people use are desktop-style programs. That makes the Metro interface an unnecessary barrier to those applications. I'd like to have my computer just boot up directly into the desktop interface. But Windows 8 forces everyone to begin on the Metro start screen.

So I found myself frequently flipping back and forth between Metro and the desktop, a process that can be disorienting. Because programs for the two interfaces look and work differently, switching between them is like running two different operating systems on the same computer.

The Metro interface is so radically different that much of what users have come to know about Windows for the past 17 years doesn't apply. And the new interface doesn't help them much in figuring out the new steps they need to take to accomplish old tasks.

Take a simple example: closing programs. Since Windows 95, users have typically just clicked on the "x" in the upper right hand corner of the program's window to close it. For those who prefer to use the menu bar, you can usually click on "File" and then "Exit."

But with Metro-style apps, you won't find a close-program "x." You

won't even find a menu bar. Instead, to close a program you have to move your pointer to the top edge of the screen, click and hold until the app screen becomes a thumbnail and then drag that thumbnail image to the bottom of the screen. And you have to do all this without any clues: There's nothing to "grab" at the top edge of the screen, and the interface gives you no indication of what you should do with the thumbnail once you've grabbed it.

That's merely one of many commands that are not only different but also hidden by the Metro interface.

Windows 8 is not all bad. It has some great features and incorporates some good ideas.

One of its qualities is speed. It generally starts up, resumes from sleep and shuts down faster than Windows 7. Also, it automatically will synchronize settings - Web bookmarks, desktop images, cursor blink rate and the like - and even apps across multiple computers.

Another cool thing about Windows 8 is the way it works with Web-based services and social networks. With the Metro-style Photos application, you can view pictures you've stored on your local machine on Microsoft's cloud-based SkyDrive service and on websites such as Flickr and Facebook. Similarly, you can save a document to your hard drive or to SkyDrive.

Microsoft officials say users will be able to add on to these services as new Metro apps become available, and that they eventually may be able to pull up photos from Picasa or save documents to DropBox, all from the same dialog box.

But neat features such as these are more than outweighed by the fundamental problems with Windows 8. Microsoft obviously wants to

drag the PC into a new era, but the result is an operating system that's much harder to use than the old fashioned one.

MICROSOFT WINDOWS 8 CONSUMER PREVIEW:

-Likes: Automatic syncing of settings and applications across multiple computers; quicker startup and shut-down processes; allows easy connection to social media and Web services within apps.

-Dislikes: New interface, dubbed Metro, is radically different in appearance and use from Windows desktop, forcing users to relearn how to use their PC; the interface hides many functions, making it difficult to know how to do even ordinary tasks; the shortage of Metro apps means users will frequently have to flip back and forth between Metro and desktop interfaces; no way to turn off the Metro interface.

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