

Edward C. Baig: Windows 8 likely to change computing's future

October 22 2012, by Edward C. Baig



Windows 8 screenshot

Radical changes, possibly the biggest to ever hit Windows PCs, are going to dramatically alter the status quo of computing a week from Friday.

That's when Microsoft formally ushers in the Windows 8 era. This fresh [operating system](#) represents such a departure for Windows that you're left with the impression that Microsoft wants to stomp out any distant memories of Windows Vista, Windows ME or other less-flattering periods from Windows' past. Never mind that a lot of people, me included, like the most recent version, Windows 7.

Though you'll still find good use for your mouse and keyboard, Windows 8, at least for many of the new computers it will run on, is not only meant to be touch-capable, it all but begs you to get your fingerprints on

it.

Microsoft has designed a unified operating system that works on tablets and traditional PCs and laptops. Despite twin versions, Windows 8 and Windows RT, Microsoft is taking a notably different, and perhaps riskier, course than rival Apple. Apple still markets separate operating systems for [Macintosh computers](#) (OS X [Mountain Lion](#)) and for the [iPhone](#), iPad and iPod Touch (iOS 6), even though some features are common to both operating systems.

Here are some of the key questions leading up to the Windows 8 [launch](#):

QUESTION: What does Windows 8 look like?

ANSWER: If you've seen a [Windows Phone](#), you have a general sense of what the customizable new Start screens on Windows 8 will look like. The interface is built around dynamic rectangular tiles that reveal information in real time - the [weather forecast](#), say, or tweets. You can click on these tiles or, depending on your system, touch them, to get at the underlying apps or programs. Windows 8 is pre-populated with apps for People, Messaging, Music, Photos, [Mail](#), Video, Calendar and more.

The interface is attractive. It generally works smoothly with touch gestures, and slightly less so with mouse/track-pad equivalents. Swiping from the right edge of the screen to the left summons system commands called "charms." Swiping from the left to the right reveals thumbnails of open apps. Dragging an app to the bottom of the screen closes it (though some close by themselves if you don't use them for a while). And pinching in and out to zoom lets you take a gander at a convenient bird's-eye view of all the apps on your computer.

Q: How will people embrace the change?

A: Time will tell. I suspect the interface could scare at least some PC users who have grown up with the more traditional Windows layout. Microsoft and its partners, however, are betting that people will find Windows 8 to be intuitive (as I did) - especially those accustomed to tapping and touching on smartphones and tablets.

Intel says the conventional wisdom may be that folks are reluctant to reach up and touch the screen. But Intel researchers found that people quickly adapted. Either way, expect a bit of a learning curve.

You can tap a Desktop tile to go back to a screen that resembles Windows 7 - minus the Windows Start menu. Sensing a competitive opportunity, Samsung, on its upcoming line of Windows 8 computers, will let folks download a Quick Starter feature that brings up a replica of the Start Menu and a toolbar. As always with a new operating system, it remains to be seen if Windows 8 will be bug-free at launch and whether all your existing peripherals will work.

Q: What kind of new hardware is coming?

A: You'll see conventional desktops and clamshell laptops, of course. But the industry is taking advantage of the touch- and slate-friendly nature of the operating system to produce several clever designs, including ones that turn notebooks or even desktops into removable tablets and vice versa. For example, you might mistake the Sony Vaio Tap 20 for an ordinary 20-inch all-in-one touch-screen computer. But it has a built-in battery that lets you fold it up and carry it around as an oversize tablet.

Lenovo's intriguing IdeaPad Yoga has four different modes; the screen can fold up to 360 degrees, letting you employ it as a regular laptop or as a tablet. You can stand it up to watch movies. Or fold it like a tent to peek at recipes when it's in the kitchen.

The usual suspects will have broad Windows 8 lineups: Acer, Asus, Dell, Hewlett-Packard, Lenovo, Samsung, Sony, Toshiba, Vizio. Intel says more than 40 new touch-capable, thin Windows 8 Ultrabooks will hit by year's end. With its own highly anticipated Surface tablets, Microsoft will not only compete against the [iPad](#) but against some of the aforementioned hardware partners. Surface will start at \$499 for a version with 32 gigabytes of storage and climb an additional \$100 if you add an innovative keyboard cover.

Q: Differences between Windows 8 and Windows RT?

A: Surface, among other machines, will have versions for Windows 8 and Windows RT. The latter was built with mobility in mind. It will run on ARM processors and deliver what is expected to be longer battery life. RT machines will feature built-in Mail, Calendar, Messaging, Photos and SkyDrive (Microsoft's cloud offering), as well as a pre-installed version of Office, containing Word, Excel and PowerPoint. But on an RT computer, you can only run the pre-installed apps or apps you fetch free or pay for in Microsoft's new Windows Store. And RT lacks the Windows Media Player or Windows Media Center.

You'll have to choose a Windows 8 computer to run the conventional desktop apps you may already own. But you can also purchase apps for Windows 8 in the Windows Store. Microsoft says there will be thousands at launch.

Q: Upgrading existing hardware?

A: If you bought or buy an eligible Windows 7 PC between June 2, 2012, and Jan. 31, 2013, you can upgrade to [Windows 8](#) Pro for \$14.99; the upgrade price is otherwise \$39.99, (or \$69.99 with disks). You can upgrade Windows XP, Vista or 7 computers. Microsoft is making available a compatibility assistant tool to help you determine which of

your older programs may give you trouble. Of course, you'll want entirely new hardware to take advantage of all the latest touch capabilities.

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