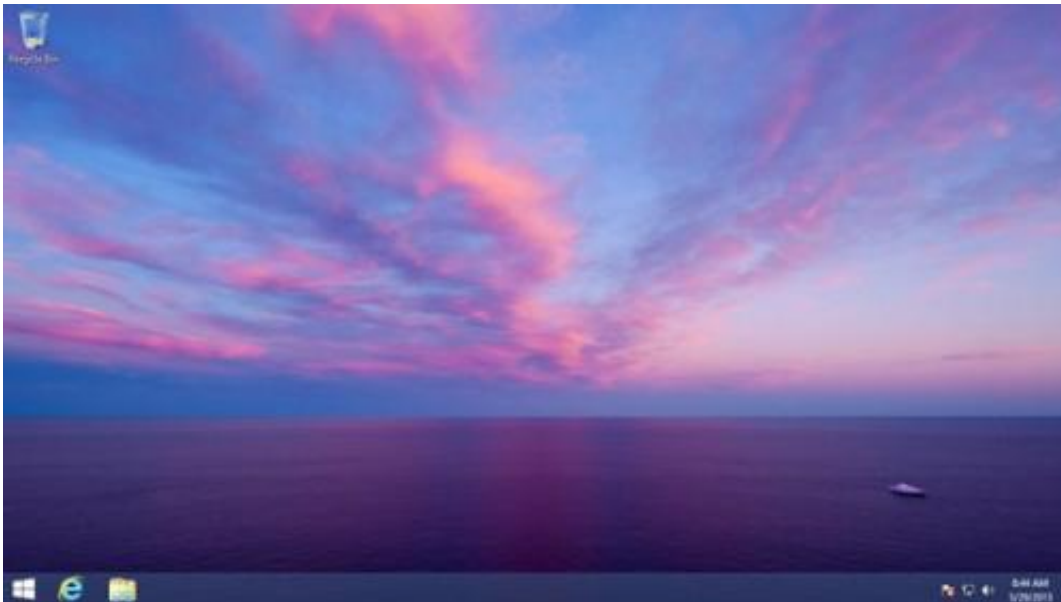


# Review: Update to Windows 8 doesn't fix basic problems

July 10 2013, by Troy Wolverton

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Microsoft is developing an update to Windows 8 that promises to "refine" the clunky software. But if a preview of the update is any indication, the changes won't go far enough to address Windows 8's flaws.

Windows 8, which debuted last year, was designed to bring Microsoft's flagship operating system into the post-PC era while continuing to serve traditional PC users. Unfortunately, this desire to serve both camps has

yielded software that serves neither particularly well.

Windows 8 is oblivious to the context in which it's being used and disregards how users might want to interact with it. Its new "Modern" interface, which was designed with touch screens in mind, but which traditional PC users can't avoid, represents a significant step backward in function for them. And users of the new interface have found a narrow range of apps available for it.

The new update, dubbed Windows 8.1 and expected to be broadly available later this year, attempts to address some of these shortcomings.

With the new software, users can choose to have their computers load the traditional [desktop interface](#) when they turn them on - rather than having to pass through the Modern interface first. Microsoft has also restored the familiar - and widely missed - Start button to the desktop taskbar.

Windows 8 allowed users to split the screen between two Modern applications, but would only devote about a quarter of the screen to one of them, while the other got the rest. With the update, users can display more than two Modern applications at once - if they have a big enough screen - and can adjust how much screen space each gets. Similarly, users of Windows 8.1 can see two or more tabbed browser windows in Internet Explorer, something they can't do with the original version of the [operating system](#).

And Microsoft appears to be focusing on boosting the number and quality of the apps users can choose from. There are now more than 100,000 apps in the Windows 8 store, and the company announced at its developer conference last month that apps from Facebook, Flipboard and the National Football League - which are popular on iPads and Android devices - are on the way.

Microsoft has also added some new features to Windows 8.1. Among the best are a search feature that searches the device, the Web and the Windows app store simultaneously; and a feature that will automatically update your apps and sync them across your Windows devices.

While such changes are welcome, they don't solve Windows 8's basic problems. It's still blithely unaware of the context in which it's being used. Even with the new "boot to desktop" mode, you'll still often find yourself in the Modern interface, even on a keyboard-and-mouse PC. And there's a good chance that even if you're committed to the Modern interface, you'll find yourself fumbling with the desktop, trying to click icons that were designed for a pointer - not your fingertips.

Rather than restoring a well-used feature, the new Start button is just a facade. It doesn't bring back the old Windows Start menu, but simply takes users back to the Modern home screen. Users can configure it to show all their applications instead - in a full-screen Modern view - but even that view doesn't duplicate all the features of the old Start menu.

Even with the new features, the Modern interface remains a poor fit for traditional PC users. The ability to show two - or maybe three - apps at a time is not a substitute for being able to view, stack and quickly switch between numerous windowed folders and applications.

And then there's the app situation. Despite the recent additions, the Windows app store offers users far less choice than app stores for the iPad and Android devices. For example, only one of the current top 10 paid and top 10 free apps available for the iPad is available as a Modern Windows app.

Windows 8.1 is still in development. It - and the Windows app selection - may well improve by the time it's officially launched. Let's hope so, because they both still need a lot of work.

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## WINDOWS 8.1 PREVIEW

-Likes: New boot-to-desktop mode; ability to adjust screen space devoted to apps when viewing more than one at once; new universal search feature; new feature that automatically updates apps and syncs them to other devices.

-Dislikes: Software remains ignorant of whether users are using a tablet or traditional PC; new Start button doesn't restore old Start menu; quality and diversity of apps far less than what's available for iPad or Android devices.

-Price: Free download

-Web: windows.com

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