

The Five Best and Worst Things About Vista

by Preston Gralla

Five Things You'll Love About Windows Vista

Graphical Interface and Windows Aero

The thing you'll probably like most about Vista is its new interface. Transparent windows slide into place with animations, there are useful gadgets on the right side of the screen, and the colors are subtler than in previous versions of Windows. Overall, it's less cartoonish and more Mac-like than Windows XP. At the heart of the new interface is Windows Aero, which features windows with glassy, translucent edges, and whose colors, level of transparency, and saturation can be customized. The Alt-Tab switching between open windows has been drastically improved with Windows Flip and Windows Flip 3D. With Windows Flip (Alt-Tab), you see thumbnails of all your windows as you rotate through them. Windows Flip 3D stacks all of your windows in three dimensions; you can flip through them like cards. (To run it, click the Windows Flip 3D button in Quick Launch, or press the Windows Key-Tab combination.)

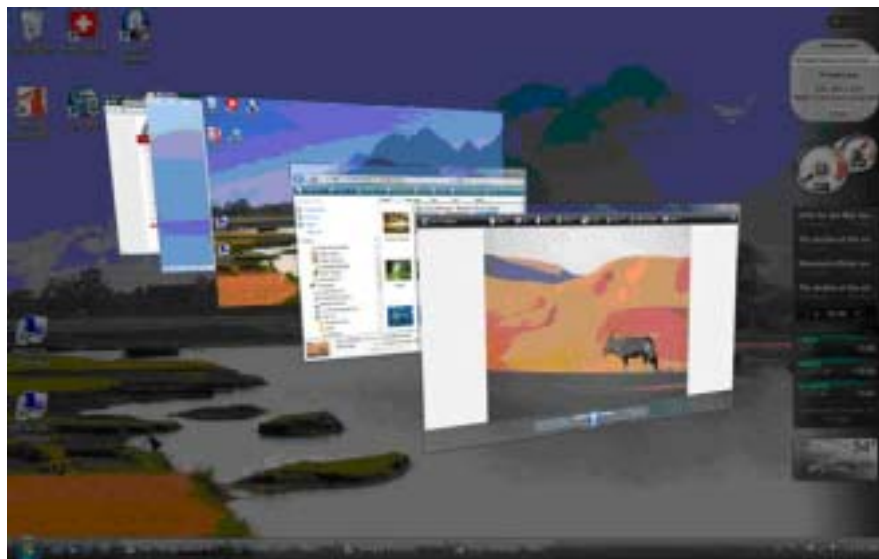


Figure 1. Windows Flip 3D switching among open windows.

Two more elements of the new user interface are particularly notable: the gadgets on the Sidebar, and Live Thumbnails. Hover your mouse over a window on the Taskbar, and a thumbnail of that window pops up, including the program and document name or website just above it. These thumbnails are “live”; if there's video playing in the windows, you'll be able to see the video playing in the thumbnail.



Figure 2. Live Thumbnails show you live previews of any active window.

Gadgets, which live on the Sidebar, are interactive applets that gather and display information, such as displaying RSS feeds, updating stock quotes, and so on. Windows Vista ships with about a dozen of them.

Network and Sharing Center

Windows Vista is the first version of Windows built in a world where networking has become nearly ubiquitous, and it shows. Microsoft has finally gotten networking right; for the first time, the network seems a natural extension of your PC.

Command central for networking is the Network and Sharing Center, which lets you easily configure a network and all its features, including sharing files and folders, connecting to and managing multiple networks, and accessing all of your network's resources. All of your vital networking tools and information are right at hand, from file sharing to changing your network name, connecting to a network, managing network connections, repairing broken connections, and more.

To see my favorite new networking feature, click "View Full Map," and Vista shows you a complete map of all of the PCs and devices on your network, including switches and gateways. Click a device or hover over it, and you'll see more details. So click a PC, and you'll see shared network files and folders. Hover your mouse over a device and details about it will be displayed—for example, its IP address and MAC address.



Figure 3. The new Network Map shows you every device on your network and displays details about each, such as IP and MAC addresses.

Wireless Networking

If you frequently connect to multiple wireless networks, for example, one at home, hot spots outside your home, and possibly a workplace wireless network, you'll appreciate the ease with which you can connect to and manage wireless networks and connections.

Click the network icon in the System Tray, then click "Connect or disconnect," and you'll see a list of nearby wireless networks. Hover your mouse over any network, and you'll see details about it, including the network type (802.11b, 802.11g, etc.), whether security is being used, and if so, what kind.

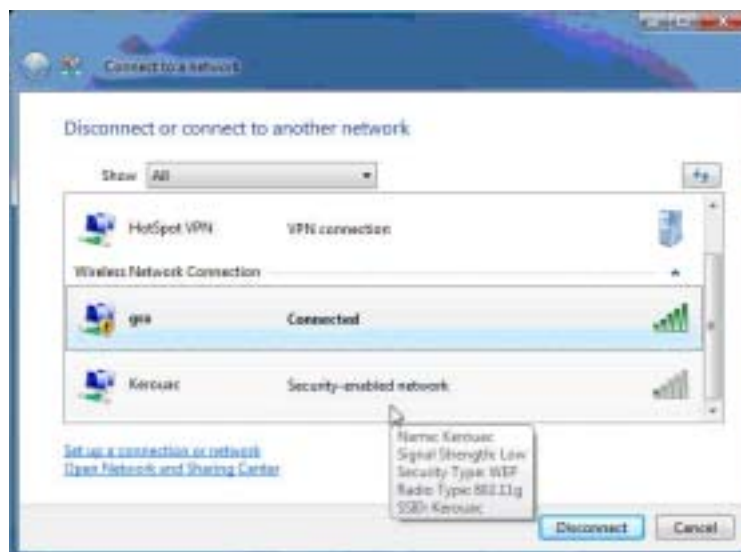


Figure 4. Vista's new way of connecting to, or disconnecting from, a wireless network.

You can also easily manage multiple networks and connections. For example, if you use a wireless network at home, one at work, and several at hot spots, you can name and save each connection and tell Vista to automatically connect to each when you're in range. That way, you won't have to fumble with making manual connections. And excellent built-in management tools let you configure your wireless connections so that if you're in range of more than one, you can set which one takes precedence over the others.

There's nice built-in security as well. You designate each network as public or private, and when you connect to each, Windows Vista automatically applies the relevant security. Private networks, for example, allow file sharing; when you're at a public network, Windows Vista automatically turns that off.

Search

If you're like me, you'll have a love/hate relationship with the new Search. On the one hand, it's exceedingly fast, makes it a breeze to find any file, and lets you save searches for future reference. On the other hand, you'll have to perform a few workarounds to get it to work right.

Search is built into every level of Windows Vista; it's on the Start menu, it's on the upper-righthand side of Windows Explorer, and it can be accessed via Start—>Search. It uses indexing to perform your searches, and because of that, it displays results lightning-fast. It searches the index as you type, so results appear as you type the first letter of your term, and narrow as you keep typing. It finds documents, emails, applications, and even websites you've visited.

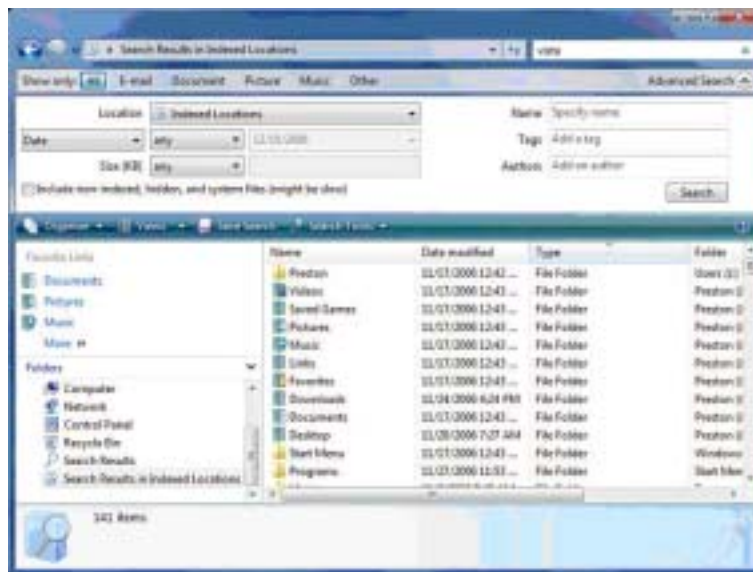


Figure 5. Vista's advanced search feature is exceptional powerful and displays results literally as you type.

In addition, there is a very powerful advanced search tool that lets you narrow your search by date, file size, author, tags, and location. It accepts Boolean searching. You can even search other computers on your network, as long as you have the rights to read from the other PCs.

You can even save your searches. Create a search once, then visit again in Windows Explorer so that you don't have to re-create it.

There are some problems, though. Search works differently in different places. For example, you get different kinds of results if you search using the Start search box, as compared to the Windows Explorer search box. More maddening is that, by default, Search only indexes a small portion of your hard disk, your own `\Users\{username}` folder, primarily. Microsoft assumes that you will store all of your files in subfolders underneath that folder. If you store your files somewhere else, Search won't find it, unless you do a nonindexed search, which can be painfully slow.

To fix the problem, go to Control Panel—> System and Maintenance—> Indexing Options, and hand-pick folders to put into the index.

Security

It's no secret that previous versions of Windows have been chock-full of security holes. Microsoft aimed to plug them in Windows Vista, and it's done quite a nice job.

The Windows firewall has been improved; it now blocks dangerous outbound connections as well as inbound ones. (In Windows XP, it only blocked inbound connections.) This adds an extra level of security against Trojans and bots.

Vista also ships with Windows Defender, anti-spyware software with some particularly notable features, especially the Software Explorer, which shows you programs that run at startup and currently running programs, and provides details about each, including whether it's classified as malware. You can then take a variety of actions, including disabling the application, removing it, and so on.

Some of the biggest security improvements are under the hood. Network Access Protection, designed for enterprise-level networks, lets network administrators set up requirements that any PC must meet before it can connect to the network, such as having up-to-date antivirus signatures. And BitLocker Drive Encryption, available only on the Enterprise and Ultimate versions, provides a hardware-based way of locking down an entire PC and all its data.

Internet security has also been improved. Internet Explorer now includes a very good antiphishing filter. In addition, any IE window, including pop ups, now includes an Address Bar with a URL. In previous versions of the browser, pop ups didn't include URLs, so you couldn't know whether they originated from a legitimate site or a spyware purveyor. With this version of IE 7, the URL is now in plain sight.

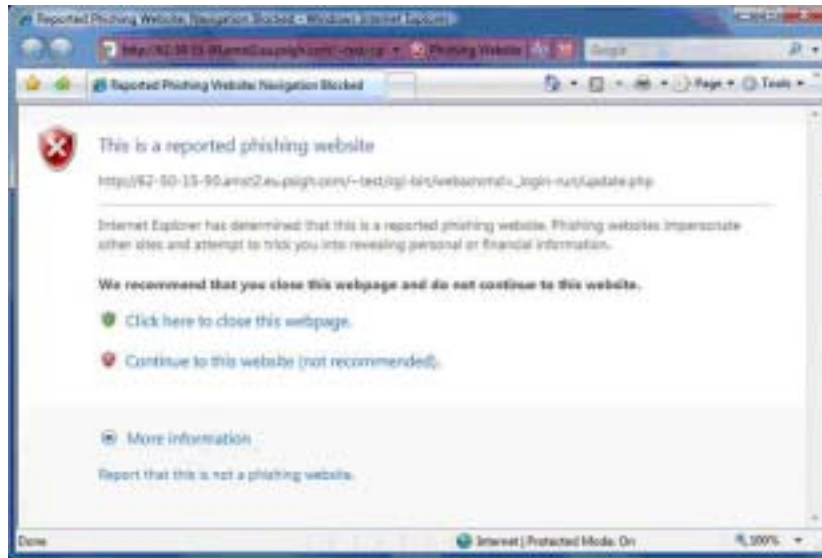


Figure 6. Internet Explorer's antiphishing filter, warning about a phishing site.

Also, by default, IE now runs in the new Protected Mode, in which the browser can't modify system files or settings. In addition, protection against cross-domain scripting attacks has been added. In this kind of attack, a hacker could create a malicious website that would spawn a legitimate website in another window, such as a banking site. But when you enter information into the banking site, the hacker can read it from his other domain.

Five Things You'll Hate About Windows Vista

User Account Control

There's no doubt about the thing you'll likely hate most about Vista: the dreaded User Account Control (UAC) prompt. UAC is a perfect example of a good idea gone bad...in fact, gone very bad. UAC prompts you to type in a password or click OK before you can take certain actions, such as adding or removing user accounts, or turning the Windows Firewall on or off. You'll know ahead of time that you'll get a UAC prompt; there will be a small shield next to any links or options that will summon it.

There's some good logic behind the use of the prompt. It keeps you safe in two ways. First, it protects against malware. If you're infected and the malware tries to do something harmful, such as turning off your antivirus so that it can't be detected, UAC will stop it. And, UAC is designed to protect you against yourself, so that you don't make any changes that may harm your system.

That's not a bad idea. But the prompt runs rampant. Why should you have to go through a UAC just to change Windows' font size? Or change the name of your computer? You shouldn't, of course. You can at least turn it off, though. Go to Control Panel—>User Accounts and Family Safety—>User Accounts, and click the "Turn User Account Control on or off" link.

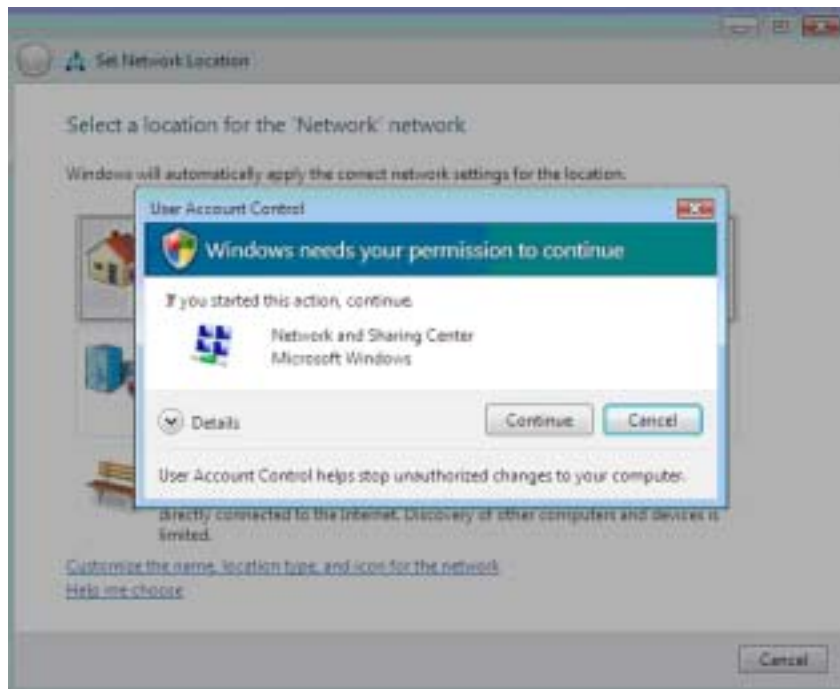


Figure 7. The most annoying thing about Windows Vista: The UAC prompt

Backup

Remember the backup program in Windows XP? A pretty sorry piece of work, wasn't it? Well, the backup program built into Windows Vista will make you absolutely pine for it. It's one of the worst utilities you'll ever use—although it's such a poor piece of work, it's likely you won't bother to use it.

You can't use it to back up individual files or files, or even certain file types. Instead, you have to back up every file in a generic group of files, such as "Documents" or "Pictures." So if you want to back up only a select group of .doc files, or of folders, for example, you can't do it. You have to back up all your .doc files, as well as all of your .ppt files, .xl* files, .pdf files, and the new format .xps files as well. You can't pick and choose. Making things worse is the fact that you can't back up only certain folders—you have to back up every single folder on your entire hard disk.

Let's say, for example, you want to back up several folders, and they each have .doc files and .jpg files in them. There's a total of 75 megabytes of files you want to back up.

You can't do it. Instead you'll have to back up every single document and every single graphic on every folder on your entire hard disk, and that includes graphics files of every type and document files of every type. Worse yet, that backup will also include graphic files that Windows uses for its operations, which probably come to several hundred megabytes.

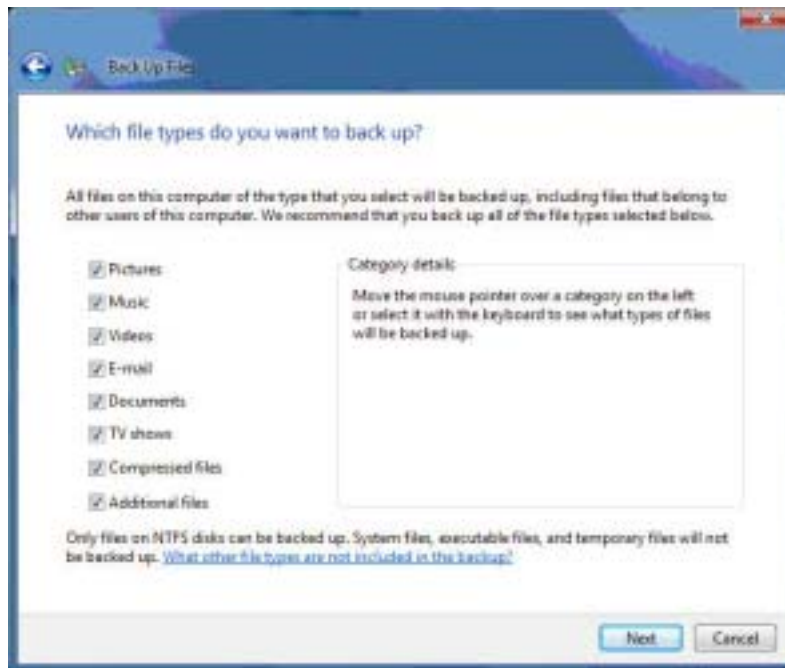


Figure 8. Windows Vista's backup program may be the worst utility ever packed into an operating system.

That means that in order to back up 75 megabytes of files, you'll actually have to back up several hundred megabytes, and most likely more, depending on what's on your hard disk.

Fewer Power User Features

Microsoft has tried mightily to make Windows Vista easy to master for the average user, but they've also made changes along the way that power users won't be happy about. For example, in Windows XP, you were able to customize to a remarkable degree what actions should be taken when you open or view a file; you can't do that any longer unless you dig extremely deep into the Registry. Similarly, you used to have a great deal more control over multiboot options than you do now.

Navigation Confusion

The redesigned Control Panel in Windows Vista is better organized than the one in Windows XP, and there are a variety of new "Centers" in it, such as the Network and Sharing Center, the Windows Mobility Center, and the Sync Center, which are quite useful.

Unfortunately, though, there's a good deal of navigation confusion as well. You'll find plenty differently named links that, for some odd reason, bring you to the same location. For example, if you're on the Network and Internet Control Panel applet and click on "Network and Sharing Center" or "View network status and tasks" or "Set up file sharing," you'll be sent to the same location—the Network and Sharing Center. This kind of thing happens at every level of the Control Panel and various centers. So even though you'll always be able to get where you want, sometimes the path there can be confusing.

Price

There are multiple versions of Windows Vista, but if you're a power user, you'll certainly want Windows Vista Ultimate. To get it, though, you're going to have to pay through the nose. It'll set you back \$259 for an upgrade, or \$399 for the full version, a very hefty sum. You may instead want to settle for Windows Vista Home Premium, which will cost about \$100 less.

Preston Gralla is the author of Windows Vista in a Nutshell, the Windows Vista Pocket Reference, and is the editor of WindowsDevCenter.com. He is also the author of Internet Annoyances, PC Pest Control, Windows XP Power Hound, and Windows XP Hacks, Second Edition, and co-author of Windows XP Cookbook. He has written more than 30 other books.

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