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## Will Windows 8 change the way architects work?

31 October 2012 | By Marc Thomas

### PRODUCT REVIEW

Windows 8

Microsoft

Upgrade from £24.99 plus VAT

[www.microsoft.com](http://www.microsoft.com)

Marc Thomas previews the new interface that spans PCs and mobile devices

Windows 8 launched last week, bringing a radical new look to your PC. Driven by the difficulties of using a conventional Windows or Mac interface on a touch screen, Microsoft has taken a crack at delivering a design that works on desktop PCs and portable devices.

Fundamental to this is replacing the start button with the new start screen, designed for touch — with big buttons known as “tiles” and the ability to use gestures to access menus at each side of the screen.

The look brings graphic design to the fore, with maybe a nod to the minimalism of the computer screens in Stanley Kubrick’s 2001. Icons are pared down and given space on the block-coloured tiles — abandoning the messy mini-pictures of previous interfaces.



Windows 8's new start screen

Discussion about the start screen has been a massive distraction from the really important changes. For Windows 8 to be of any use on battery-only tablets with low-powered processors, Microsoft has had to streamline the whole operating system; on a full-blown PC, Windows 8 is significantly faster to start up and operate. The best new feature is "file history", which keeps incremental versioned backups and is very easy to use.

The desktop is still there and will continue to be where you spend most of your time. Once your most frequently used applications are pinned to the task bar, you won't see the start screen unless you need it. Windows key + D takes you to the desktop at any time, where things are quite familiar. The resource-wasting transparency of the Vista/Windows 7 Aero interface has thankfully been replaced by a cleaner look.

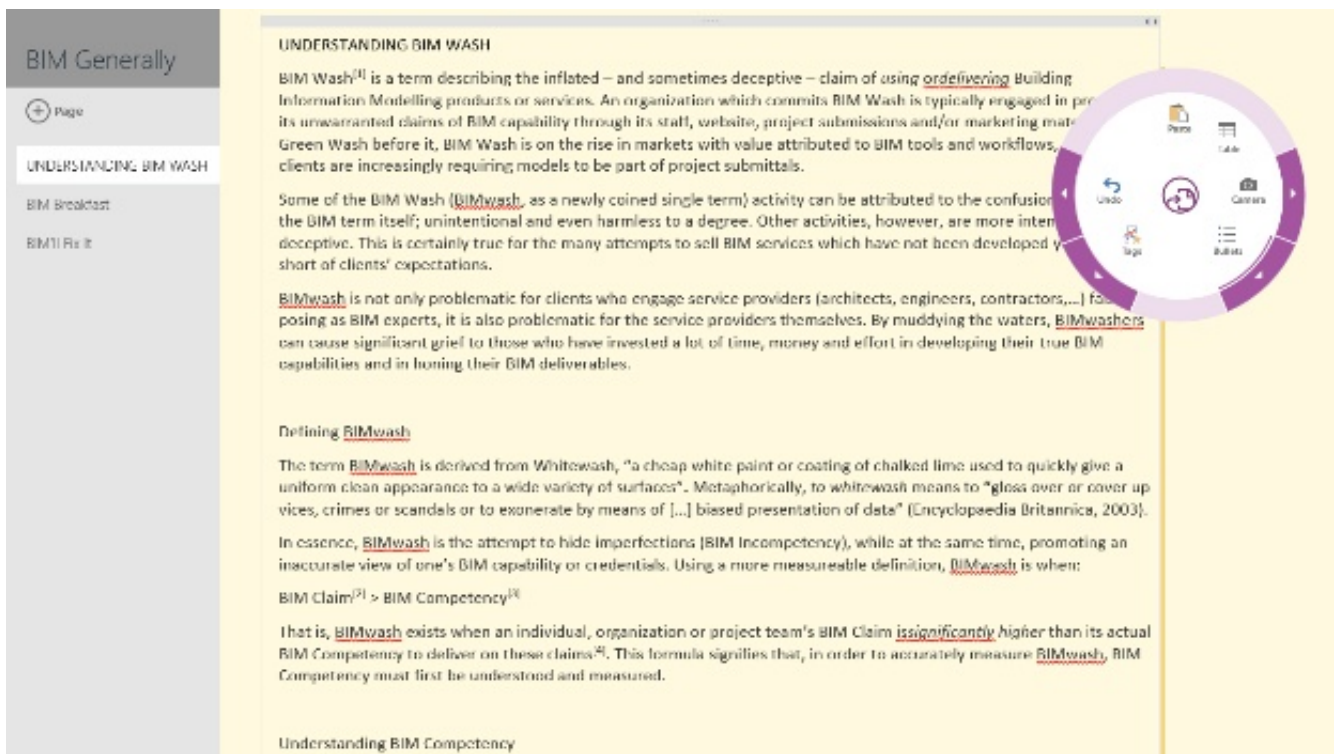
Windows 8 is the front end of Microsoft's whole infrastructure — all the back-office server products have been upgraded and a strategy for the Cloud is emerging.

On a full-blown PC, Windows 8 is significantly faster to start up and operate

Windows 8 adopts the "app" concept. Apps are downloaded from the Windows Store and will run on any Windows 8 device, while conventional applications require a PC or Intel tablet. Some key apps are there already — Skype and Kindle, for instance, and a very slick official Google app.

Windows 8 apps are shared across any Windows 8 devices. If you log into Windows 8 with a Windows Live ID, your settings are downloaded from the Cloud — including access to your purchased apps and documents stored on Microsoft's SkyDrive. Combine this with the Cloud-based Office 365 subscription services for connection to a bang-up-to-date Microsoft server infrastructure.

Office 2013 is now previewing its version for the desktop, and there are Office apps for Windows 8 RT — Currently free is One Note MX which has innovative finger friendly features such as the pop-up dial menu, indicative of one way interface design could go. A similar on-screen menu has been built into the latest MicroStation in anticipation of tablet use.



### One Note MX

If you work in a large practice, don't hold your breath. No IT manager is going to move wholesale from Windows 7 for some time. Laptops will upgrade early, as the benefits for battery life and speed are

worthwhile.

In a small practice there is no need to rush, but take a look at the launch offers — upgrades to Windows 8 Pro can be bought for £24.99 until January 31. Getting a small team used to the interface is a relatively minor training task.



Microsoft Surface tablet is a rival to the iPad in function and price

Windows 8 Pro is the version for most businesses, and the upgrade path from Windows 7 Pro. Larger concerns will go for Windows 8 Enterprise as part of a licensing subscription package.

Windows 8 RT is the tablet-only version for low-power ARM processors. It will not run conventional desktop applications and only comes pre-installed on appropriate hardware. Microsoft's Surface RT tablet, launched alongside the operating system, is a rival to the iPad in function and price. (See review, [IT July 6](#)).

Plain Windows 8 is the consumer option and lacks important networking options — avoid this in the office. Microsoft has committed three years' development to Windows 8 and its supporting server infrastructure. Behind the Start screen is a massive range of incremental improvements — these are the really important things that are worth upgrading for.

## Start working in a different way

The absence of a start button generated some over-excited reactions, but don't worry about this. Remember the start menu was invented in 1995 — it's about time they came up with something better and I think they have.

The start screen provides the same functions as the start menu and is easier to use. Just learn a few new habits and you're away.

Tiles are dragged around the screen, grouped and named as you need them. Despite the touch-orientated design, both for speed and for relief of mouse-induced RSI, the start screen is easy to drive from the keyboard.

From additional Windows key (yes, that one you never use) functions to the Page Up/ Down buttons, the keyboard is often far quicker than the mouse. Use Windows key + Q to search for anything, and really do embrace searching: Windows 8 search is faster.

Postscript: Marc Thomas is director of Isisst Project Technology. [www.isisst.co.uk](http://www.isisst.co.uk)

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