



Hands on with Windows 10

Peter Zaluzny takes a look at the best (and worst) features of the new default operating system in PCs

The first lot of laptops, tablets and smartphones with Windows 10 has arrived, and if you were lucky enough to find a new device under the Christmas tree, odds are you're running Microsoft's new operating system (OS). Even though it's been out for a few months, Windows 10 has undergone some changes since we looked at the preview build in CC May/June. We spent some time with the full consumer version so we could help you get around the new OS without any hassle.

Upgrades a plenty

Start menu meets Start screen

Windows 10 combines a Start menu reminiscent of the Windows 7 design, with the tile-based Start screen introduced in Windows 8. This combination is a step up from the tiled screen in Windows 8, as Microsoft has maintained the best features of their classic design, with new ideas to help users ease into a different approach to desktop navigation.

For example, the tiled segment works well as a quick access menu, as you can pin programs, apps and websites, then organise them into customisable categories. Some website links, known as live tiles, even update to display the latest news, weather, finance and so on.

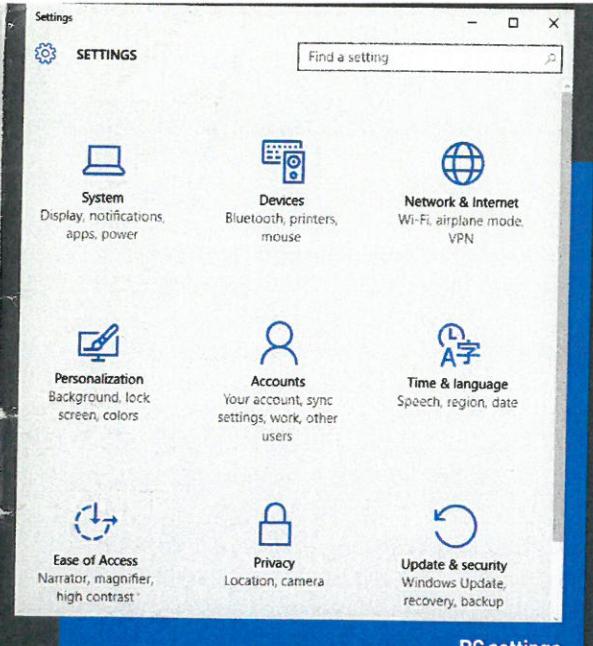
Pinned tiles aren't invasive either, however you may find that the overall larger start menu takes up a bit too

A universal operating system
Microsoft wanted to make a one-size-fits-all OS that worked across desktops, tablets and smartphones with Windows 8, but they didn't quite pull it off. The problem was that some tablet features didn't translate to desktop and vice versa. This has been rectified in Windows 10 with 'Continuum', which automatically optimises the OS to best suit the device you're using.

Say you're working on a 2-in-1 (tablet with detachable keyboard) with the keyboard attached. Windows 10 will turn on laptop mode, with mouse and key-friendly features such as the combined Start menu mentioned below. When you detach the tablet, the OS will activate a touch-friendly version of the Start menu, which magnifies the tiled segment and limits access to the desktop. There's also an override button so you can set it to keyboard or tablet mode, which is a useful workaround if the OS doesn't auto-optimize (which happens from time to time).

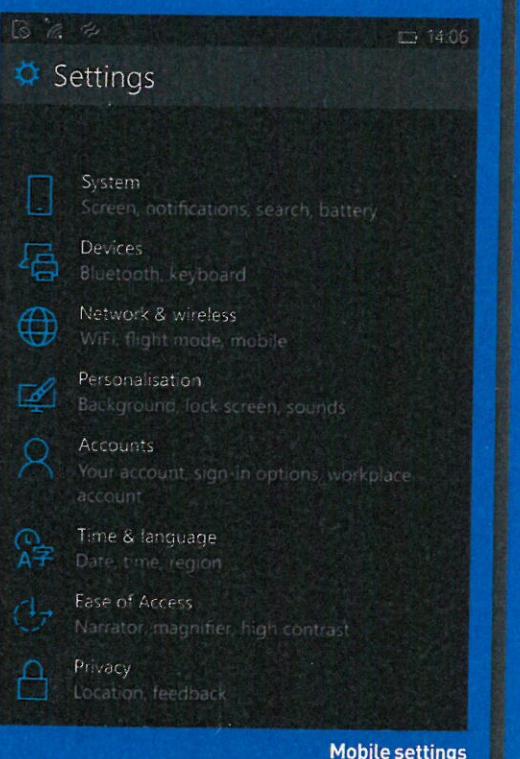


much space on smaller screens. You can't remove this section altogether, but you can limit it to a handful of tiles if you'd prefer to stick with the traditional Start menu.



Simplified settings

This cross-platform accessibility is possible because Microsoft has reorganised the Settings menu, which now strikes a nice balance for users that want to customise their system without having to dig through the Control Panel. Settings are organised into clear categories and subcategories, and most can be altered using simple on/off switches. However, you don't have to stick with simple settings if you don't want to, as Microsoft has kept the traditional Control Panel and Registry intact.



Cortana

After months of anticipation, the Australian version of Cortana is finally available to everybody using Windows 10. The new digital assistant, which works similarly to Apple's Siri, is free on desktops, laptops, tablets and Windows phones with the latest system update (mid-November 2015).

When you log in to multiple devices using the same Microsoft account, Cortana can share your information, calendar, interests and so on across all of them. There are other Windows sharing options (e.g. simply logging into your account on different devices shares system settings such as language), but they don't include as many features as the digital assistant.

So what can Cortana do for you? As well as being able to answer questions and search your computer or the internet in response to your typed or voice commands, Cortana can interact with apps to help organise your life. For example, it can add an event to your calendar when you say "Cortana - add lunch, 3 February at 2pm", then send reminders as it nears. If it can't find anything on your computer based on your search command, Cortana will run an online search using Bing or Google, depending on your default search engine settings.

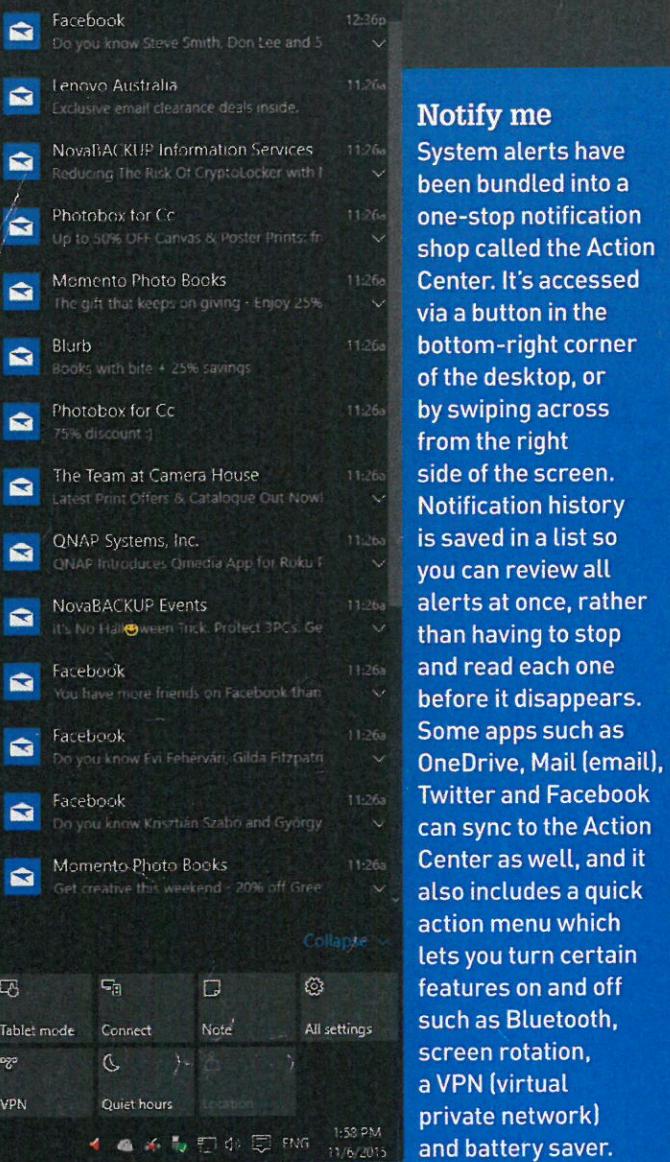
Over time, Cortana can gather data on your search preferences (based on your privacy settings), to tailor content to your interests. This is one of the more impressive features, as it doesn't take long for the software to develop a profile then deliver articles, music and video based on limited user input. For example, when you say "Cortana, show me sports news", it will list information from your local news sources, which it identifies using your browser's IP address.

The level of detail depends on how deeply embedded you are in the Microsoft ecosystem, and the amount of access you give Cortana. If you turn on location services, it can deliver local weather updates when you ask "what's the weather like on Friday?" Then, if you purchase plane tickets using the account synced to your inbox for example, Cortana may be able to track the flight and provide updates, depending on the airline.

We found the voice search tool to be accurate and responsive to male and female voices of varying volumes and pitches, even with thick Aussie accents and colloquialisms. It can decipher foreign accents as well, but although it speaks and understands many languages, we weren't able to set up more than one language on our account at the same time.

Although a lot of the emphasis has been placed on the voice commands, you probably won't use this feature much unless you have limited mobility in your hands, visual impairment (it can read text aloud) or you really prefer to talk over typing. However, it's also a very powerful search tool that does a good job of tailoring content to suit you, which is where Cortana is likely to find its audience.





Notify me

System alerts have been bundled into a one-stop notification shop called the Action Center. It's accessed via a button in the bottom-right corner of the desktop, or by swiping across from the right side of the screen. Notification history is saved in a list so you can review all alerts at once, rather than having to stop and read each one before it disappears.

Some apps such as OneDrive, Mail (email), Twitter and Facebook can sync to the Action Center as well, and it also includes a quick action menu which lets you turn certain features on and off such as Bluetooth, screen rotation, a VPN (virtual private network) and battery saver.

Windows Hello

'Hello' is a new feature that lets you log in using face or finger identification (known as biometrics). It's designed to replace the traditional keyboard login with enhanced security features. While it's technically available here, there aren't many devices in Australia with the special 'depth cameras' that Hello requires to use this feature.

Laptops, 2-in-1s and so on with Intel's new 6th generation processors and RealSense cameras support Hello, but these only hit the market late last year. This means that pre-2015 computers, monitors etc. with inbuilt webcams won't support Hello. However, it works with almost any device that can read fingerprints. Because this technology is still rolling out, we didn't have access to it at the time of writing.

Virtual desktops

Microsoft has finally added virtual desktops to the OS. These give you the option to run different programs on different desktop screens. This can reduce screen clutter and improve productivity as you can move distracting software, such as email, to another desktop. Although a limit isn't specified, we were able to create 250 virtual desktops on our mid-range test system. Most people will probably be happy with three or four.

A work in progress

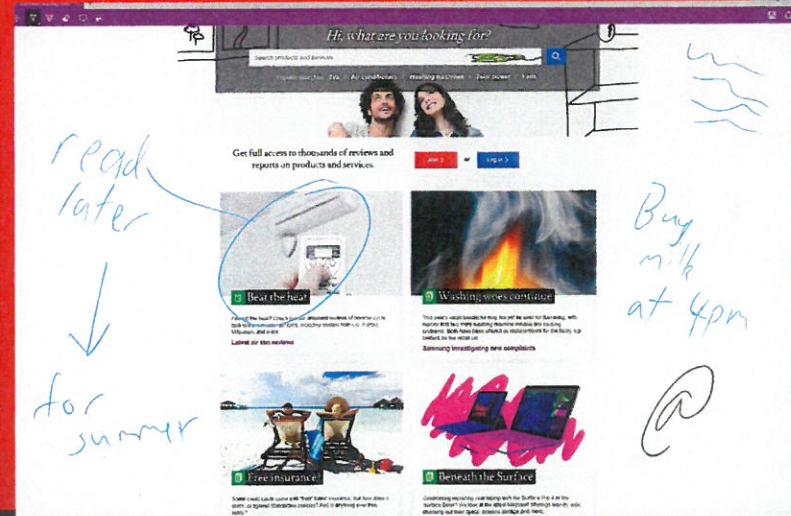
Even though Windows 10 gets a lot of things right, some changes seem a bit underdeveloped, while others feel like setbacks compared to older operating systems.

On the Edge

Microsoft has finally started to move away from Internet Explorer (IE), replacing it with a new web browser called Edge. On top of much-needed visual and navigational updates which tidy up a lot of the clutter, Edge is designed to be a touch-friendly browser which supports stylus input so you can add annotations or references to web pages (see screenshot below).

Many navigation features are similar to the Windows 10 desktop, such as reading lists, favourites and history, which are stored in an Action Center-like sidebar. And although we didn't run any stringent speed tests, we did find Edge to be faster than IE. Finally, Cortana is integrated into Edge for personalised, voice-activated web browsing, but we couldn't fully test this as the digital assistant hadn't been completely rolled out at the time of writing.

Although Edge is an improvement over IE, many people moved to Firefox or Google Chrome after IE began to lag in terms of usability and features. At the moment, Edge still doesn't offer any compelling reason to switch back, but it is early days and Microsoft is likely to add more features to the browser in coming months.



Automatic updates

When Microsoft releases a Windows 10 update, the files will automatically download by default, which is a big change from past operating systems that provided greater control over download times. This is useful on the one hand, as it ensures your desktop, mobile and other devices are safe from major vulnerabilities, but it fails to take individual user factors into account, such as bandwidth limits and data caps.

Private practice

There have been many reports and user comments crying foul about Microsoft's privacy practices since the launch of Windows 10. Most of the criticisms are levelled at the default settings, which supposedly let Microsoft gather a broad range of personal data without clearly informing the user. Is there anything to worry about or has this been blown out of proportion?

What information can Microsoft gather?

By default, Windows 10 can gather a surprising amount including: information on your day-to-day desktop use, web activity which can help narrow down your interests and tastes (e.g. movies and food), your location, personal data via app and software accounts and even the content of SMS messages.

Is this a privacy nightmare?

We've received some questions from readers asking if Microsoft has permission to do this, and the short answer is yes, depending on how you set up your computer. Almost all of these options will be turned on if you select 'Express Settings' when configuring your system for the first time. When these options are turned on, you're giving Microsoft permission to gather your data, which is why some critics are pointing the finger at Microsoft for being less than transparent.

Most of these settings can be switched off after you install Windows 10. But before you raise concerns, it's worth considering the data gathering in the context of the operating system and any related apps. Some features require access to private information to function, such as Cortana, which means you won't be able to access all of the tools available with Windows 10, if you lock down the privacy settings.

However, some data tracking tools cannot be deactivated in the Home edition and don't provide you with any way to 'opt out', either. Microsoft claims this is acceptable as the software supposedly sticks to gathering system information to identify problems such as bugs, crashes or performance issues.



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Tuesday

Privacy
Location, camera

So what should I do?

Head to **Settings → Privacy**, look through each category and decide which features you want to leave on or turn off. A few settings that you should consider turning off include:

- **Start screen ads:** Go to **Settings → Personalization → Start** and turn off Occasionally show suggestions in Start.
- **Wi-Fi Sense:** This setting allows you to automatically connect to open Wi-Fi networks. However, that includes personal networks shared between friends via Facebook, Outlook and Skype. Once the network is shared, each party can log into the others' Wi-Fi networks without a password. We believe the convenience is not worth the risk of uninvited guests accessing your home network. Go to **Settings → Network → Wi-Fi → Manage Wi-Fi settings** and turn off **Connect to suggested open hotspots** and **Connect to networks shared by my contacts**.
- **System feedback frequency:** You can't turn off system feedback, but you can limit the amount of diagnostic data Microsoft can gather. Go to **Settings → Privacy → Feedback and diagnostics**, then switch **Windows should ask for my feedback** to **Never**, and **Send your device data to Microsoft** to **Basic**. This will reduce the risk of Windows sending back private content in diagnostic scans.
- **Search online and use web results:** The search function that's built into the tool bar (adjacent to the Start menu) can be used to explore your device and search the web. If you're searching for files that contain personal content however, the information you enter will be considered an online search as well, which could be captured by web tracking software. If you don't plan to use Cortana we recommend turning off search online by clicking the **search bar** then **settings (cog icon)**. Here, turn off **Search online and include web results**. If you want to use Cortana, leave this turned on and avoid searching for sensitive documents with this tool. ■

