Tools, Tips and Workflows
Operating Systems - Should you upgrade?
LP360

B S A U | A W G

Lewis Graham
February 2014
Revision 1.0

I recently moved up to a new engineering laptop computer (the new Dell M3800). This is a typical engineering grade laptop with high resolution display, NVidia graphics and GPU, 8 core processor and so forth. This system shipped from Dell with Windows 7 Professional Operating System (OS) rather than Windows 8.1. I found that rather curious; after all, Windows 8 has been around for a while and the M3800 has a touch screen. Now why it has a touch screen is beyond me since it has no tablet mechanical configuration but that's another story.

Anyway, I decided to reformat this machine to Windows 8.1. I had read several articles indicating that Windows 8.1 has better multi-display support than does Windows 7 and, besides, I wanted to ensure that LP360 was getting a thorough test under this configuration since Windows 7 Ultimate is our standard corporate OS.
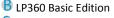
I can save you the trouble of reading the rest of this article. Windows 8.1 is most definitely not an engineering workstation operating system (sorry, Microsoft, but this is just the way it is!). Stick to Windows 7, 64 bit for now. News is circulating that Windows 9 will be released in the Spring of 2015 so it looks as if Windows 8 is turning in to a Vista story.

So now a bit of detail, if you still insist on giving Windows 8.1 a go. Let me begin with a caveat – I am not a Windows expert so feel free to send those emails offering corrections to what I got wrong – that's how we all learn.

Windows 8 (I actually have this on a tablet PC) was a very tablet PC-centric OS. So much so that no one was buying Windows 8 for desktop PCs. Microsoft did a minor course correction and released the Windows 8.1 update. Now based on what I see in Windows 8.1, version 8.0 must have been pure tablet! The best top level description of Windows 8.1 is the employment of an Easter egg strategy for the user interface (UI). To be fair, Apple has taken this same strategy with iOS 7. By Easter egg, I mean that many UI elements are simply not visible – you have to hunt around for them. Swipe up for this, swipe down for that, left for one thing, right for something else. One needs a gestures Rosetta stone to figure this out! Of course, all this swiping and tapping was designed for a finger on a touch screen. If you are using a mouse, it seems that you must hover over certain magical (and invisible) areas in the corners of the screen. Unfortunately, these seem to be based on pixels rather than real world dimensions so the higher your screen resolution (typically very high for engineering workstations), the smaller these secret areas.

I am determined not to be an old guy who just resists change so I worked on this for a week. I had to be able to train myself to like this new interface. Alas, I reached the point where I was about to smash my nice 24" monitors with a sledge hammer, when to the rescue came "Classic Shell" (www.classicshell.net), a free application that patches up Windows 8.1 into a semi-usable GUI; very highly recommended if you are using Windows 8.1 in a desktop configuration.

There are certain aspects of Windows 8.1 for which I have not found a work-around. The worst are applications designed for the Microsoft Metro (now called "Modern UI") interface. These applications run in full monitor (not full window, full monitor) mode and there is nothing that I have found (third party

B LP360 Basic Edition	A ArcGIS	QCoherent Software LLC
S LP360 Standard Edition	W Windows	www.LP360.com
U LP360 sUAS Edition	G GeoCue	256-461-8289 (phone)
A LP360 Advanced Edition		256-461-8249 (fax)

patches and so forth) to change this behavior. This means that when you start up one of these Metro apps, it simply fills your entire monitor. Thus if you have a dual screen workstation, you may be able to visualize two applications (although I have not yet figured out how one launches a Metro app on the secondary monitor). So Windows 8.1 effectively turns Windows into Window. Fortunately, no serious applications that I use (including all of the Microsoft Office products) have been updated to Metro so this is only occasionally an annoyance (for example, the built in image viewer of Windows 8.1 is a Metro app).

8.1 has incorporated some elements of the old Vista Aero themes into the desktop, regardless of the theme that you pick. For example, the Task Bar is semi-transparent, leading you to believe that you can click on buttons of dialogs that you see through the task bar. Not so – you can partially see through it but you cannot poke through it. A note to developers. The display system of Windows 8.x has changed so that you can no longer get away with mixing OpenGL and GDI in the same window. Now to be fair, you were never supposed to do this in the first place but prior versions of Windows were quite forgiving in this area. We will be soon releasing a service pack to LP360 to correct the areas where we were not careful about this!

Well, for a Microsoft Gold partner, this has been pretty negative! Is there anything good about Windows 8? Yes, I have found a few things I really like. You can put your task bar on every monitor. This means you no longer have to mouse back to the primary monitor for launching tasks. Task Manager is greatly improved under Windows 8. It provides much more organized information about running processes and allows you to directly vector to useful places such as Service Manager. All of the applications that I used under Windows 7 seem to be available for Windows 8 (sans Metro interfaces, thank goodness!). So now a month later, I can say that I am functional on Windows 8.

The bottom line is that Windows 7, 64 bit is an industrial strength workstation operating system that has proven bullet proof for our uses here at GeoCue. Windows 8 and 8.1 were noble but failed attempts to meet both the needs of desktop users and tablet uses not only with the same OS but with the same Graphical User experience. It simply does not work. My advice – if you are on an OS that predates Windows 7, upgrade to Windows 7, 64 bit. If you are on Windows 7 now, wait and see how Windows 9 turns out.