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Whether you like it or not, the next version of Microsoft's Operating System is coming. The popularity of Microsoft's Operating System among end users covers a big range of emotions running the gamut from those who love everything that comes out of Redmond (the Microsoft suck-ups) to those who believe Bill Gates has a conspiracy against all that is good and right in the world, and that Apple's OS X is the way to go.

In my experience, the direction Vista is taking is dead on. It combines the best historical features of Windows with elegant usability concepts drawn from the Macintosh world. Hey, remember the original Windows was built upon the same philosophy. My test drive of the new Beta 2 release of Windows Vista turned up two big surprises. First, I was surprised that, unlike other Microsoft betas, this one is indeed a beta. The consumer version of the operating system was delayed until an estimated ship date in January 2007, and with this version (Beta 2), I have found there are still lots of glitches that need to be fixed. If you decide to download and install this beta, be sure you backup all your data because you will most likely be rebuilding the machine upon which you load it.

The second thing I was surprised about was the glitziness of the interface; it's much more suited to the consumer PC user than the business consumer. Don't get me wrong, business users will like the crisp interface and new usability tools, but generally business users just want their computers to help them get their work done — it doesn't matter if the interface looks pretty. For businesses, the important addition (and biggest question) will be whether the improved security promised to be provided by Vista will be worth the expense of the beefier PC hardware required to run it properly. As a result of the new hardware requirements, I'm betting most accountants will probably

migrate from Windows XP to Vista later rather than sooner. In contrast, consumers

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is pretty customizable. Some are a little (yawn) boring like the one that shows the time and temperature, but others have the potential to spice up those long conference calls (like Video Poker and Sudoku). Remember the boss screen (for those who don't, it was a game of Free Cell that minimized to an Excel spreadsheet titled budget.xls)? It may be time for another boss key for these intriguing gadgets available for the sidebar.

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### **Aero Glass GUI —**

I really like the new graphical user interface; however, Aero Glass is available only if your PC is outfitted with a video graphics card carrying at least 128MB of video memory (see what I mean about hardware?). You also need to get a special Windows Display Driver Model (WDDM) driver for your video card. Early WDDM drivers are included with Vista, and graphics card makers are getting their drivers ready.

Vista's success will not just be tied to a new UI and usability —

Success will also be determined by the surrounding applications and services needed to compete with the likes of the well-known iTunes juggernaut. Hence the introduction of Windows Media Player (WMP) 11. WMP 10 did a good job of ridding itself of earlier version limitations and was quite useable. WMP 11 adds a slick new look and an integrated music store called URGE (URGE is a new online music store Microsoft has launched in partnership with MTV). So now we have the first Windows-based alternative to iTunes that has a real chance of success. The URGE model, however, is different — it is a subscription service where you pay about \$15 per month for all you can listen to (but not own). This particular model has some potential upside, compared to Apple's 99-cents-per-song fixed pricing. If you just want to see WMP 11,

a version for Windows XP is currently available and can be downloaded and

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