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Ericuse165 asked the Windows forum which is better: the 32- or 64-bit version of Windows 7. You can run today's versions of Windows on 32-bit processors—a standard that's been around for about 25 years—and on newer, backward-compatible 64-bit processors. Of course, everything has to have an acronym in this industry, so the Windows-compatible 64-bit standard is also known as x64. That's fine, but the 32-bit standard is abbreviated as x86. If you don't understand the history, that's just plain confusing. Because x64 processors are backwards-compatible, you can install and run 32-bit as well as 64bit versions of Windows onto them. Of course, if you bought an x64 computer from a major manufacturer, it almost certainly came with 64-bit Windows pre-installed. You cannot install or run 64-bit Windows on a 32-bit PC. The 64-bit version of Windows has certain advantages. While the 32-bit version is limited to 4GB of RAM—and can't really make use of all that—the 64-bit version can address up to 8TB. While you won't be able to actually install that much RAM (or afford it) for a long time to come, you can buy a 64-bit computer today with 12GB installed. Speaking of things that aren't quite there yet, 64-bit applications should run faster than their 32-bit equivalents. But as I write this, very few native 64-bit applications exist, and they're not necessarily improvements (most 32-bit applications run just fine in Windows x64). In fact, although Microsoft Office 2010 comes with 32- and 64-bit versions on the same DVD, Microsoft recommends you install only the 32-bit version. And, of course, 64-bit Windows has its disadvantages: While most 32-bit applications have no problem in a 64-bit environment, utilities—which tend to work close to the OS's core—are seldom as versatile. For instance, a program that inserts itself into Windows Explorer's context menu has to be rewritten to work with the x64 version of Explorer. More and more utilities today are getting rewritten to work properly in Windows x64. Another problem: Early, 16-bit Windows (and DOS) programs, written to be compatible with pre-Windows 95 Microsoft operating systems, will not work at all in the 64-bit environment. (They will work in a 32-bit version of Windows running on 64-bit hardware.) That's significant from a historical point of view—for the first time, we have Windows operating systems that won't run the original, IBM-PC version of VisiCalc. But for most people, that shouldn't be an issue. Read the original forum discussion. Add your comments to this article below. If you have other tech questions, email them to me at [answer@pcworld.com](mailto:answer@pcworld.com), or post them to a community of helpful folks on the PCW Answer Line forum. As I think about the hardware technologies that Windows 7 is likely to usher in, one of the most obvious is that 64-bit computing is going to become the standard. That's not saying all that much, since Windows is already in a 64-bit version, nearly all current server operating systems are 64-bit, and the current version of Mac OS ships with a 64-bit mode as well. Indeed, the first 64-bit version of Windows was a version of XP released more than 4 years ago.64-bit computing has one major and obvious advantage: It supports more memory. 32-bit operating systems max out at 4GB of memory, and that includes the memory used by components such as graphics cards. 64-bit computing also offers the potential of somewhat faster performance, since it would take better advantage of the 64-bit processors that are now standard in today's personal computers. (In practice, though, I haven't seen any real advantage here for anything but very large database applications, and you're likely to be running those on a server anyway.)That's why, even with Windows Vista, any consumer PC you were likely to buy with 4GB came with the 64-bit version. As a result, many of the issues caused by a lack of drivers that early users encountered have been addressed. As I said the last time I wrote about it, my biggest questions centered on Flash for the 64-bit browser and VPN clients; I was also worried about NaturallySpeaking, but now there's a good 64-bit version of that. As it turns out, there's good news and bad news.First, regarding Adobe Flash, the company continues to say it is working on 64-bit versions of its Flash Player 10 for both Windows and Mac. For now, the answer is pretty simple: Windows 7 defaults to the 32-bit browser; though there's a simple menu item to bring up the 64-bit version. (In practice, you're unlikely to see many other differences, though the 64-bit version adds some more security features.) Firefox is generally available only in a 32-bit version, though there are some sites with 64-bit versions out there. But again, the 32-bit version works just fine on the 64-bit version of Windows.On the VPN front, the older Cisco VPN Client (IPSEC) was a pain to get running even on 32-bit Windows 7, though I was able to use the existing 5.0 version by following a workaround I found at [sevenforums.com](http://sevenforums.com). When I last wrote about it, Cisco had told me the company was not going to do a version of the IPSEC client for Windows 7, instead promoting its AnyConnect SSL solution. That's now changed. Cisco has released a beta version of its 32-bit client, version 5.0.06.0100 (corporate customers can download it from Cisco's Web site). It installed and worked for me without a hitch. Cisco now tells me this version should go final before Windows 7's official on-sale date, October 22.As for 64-bit support, Cisco says the AnyConnect client works today—which doesn't help if you connect to an older VPN—and is "actively working through a plan for support for the Cisco VPN client." In the meantime, I've tried out NCP's Secure Entry Client and found that does work on 64-bit Windows 7. It's \$144, but with a free 30-day evaluation period, so it's not inexpensive, which makes me appreciate Snow Leopard's built-in IPSEC client even more. Alternatively, you can use XP Mode or another virtual machine, such as VirtualBox.Memory prices dropped dramatically earlier this year but are now rebounding. Still, you know that the long-term trend is always towards lower prices, and thus we'll likely see more systems coming with 4GB and more of memory. That will likely mean that the 64-bit version of Windows 7 will eventually become more dominant than the 32-bit version.I expect this will take some time, as there are still some compatibility issues to be worked out, mainly for corporate applications. But while it's taking a bit longer than I would have guessed, the 64-bit transition seems inevitable.For more of Michael Miller's take on technology, read his blog Forward Thinking. Got a copy of Windows 7 you're looking to bend to your will? Then you'll want a copy of Windows 7 Manager, which lets you tweak, customize, master and improve just about every aspect of Windows 7. Whether you're looking to tweak security, improve optimization, clean your system, master your network or more, you'll find something here. Though it covers a lot of territory, everything is laid out cleanly in Windows 7 Manager. Click what you want to improve, such as Security, Network, Optimizer, and so on, and you'll come to a screen full of options. In some cases you won't need to know anything about the innards of Windows 7, because sets of wizards guide you through the task. In other instances, you'll need to have some technical background, because you have to make choices among check boxes—for example, if you want to accelerate your network connection, you'll need to understand terms and technologies such as Maximum Transmission Unit (TMU) size, TCP/IP Timeout Life (TTL), and "Enable SackOpts." The amount of control Windows 7 Manager gives you is extraordinary. Want to change the mouse hover time before a pop-up displays? You can do that. Want to manage what programs run at startup? You can do that as well. You can also repair hardware and software problems, optimize your broadband connection and more. The same developer makes a similar program for Windows Vista, called Windows Vista Manager, which looks and works very much like Windows 7 Manager. Anyone who used Windows Vista Manager will very easily make the switch to Windows 7 Manager; the interface and functions are very similar. The program doesn't come cheap, though. You'll most likely only want to pay for Windows 7 Manager if you want to do a great deal of customization. Note: This software comes in 32-bit and 64-bit versions. This is the 64-bit version, which is for 64-bit PCs running a 64-bit OS. If your PC is running a different supported OS, please download the 32-bit version instead. --Preston Gralla Most new PCs have been shipping with the 64-bit version of Windows — both Windows 7 and 8 — for years now. 64-bit bit versions of Windows aren't just about taking advantage of additional memory. They're also more secure than 32-bit versions. 64-bit operating systems aren't immune to malware, but they do have more security features. Some of this also applies to 64-bit versions of other operating systems, such as Linux. Linux users will gain security advantages by switching to a 64-bit version of their Linux distribution. Address Space Layout Randomization ASLR is a security feature that causes a program's data locations to be randomly arranged in memory. Before ASLR, a program's data locations in memory could be predictable, which made attacks on a program much easier. With ASLR, an attacker has to guess the correct location in memory when trying to exploit a vulnerability in a program. An incorrect guess may result in the program crashing, so the attacker won't be able to try again. This security feature is also used on 32-bit versions of Windows and other operating systems, but it's much more powerful on 64-bit versions of Windows. A 64-bit system has a much larger address space than a 32-bit system, making ASLR that much more effective. Mandatory Driver Signing The 64-bit version of Windows enforces mandatory driver signing. All driver code on the system must have a digital signature. This includes kernel-mode device drivers and user-mode drivers, such as printer drivers. Mandatory driver signing prevents unsigned drivers provided by malware from running on the system. Malware authors will have to somehow bypass the signing process through a boot-time rootkit or manage to sign the infected drivers with a valid certificate stolen from a legitimate driver developer. This makes it more difficult for infected drivers to run on the system. Driver signing could also be enforced on 32-bit versions of Windows, but it isn't — likely for continued compatibility with old 32-bit drivers that may not have been signed. To disable driver signing during development on 64-bit editions of Windows, you would have to attach a kernel debugger or use a special startup option that doesn't persist across system reboots. Kernel Patch Protection KPP, also known as PatchGuard, is a security feature only found on 64-bit versions of Windows. PatchGuard prevents software, even drivers running in kernel-mode, from patching the Windows kernel. This has always been unsupported, but it's technically possible on 32-bit versions of Windows. Some 32-bit antivirus programs have implemented their antivirus protection measures using kernel patching. PatchGuard prevents device drivers from patching the kernel. For example, PatchGuard prevents rootkits from modifying the Windows kernel to embed themselves in the operating system. If an attempt at kernel patching is detected, Windows will immediately shut down with a blue screen or reboot. This protection could be put into place on the 32-bit version of Windows, but it hasn't been — likely for continued compatibility with legacy 32-bit software that depends on this access. Data Execution Protection DEP allows an operating system to mark certain areas of memory as "non-executable" by setting an "NX bit." Areas of memory that are supposed to hold data only will not be executable. For example, on a system without DEP, an attacker could use some sort of buffer overflow to write code into a region of an application's memory. This code could then be executed. With DEP, the attacker could write code into a region of the application's memory — but this region would be marked as not-executable and could not be executed, which would stop the attack. 64-bit operating systems have hardware-based DEP. While this is also supported on 32-bit versions of Windows if you have a modern CPU, the default settings are more stringent and DEP is always enabled for 64-bit programs, while it's disabled by default for 32-bit programs for compatibility reasons. The DEP configuration dialog in Windows is a bit misleading. As Microsoft's documentation states, DEP is always used for all 64-bit processes: "System DEP configuration settings apply only for 32-bit applications and processes when running on 32-bit or 64-bit versions of Windows. On 64-bit versions of Windows, if hardware-enforced DEP is available it is always applied to 64-bit processes and kernel memory spaces and there are no system configuration settings to disable it." WOW64 64-bit versions of Windows run 32-bit Windows software, but they do it through a compatibility layer known as WOW64 (Windows 32-bit on Windows 64-bit). This compatibility layer enforces some restrictions on these 32-bit programs, which may prevent 32-bit malware from functioning properly. 32-bit malware will also be unable run in kernel mode — only 64-bit programs can do that on a 64-bit OS — so this may prevent some older 32-bit malware from functioning properly. For example, if you have an old audio CD with the Sony rootkit on it, it won't be capable of installing itself on a 64-bit version of Windows. 64-bit versions of Windows also drop support for old 16-bit programs. In addition to preventing ancient 16-bit viruses from executing, this will also force companies to upgrade their ancient 16-bit programs that could be vulnerable and unpatched. Given how widespread 64-bit versions of Windows now are, new malware will likely be capable of running on 64-bit Windows. However, the lack of compatibility can help protect against old malware in the wild. Unless you use creaky old 16-bit programs, ancient hardware that only offers 32-bit drivers, or a computer with a fairly old 32-bit CPU, you should be using the 64-bit version of Windows. If you're not sure which version you're using but you have a modern computer running Windows 7 or 8, you're likely using the 64-bit edition. Of course, none of these security features is foolproof, and a 64-bit version of Windows is still vulnerable to malware. However, 64-bit versions of Windows are definitely more secure. Image Credit: William Hook on Flickr

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