

What happened to the Shut Down menu in classic Task Manager?

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The great thing about open comments is that anybody can use them to introduce their favorite gripe as long as it shares at least four letters of the alphabet in common with the putative topic of the base article. xpclient “asks” why the Shut Down menu was removed from Task Manager. I put the word “asks” in quotation marks, because it’s really a complaint disguised as a question. As in “Why do you guys suck?” The first thing to understand is that classic Task Manager went into a state of sustained engineering since Windows 2000. In other words, the component is there, but there is no serious interest in improving it. (That’s why it wasn’t updated to call EnableThemeDialogTexture on its pages.) It’s not like there’s a *Task Manager Team* of five people permanently dedicated to making Task Manager as awesome as possible for every release of Windows. Rather, the responsibility for maintaining Task Manager is sort of tacked onto somebody whose primary responsibilities are for other parts of the system. There are a lot of Windows components in this state of “internal sustained engineering.” The infamous “Install font” dialog, for example. The responsibility for maintaining these legacy components is spread out among the product team so that on average, teams are responsible both for cool, exciting things and some not-so-cool, legacy things. (On the other hand, according to xpclient, an app must be serving its users really well if it hasn’t changed much, so I guess that *Install font* dialog is the best dialog box in all of Windows at serving its users, seeing as it hasn’t changed since 1995.) The engineering budget for these components in internal sustained engineering is kept to a minimum, both because there is no intention of adding new features, and also because the components are so old that there is unlikely to be any significant work necessary in the future. Every so often, some work becomes necessary, and given that the engineering interest and budget are both very low, the simplest way out when faced with a complicated problem in a rarely-used feature is simply to remove the rarely-used feature. And that’s what happened to the Shut Down menu. (Note that it’s two words “Shut down” since it is being used as a verb, not a noun.) Given the changes to power management in Windows Vista, the algorithm used by Task Manager was no longer accurate. And instead of keeping Task Manager updated with every change, the Shutdown user interface design team agreed to give the Task Manager engineering team a break and say, “Y’know, the Shut Down menu on Task Manager is rarely-used, so we’ll let you guys off the hook on this one, so you don’t keep getting weekly requests from us to change the

way Shut Down works.” I remember, back in the days of Windows XP, seeing the giant spreadsheet used by the person responsible for overall design of the Shutdown user interface. It tracked the gazillion group policies, user settings, and system configurations which all affect how shutting down is presented to the user. Removing the column for Task Manager from the spreadsheet probably was met with a huge sigh of relief, not just from the Task Manager engineering team, but also from the person responsible for the spreadsheet.

Remember, engineering is about trade-offs. If you decide to spend more effort making Task Manager awesome, you lose the ability to expend that effort on something else. (And given that you are expending effort in a code base that is relatively old and not fresh in the minds of the people who would be making those changes, you also increase the likelihood that you’re going to introduce a bug along the way.)

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