

Software Review

Microsoft Virtual PC 7 for Macintosh

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Virtual PC 7 (VPC 7) is just what it sounds like it might be. Install it on your Mac and you have a PC virtual machine running within Mac OS, similar to the Java virtual machine [Sun calls it the "Java Runtime Environment"] every Mac user has running already, because it is included as a package with Mac OS. See <http://www.apple.com/macosx/architecture/>

Installing Windows:

Once Virtual PC is running you can install any version of Windows OS, or even Linux, if you wish (and you are not limited to one VM, you can have as many as you want, disc space permitting). Then you can run programs like Punch Home Design and such for Windows... applications that don't have Mac versions, and drag and drop between the Windows and the Mac desktops. And, with the new VPC 7, you can use whatever printer you already have set up on your Mac too!

Installation is simple. Just slip CD number one into the drive and follow the easy instructions. If you already have a licensed copy of Windows you can buy Virtual PC bare bones, but if not, order the version that has a Windows package included that installs a Windows Virtual Machine quick and slick as a whistle, without having to go through the full Windows installation routine required when starting from scratch with a regular windows installation disc.

If you currently have a version of Windows running in VPC 6 or earlier that you would like to import into VPC 7, make sure you do a full Windows shut down on it before installing VPC 7, rather than just the "Save State" (hibernate) option. If you don't, VPC 7 won't import it, it will just lock up and sit there all night. We speak from experience. Took us three weeks to figure out what was wrong with that virtual machine.

Running Windows programs:

Don't expect VPC to handle your PC copy of Doom 3 for one simple reason: Video RAM. Even more than other modern games, Doom 3 requires a boatload of VRAM (at least 64MB). VPC still tops out at 16MB, and the default is a ridiculously low 4MB. Another weak performance link is RAM; you can delegate only 512MB of your Mac's RAM to power the emulated PC. Too bad, since we'd like to see if a couple gigs of RAM would speed things up.

Overall performance:

VPC 7's speed isn't all that impressive, compared to what you might be used to with your Mac, but we have to give Microsoft credit for making version 7 noticeably quicker than version 6 was – and this is on the same Dual 1.25GHz Power Mac G4 we used to test version 6 just last year.

So, VPC 7 is noticeably quicker than VPC 6 was, but you might still experience some of the slow, clunky redraws and interface lag time that can plague any Windows machine, compared to a slick graphics processing Mac.

New features in version 7:

Other than significant retooling for Apple's latest wares (namely the G5 processor and Mac OS 10.3), Virtual PC's list of major new features is short. Printing is greatly improved; VPC taps right into your Mac's existing print drivers, so you don't need to install a driver for most printers. And even if your printer needs a driver, you can install it normally on your Mac and Virtual PC will tap into it from the Windows environment.

Version 7 seems to be more about improving old VPC features than adding new ones. In preferences, for example, you can set up the PC much more precisely than before, taking control over everything from those annoying Windows OS alerts (yes, we know our PC may be infected—stop being redundant) to CPU usage, and a mainline button to launch the PC Settings dialog from VPC Preferences. That may seem like a no-brainer, but it's easy to forget about the PC Settings, and you can use them to eek some of the clunkiness out of your faux Windows system.

The bottom line. Even these days when you can score a real Windows box for barely more than VPC's price, still you might want to seriously think about Virtual PC instead of getting involved whole hog with the real Wintel deal.