



Virtual PC 6

Review of Microsoft Virtual PC 6.1 for Mac

This review is of Virtual PC version 6.1. Version 6.1 will run on Macs that use a G4 processor. For Macs that have the newer G5 processors, virtual PC 7.0 or higher is required.

There are some nice features in this version that did not exist in previous versions. An icon for the application “virtual PC”, as well as an icon for the windows “start” menu now appears in your dock, allowing you easy access to the application. You can also mount a drive on the Mac desktop, and open it from the PC, a very nice feature.

Installation is very easy, as it is now a simple drag and drop process that will seem familiar to all Mac users. One does have to “activate” the application, in the same way that any PC user would have to do when installing Windows on a real PC. But this is also simple and painless.

There are a number of steps to follow for various options of installation, such as if you need to import a “legacy” drive (from a previous version of VPC), but these options did not apply to me, and I did not have to use any of them. This was the first time that VPC had been installed on our Macs.

Double clicking the application icon starts up Virtual PC in the same way that you would start up any Mac application.

I installed this version on two Macs, one a year 2000 Prismo that had been upgraded to a 550 MHz G4, and the other, a one year old iMac running a 1.25 MHz G4, with a much more powerful graphics card. VPC asks you allocate a certain amount ram to the application. I chose to assign 386 Megs to VPC on both the iMac and on the Powerbook. I expect that performance would improve as the amount of ram allotted went up.

The Windows desktop picture looked amazing on the iMacs 20" LCD screen.

My first test of VPC involved browsing the web. I tried out both Internet Explorer, and Mozilla's FireFox on both machines. Both worked surprisingly well, with no crashes or inability to render web pages. The older laptop, however, took much longer to render the graphics from the web pages. This was to prove true for any task that required image processing. It's old 128 rage graphic card with only 8 Meg of ram was just not up to the task.

I then fired up MSN instant messenger, and was once again happy to find that it also worked just fine on both machines. Sending and receiving messages did not stress the older powerbook nearly as much as handling image files, and the chats moved along on either machine without undo slowdowns. But sending a file to a PC user with instant messenger under VPC failed. I have never been able to send a file to a PC user while using MSN instant messenger for the Mac, either, and I was really hoping that I would be able do this with VPC, but no luck.

I had no trouble printing from my laptop using VPC. The printer that I had hooked to the laptop was recognized by VPC and

appeared in the printer list a few seconds after I turned it on. I was able to print right away. It was not quite as simple with our iMac. We have a Lexmark printer connected to the iMac, and VPC gave a notice that it could not find the appropriate driver for that printer. I was able, however, to browse to Lexmark's website, using Internet Explorer, from VPC, and download and install the driver. Installation was exactly like any Windows installation, with a "Wizard" doing all of the work. After install I was able to print just fine.

Then I decided to try a more challenging application. I downloaded Picasa 2 from Google. Picasa is a photo application for the PC that is in many ways very similar to iPhoto for the Mac. It is a search tool, an organizer, an editor, and allows you to share your pictures via e-mail, among other things.

As before the installation was easy, with a typical Windows wizard handling the process. After install, the application immediately asks to scan your computer for image files. I set up a shared folder (which is a function accessible from the Windows taskbar) and moved several folders of photos from my Mac to the "my pictures" folder on the virtual PC. Then I let Picasa do its scan.

On my laptop Picasa came to a complete standstill. Only gray squares appeared where there should have been thumbnails of my photos.... The old rage 128 card had failed at this chore. I did exactly the same thing on the newer iMac, and Picasa found and organized all the images from the folders flawlessly, if a bit slowly, compared to doing the same sort of thing in native OS X mode. I was able to run the slideshow and able to display and edit images individually as expected.

An interesting thing to note is that the Virtual PC application has copy protection that allows it to be running on only one computer at a time. My two Macs were hooked to the same local network, and if I tried to start up VPC on the second machine while it was still running on the first, a message would pop up on both machines stating that another machine on this network was already running this copy of VPC and that I had to quit the application on the first machine before it could finish start up on the second machine.

Conclusion

While VPC will never win any speed contests compared with using the native OS, it WILL allow you do do things that are simply not available on the Mac, (Like Picasa). That is what it is for, and it works well for that purpose. However, if you really need to do processor intensive work, and you do not have the fastest Mac, you will probably tire of the lag times that you will inevitably encounter during these tasks.

All in all I was pleased with how well VPC worked. It was VERY much like running any PC, only slower. AND... as an unexpected bonus, I found that I was able to take screen shots of the PC in exactly the same easy way that we do on the Mac ... (shift /command/ 3 or 4)..... What a treat!!

Wayne Schlueter

kitway@commspeed.net