

Silent PC

Move from PC to iMac and the noise will go away

Introduction

People have different reasons for moving from PCs to Macs. Mine was not intentional at all. I use PCs in a professional setting, since I am an IT project manager and consultant. However, I have always been put off by the amount of noise that those PC boxes emit. It seems the faster they become the more noise they make. It must be the sportscar syndrome, but it does nothing for me. I want my PC as quiet as possible. Over time I have built many workstations and servers and have done everything possible to keep them quiet, but when you have 7 fans or more in a metal case there is just no way to avoid hearing them. It's not really the noise that much, because you can get used to that, but it's those blasted resonances that develop when there are other noises from other devices in the vicinity colliding with the droning of the PC and the result is a low frequency warble that just drives me up the wall.

I was quite surprised when I saw a large iMac for sale at my local Best Buy store a while ago. Attracted by the low price and the large screen I held my ear to it as closely as I could. I couldn't hear any noise whatsoever, although a shop environment is probably not a good test location. It only has a screen, keyboard and mouse, but no noisy tower, or desktop unit. All components are fitted inside the monitor. Quite ingenious.

What finally clinched it for me was when I discovered that I could only do program development for the iPhone on a Mac. I then discovered that with VMWare for the Mac you can run your PC software on the Mac. I am used to working on a rather large monitor, so I needed to make sure that the Mac had at least the same resolution and screen size as my PC monitor. On this basis I went ahead and bought a 2.66 GHz dual-core iMac with a 24 inch screen. It had just been reduced because they brought out a new 2.93 GHz machine.

Snags and Surprises

The implementation/conversion was far simpler than I could ever have imagined. This is no doubt in a large part due to the simplicity and effectiveness of the VMWare software. However, there were also a few snags.

Implementation/Conversion Steps

After unpacking the iMac it was nice to find that I had no OS software to install. All I had to do was tweak the configuration to suit my needs. For example, I like to work with a totally black desktop background. There were also far too many tools that started

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automatically, such as the calculator, and stickies, which I removed, because I don't need them. Unlike the PC you start your Mac applications from the folders where they are stored. In other words, there is no START menu, like on the PC. So, I rearranged the programs I needed most into folders that I could easily recognize. This is a complete no-no on PCs, because if you move a program then it usually won't work any more.

Then I found, to my surprise, that I didn't need to install any PC software on the Mac. With VMWare you simply grab the whole disk contents of the PC and move it, as a complete image, onto the Mac, thus creating a 'virtual machine', which is to all intents and purposes identical to your PC.

But, in order to achieve this, I had to get a large enough external disk drive that I could attach to the PC, copy the whole content on, and then attach to the Mac, to copy the content off. I went and bought a Western Digital Diskbook with 500 GB.

After installing the PC image on the Mac I was completely stunned to see an absolutely identical desktop again. I really had my PC software on the Mac in one step.

But then I realized, since all my computers are on a network, that the PC on the Mac had the same network name as the original PC. So I went ahead and renamed both of them. Now I have a PC_old and a PC_mac.

Then I found that the standard Mac keyboard did not allow me to use the same key shortcuts as I was used to on the PC. You can't just attach a PC keyboard to a Mac, because you also need the special Mac keys. So, I looked around and at Fry's I found a keyboard from Kensington that has both, PC and Mac keys. It also has two USB connections built in, just as the Mac keyboard, which is very handy for connecting SD card readers, etc.

Later I found that the PC virtual machine does not have enough CPU power as the original PC, but pretty close. I was amazed, because I expected much more power loss through the PC emulation.

Assignment of devices, such as USB ports and CD/DVD drive is fully automatic. Even network printers work just as before. I was amazed.

One unfortunate side-effect is that now some programs assume that they are running on a brand new system and wanted re-installation. Rather than doing that I started to compile a document with a list showing where some of these exceptional programs should be run from. For example, there is no point running Google Earth on the virtual PC, because it is too slow. You can easily download a Mac version of Google Earth and run it straight off the Mac.

So, I gradually moved from using the PC emulator only in exceptional circumstances, for example, for software such as Adobe products, where I don't have a Mac version yet, to using the native Mac primarily, with Mac Office, etc.

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I hardly ever go back to the noisy PC anymore, primarily for playing Flight Simulator, where the noise of the game overrides the noise of the PC anyway, and where I need the raw power of that beefy computer.

Over time I have collected a toolbox of my favorite programs that more or less allow me to work without hardly ever needing to go back to PC software. These tools are:

- Chicken of the VNC for access to Linux servers
- Filezilla for FTP to servers
- MySQL tools for access to MySQL databases
- Opera and Firefox for Internet Web browsing
- TextWrangler for a language-sensitive text editor
- Thunderbird – for mail
- Adobe Photoshop for graphics editing

If I do need to go and start up the PC virtual machine then it's primarily for client-specific programs, such as Adobe (Pagemaker, Framemaker, Premiere), VPN software, IBM software, Accounting software, MS Project, Visio, and Wordperfect.

Recently I upgraded the Mac OS to Snow Leopard, which, for \$24 for a single license is very reasonable. Compare this with \$199 for an upgrade of Vista to Windows 7.

Finally, the 'go green' aspect should also be mentioned. I have not yet measured the power consumption of an iMac compared with a similarly powerful PC. But I would guess that the difference is substantial. The other difference I noticed is the time it takes to start up and shut down a Mac. On the PC you have to wait quite a long time, but on the Mac it's just a matter of seconds. So, many PC users keep their machine running day and night. Sometimes even hibernation on the PC is not as reliable as it should be. In contrast, the Mac has been ultra-reliable in this respect. After a few minutes of idleness, it automatically goes into hibernation and is up and running again with just a single key-click. It doesn't even take a second to come out of hibernation. The amazement of an old PC addict just doesn't seem to end. Shutting down is also a matter of seconds, not minutes.

Conclusion

I never had any intention of becoming a Mac convert. I worked on a Mac many years ago, and thought in the meantime that it lost the edge over PCs, because of the range of software available. In any case, MS Office on the Mac is nearly identical to MS Office on the PC. But when I now sit and work on this quiet computer all day, I don't miss the noisy PC a bit. I was quite frankly wrong in underestimating how much the operating system and ingenious hardware design can add to enjoying work on a computer. The conversion with VMWare was far easier than I could have ever imagined.