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MacBook, OS/X, Boot Camp and Windows 7: The Perfect Partners.

Looking for a fun machine that can also do serious work? In this account of a changeover from Microsoft Windows XP and Vista microcomputers, Stewart Adam finds the perfect partners are an Apple MacBook running the latest OS/X—Snow Leopard—and the Boot Camp method of dual-booting Windows 7 x64 Ultimate.

In my daily work life in higher education, I am involved in teaching—much of it online using the Internet (Net). Even face-to-face teaching requires a microcomputer and Net connection not to mention the almost universal use of PowerPoint slides and all manner of video files—even if only to relieve student boredom. When engaged in the second part of my work—business and social research—I have the need of statistical software packages to analyse the data gathered from surveys, experiments and other collection methods.

Like many, I found myself relying on DOS-based microcomputers in the early years, and Microsoft Windows-based PCs for the past two decades. With teaching increasingly involving Podcasts (MP3 voice files in my case) and Vodcasts (screen capture of PowerPoint slides and voice capture) and my personal music storage and replay swinging to an Apple iPod Nano, I began to wonder if an Intel equipped Apple Mac might better suit my needs.

Enter the MacBook. Apple’s education price on their entry level MacBook, now sporting many of the features of the more expensive MacBook Pro, and equipped with an Intel 2.26Ghz Intel core 2 duo CPU and a 13.3” LED backlit widescreen display, won me over. I added another 2Gb of memory making 4Gb in all, and upgraded to a 500Gb hard drive at the time of purchase. You can make your own comparisons at http://www.apple.com/macbook/compare.html, but for me it was a simple choice, buying through Apple’s online store.

A few days later my shiny, new, white MacBook had arrived and was up and running. Snow Leopard, as the latest version of Apple’s OS/X is known, is a sweet operating system that features many applications (apps) to make life easier. These range from Dashboard tools (e.g., Calculator) to Photobooth and...
iMovie and on to Time Machine for easy backup management. For me, Microsoft's Office 2008 for the Mac is a necessity, as is the bibliographic package EndNote X2 which integrates easily with Word 2008. As my employer uses Exchange server for e-mail, I opted to use Entourage as my e-mail client. Entourage, part of the Microsoft Office 2008 for the Mac suite, is the equivalent of Microsoft Outlook for PCs, right down to the ability to synch with devices like the iPod Touch (the iPhone look-alike), and the iPhone itself, but not with Windows-based PDAs.

MacBooks for all

Needless to say, iTunes is the software needed to manage your music on iPod devices with the caveat that if you have already synched an iPod(s) using iTunes on a PC, then you will need to reformat the iPod(s) if you plan to continue using the Mac version of iTunes. I did this using the MacBook's wireless N connectivity to copy the music held in MP3 format on a Linux-based desktop used as a Media server—which is another story in itself.

Dual booting OS/X Snow Leopard and Windows 7

Having used a PC for so long, I was not as convinced that OS/X would appeal to me as the preceding paragraph might indicate. Added to this was the fact that one statistical modelling software package I use in the research part of my work life (AMOS) only runs on a Windows-based machine. I therefore decided that the MacBook would also need to run Windows. Since Windows 7 (Win 7) had recently hit the market and I wanted to use the full graphical capabilities of the MacBook, it came down to a choice between Win 7 Professional and Win 7 Ultimate since each can be used as a media server. The latter won out.

The next step entailed a decision between running a virtual version of Win 7 using the Parallels software package, or using OS/X's inbuilt Boot Camp app. to partition the hard drive and load Win 7. The fact that Parallels costs some $100+ and the availability of easy-to-follow guides on the Web for the Boot Camp dual-booting method made the choice an easy one. The chosen online guide entitled 'Using Boot Camp to install Windows 7 on your Mac. The Complete Walkthrough' can be found at http://www.amplehelp.net/2009/01/15/using-boot-camp-to-install-windows-7-on-your-mac-the-complete-walkthrough.

While written for the earlier version of OS/X (Leopard), it also applies to Snow Leopard. You will need the OS/X installation DVD, at least 10Gb of disk space, and as the guide recommends, back up your hard drive with Time Machine before starting. Suffice it to state that the graphical guide is complete and accurate. Given my uncertainty as to which operating system I would be relying on most, I allowed Boot Camp to leave OS/X on one 250Gb partition (MAC HD) and to create a second 250Gb partition (BOOTCAMP). I then inserted the Win 7 DVD and installed to the BOOTCAMP partition. This installation is no different to any other windows installation, and removing the Win 7 DVD allows the MacBook to boot back into Windows during installation. This is followed by installation of the OS/X Installation DVD when prompted so that the Win 7 drivers can be installed. Apple has thoughtfully supplied
all the needed Win 7 drivers on the OS/X Installation DVD, which accompanies the MacBook. The only aspect of the installation that did not follow the guide occurred when the WiFi driver that Boot Camp found on the OS/X Installation DVD failed to load. Once I had established that the WiFi needed the Broadcom bcm432xx driver from the many on the DVD for different Intel-based Macs, I copied the installer and driver files to the BOOTCAMP partition from the OS/X Installation DVD and installed from there, and then allowed Win 7 to update itself. In every other respect, the Win 7 installation was one of the smoothest encountered on any microcomputer.

Backups under OS/X and Windows 7
Another decision of note entailed choosing the method of backing up both partitions. As the MacBook has replaced a desktop with RAID 1 dual mirrored drives, and is to be used for research and publication of a findings in academic journals, in addition to books and coursework, backing up on a regular basis is an essential task. An external LaCie d2 quadra drive was chosen and two 500Gb partitions created—one for backing up the Mac HD, the other for backing up the BOOTCAMP (Win 7) partition. OS/X’s Time Machine app. can backup or image the Mac HD partition, but cannot be used to backup the Win 7 partition. While LaCie provide SilverKeeper software for backing up under Windows, and Windows 7 also provides a backup manager, I wanted to be able to back up both partitions from OS/X. After a little desk research and peer comments, Winclone was selected for backing up the BOOTCAMP partition. A review is available at http://www.macupdate.com/info.php?id=25932. Not having had to restore the BOOTCAMP partition yet, I cannot provide a first-hand testimonial as to Winclone’s true capabilities.

Which operating system do I now favour?
Which operating system do I favour after a few weeks of use? I am tending to favour OS/X over Windows 7. Increasingly, I am tending to let the MacBook boot straight into OS/X rather than hold down the ‘option’ key, which enables the choice between the two to be made. If you are wondering why, one reason is that running under OS/X gives 5–6 hours of battery use, which is quite close to the claimed 7 hours. Yes, one could achieve 7 hours but to do so would mean pressing the F1 key so that the bright backlit LED screen becomes darker. It would also mean turning off WiFi and ensuring that no programs are running in background. When using MS-Office and WiFi under Win 7 the battery power drains away before your very eyes.

Given that I have the MS-Office suite and other favourites like VLC media player (see http://www.videolan.org/vlc/) running on both operating systems there is little reason to use Windows other than to use the statistical modelling software mentioned earlier. Moreover, one can access files from one partition to the other, even if only in read form from OS/X. One thing I do miss when using OS/X is being able to synchronise a Windows-based mobile phone/PDA (Calendar, Contacts, Tasks, etc.) using Entourage as one can when using Outlook under Windows. Apple aficionados will simply answer: “Buy an iPhone!” Once again though it comes down to mobility from my perspective. My iPhone 2G Pocket PC usually gives me at least three days of battery life, while iPhone users seem to have difficulty getting one day of battery use. This is an issue I will leave to others to comment on more fully.

Summary
The only things I miss are having separate Delete and Backspace keys under Windows (Option+Delete removes whole words, while F7+Delete removes characters ahead of the cursor, under OS/X). I am now used to COMMAND+S to save under MS-Office for the Mac, which is the equivalent of CTRL+S under Windows. Similarly, COMMAND+SHIFT+3 under OS/X is the equivalent of SHIFT+PRTSC to capture screen under Win 7. However, I do miss the numeric keypad, which is not found on the MacBook keyboard or on the same size Bluetooth Mac keyboard. I do not miss using high overhead antivirus software that slows the computer down under Windows in favour of the low-overhead iAntivirus under OS/X, or no antivirus software at all if one believes the Apple aficionado.

On the whole, the MacBook is a fun machine that is being used for serious work, so I have no hesitation in recommending the same setup to others, with perhaps less hard disk space given over to a Windows partition. Offering a crisp LED screen, blistering processor and WiFi speeds, the MacBook is good value for money. As the screen capture shots under both operating systems show, the display quality is equal under both.

About the author
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