

Featured App of the Week: Oracle VirtualBox

Have you ever wanted to turn one computer into two, or maybe even more? Do you have older hardware you can't part with that doesn't have drivers compatible with your current computer?

Maybe you even want to pull all your beloved floppy-based games out of the closet and play them like the good ol' days. Then this week's featured app of the week is for you.



VirtualBox, a free program from Oracle, turns your current Windows, Mac, Linux or Solaris computer into a host that can simultaneously run almost any other operating system. It is a program popular with Mac users because it is a free alternative to the pricier Parallels application. VirtualBox allows OS X users to run Windows and its compatible applications inside a Mac environment without the need to reboot, as you would with a Windows installation in BootCamp.

Once VirtualBox is installed on the host computer, you can then set up "guest" virtual machines. Users can tailor these individual profiles by allocating how much processor power and memory to use, how much hard drive space to reserve as a "virtual" drive and other options. From there, the virtual machine acts exactly like a computer would. You would boot up the machine for the first time, install your chosen operating system, and run it as you would a real computer.

It is also a great way to run older versions of Windows to support older programs or hardware that can't run natively in Windows 7 or 8. For example, someone with an older Canon scanner could boot up a virtual Windows XP "machine" and operate the scanner. You can set up "shared" folders like you would in an operating system to exchange files over a network, only you are doing the transfer between the virtual machine and the host computer.

Virtual machines are also useful for testing purposes, and for keeping certain files or operations "sandboxed" — or kept safe and separate — from the host computer's operating system.

Oracle's VirtualBox is a great, free software application with practically endless uses, and is free to download from Oracle's website.