

Review: Downloading Mac software, made simple

January 26 2011, By DANA WOLLMAN , AP Technology Writer



In this screen shot provided by Apple Inc., a page of Apps from the Mac App Store is displayed. The store, available as a free upgrade on certain Macs, sells a host of games and software programs in one place, and makes installing them as easy as downloading an app on an iPhone. (AP Photo/Apple Inc.)

By now, many of you are familiar with the App Store on iTunes - the portal through which Apple Inc. sells mobile applications, or "apps," for its family of iPhones, iPads and iPod Touches.

Now, Apple has made downloading software on a [Mac computer](#) as easy as it is on an [iPhone](#).

The Mac App Store, which launched this month, lets Mac owners browse various categories of software in one place, both from Apple Inc. and outside parties. Moreover, downloading apps is as easy as clicking

"Buy" and letting the software install itself.

I set up the Mac App Store on my [MacBook](#) and spent a week treating myself to new games and other apps. Suffice it to say, I can get used to having a computer that tries to be as smart as, well, my smart phone.

- Getting started:

The Mac App Store is its own program, available as a free download for laptops or desktops running [Snow Leopard](#), the latest version of Apple's operating system.

You sign into the store using the same Apple ID you would use to buy apps for your iPhone or music for your iPod. If you already have credit in your iTunes account, you can use it in the Mac App Store.

- Selection:

Three weeks after opening for business, the Mac App Store sells more than 1,000 apps - a fraction of the 300,000 available for iPhones, iPads and iPod Touches. Its 21 categories include sports, news, weather, productivity, games and education. As with iTunes, the Mac App Store lists new additions, staff favorites and the most popular free and paid apps.

Some, such as the game "Angry Birds" (\$5), began as apps for mobile devices and were adapted for Macs' larger screens. Other well-known - and free - apps include Twitter, the note-taking program Evernote and Amazon.com Inc.'s Kindle app for reading e-books. Other popular games include "Flight Control" (\$5) and "Call of Duty" (\$50). The latter game has already been available for the Mac, both on a disc and as a download - the App Store just makes it easier to buy it.

Meanwhile, there are some you might not have heard of, such as the photo editor Pixelmator (\$30) and Wallet (\$20), which stores credit numbers and other sensitive information.

Apple's own software is on display as well. For the first time, the company is selling individually the various pieces of its iLife suite, which includes iMovie, iPhoto and GarageBand. Same goes for the productivity suite, iWork. For instance, you can buy Apple's word processor, spreadsheet program and presentation creator for \$20 each. The full suite costs \$79 in Apple's online store and retail stores.

Notably absent from the store is Microsoft Office for Mac. Microsoft says it's still studying the store.

Apps such as Twitter and "Angry Birds" loaded quickly on my aging MacBook. That's not to say they can't use improvement: Twitter lacks the "show retweets" function Twitter's website has; that allows you to keep track of who has re-posted updates you've made. Meanwhile, "Angry Birds" takes up the entire screen, obscuring, say, instant-messaging conversations in the background. The game works well with the MacBook's touch pad, but it lacks some of the immediacy of touching the screen to pull back the slingshot to fire a bird.

Luckily, when a developer improves an app, it's easy to update it - or several, in one swoop. For its regular App Store on iTunes, Apple has pages of submission guidelines and is known for summarily refusing apps that fall afoul of them. It's not clear what guidelines apply to the Mac App Store, but Apple did say it tests apps to ensure they run smoothly.

- Easy installation

The Mac App Store is smart enough to know what software you already

have installed on your computer. So, when I looked at the product page for Pages, Apple's word processor, the option to buy was grayed out because I already own it.

Once you click "Buy" to begin the download, the installation process takes a turn for the cute. An icon for your new app flies across the screen and lands in the dock at the bottom. A progress bar beneath it shows how much of the download remains. When the app is finished installing, its icon will start bouncing up and down in the dock.

And there you have it. Installing apps on a Mac is now as easy as installing them on an iPhone. It's a big improvement over having to find software on a developer's website, click through various dialog boxes authorizing the download and then click through even more to begin the installation.

- Verdict:

Because it's a free download, the Mac App Store didn't trigger the kind of around-the-block lines and breathless anticipation that new iPhones or iPads get.

Yet it's revolutionary. We've seen smart phones become more and more like computers. Now, that evolution is coming full circle: Apple is making its Macs as easy to use as its iPhones.

In essence, Apple is encouraging us to trade the freedom of buying software from all over to the place for the convenience, and security, of buying them in Apple's own store, where Apple gets a 30 percent cut of all sales.

It might sound nefarious, but the iPhone App Store shows that this is a very powerful idea. It has encouraged software developers to create apps

no one ever thought of before and encouraged consumers to take chances on software from developers they've never heard of. We've all come out ahead on that one.

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