Review: New version of Mac OS X offers welcome tweaks

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When it comes to updating the software that underlies its Mac computers, Apple has generally opted for a conservative approach.

But the company's latest revision of OS X, dubbed OS X El Capitan, is even more modest than usual. The free update offers only a handful of new features and tweaks, and many of those are borrowed from competitors or from the software that underlies the iPhone. And there's nothing in the way of a real killer app.

But even if El Capitan isn't terribly ambitious, it's still worthwhile. Indeed I love some of the changes, however small-bore they may be.

A couple of my favorites are tweaks that Apple made to Safari, the built-in browser in OS X. At long last, Apple has added tab pinning to the software. Long available on Google's Chrome and Mozilla's Firefox, tab pinning involves placing browser tabs in a fixed place in a browser window. Whenever you open the window the tabs are there, in the same place and order.

Tab pinning is a great time saver if you always use certain sites or services when you are on the Web. I use the feature to always have my Gmail account, my calendar and Twitter easily at hand. And the lack of tabbed browsing has been a big reason that Safari isn't my go-to browser on my Macs.

Another great addition to Safari is a mute button. You've probably run

into the problem of hearing an ad or a Web video playing but not being able to figure out which browser tab or window it's coming from. Safari will now not only identify the offending tab - with a speaker symbol - but will also allow you instantly mute it by simply clicking on the symbol.

Apple has also made some compelling tweaks to OS X's multitasking capabilities. Borrowing a page from Microsoft and Samsung, Apple has added to OS X a way to automatically split a Mac's screen between two windows. This is a cool trick if you are frequently switching back and forth between two apps, like if you're pasting information from your address book into a Web form.

In the past to split the screen between two apps in OS X, you'd have to manually resize each app window and drag them around to position them on the screen. Now, you can divvy up the screen between two apps by clicking and holding on the maximize button in one app window and then clicking on the other window you want on the screen, a much faster process. By default, OS X will divide the screen evenly between the two apps, but you can allot more space to one of the apps by simply dragging the line between them left or right.

Another nice multitasking tweak comes in the workings of Mission Control - the interface that Apple uses to show all open apps and desktops. In previous versions of OS X, Mission Control stacked together all open windows of particular apps. That made it difficult if you wanted to access a particular window or move that window to a new desktop. El Capitan fixes this by displaying and allowing you to interact with all open windows for each application.

One other notable OS X update is to its Spotlight search feature. Spotlight used to just allow you to easily find files stored on your computer. Over the years, Spotlight has started to do a lot more,

including allowing you to quickly search the Web, calculate a math problem or look up a definition.

Now, you can use it to look up stock quotes, find the score of last night's game or see the roster of your favorite team, and find out the weather forecast. You can also use so-called "natural language" to search for particular items. So, you can search for particular email messages by typing, "email I sent to Bill last week."

I found that last feature to be hit-or-miss. When I asked Spotlight to find email I sent to my wife, it did pretty well. When I later specified that I was interested in messages I sent her last week, it didn't find any. Even though I actually did send her email last week, Spotlight instead showed me a list of messages I sent between 2012 and May of this year.

And despite its new capabilities, Spotlight isn't yet a full digital assistant. Unlike Siri, which Apple has built into the iPhone and iPad, or Cortana, Microsoft's similar technology that comes with Windows 10, Spotlight can't understand voice commands or queries and doesn't preemptively send you information based on your schedule or preferences.

According to Apple, some of the biggest changes in El Capitan are under the hood, consisting of the steps it took to make the operating system run faster. The company says that apps now launch 40 percent faster than under Yosemite and users can switch among them twice as fast. It also says that the updated operating system will more quickly open PDF files and download mail.

Those sound like dramatic improvements, but you may not notice any differences. On my 2014 Macbook Air, El Capitan didn't feel all that much faster, with one exception. Photos did seem to launch noticeably quicker than before. But I have a huge digital photo library that dates back 15 years. If your photo collection is less bulky, the change likely

won't be as apparent.

If all those changes don't sound revolutionary, that's because they're not. But incremental changes are OK too, especially when they don't cost anything and when they make your computer a little easier and satisfying to use.

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What: Mac OS X El Capitan

Likes: Free; tabbed browsing, mute button in Safari; split-screen view; Mission Control now shows all open windows instead of stacking them; Spotlight search can now search stock prices and sports scores; speedier launch of some apps; able to run on computers that ran previous version.

Dislikes: Spotlight's natural language search feature hit or miss; doesn't include Siri or a full intelligent assistant; performance enhancements are more subtle than dramatic; some features won't work on older Macs.

Price: Free upgrade

Web: apple.com

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