

Wolverton: Apple's Magic Trackpad is a winner

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Touchpads have become all but ubiquitous on laptops, which now represent the majority of computers sold. But they're still an afterthought when it comes to desktops.

Apple's new Magic Trackpad may help change that.

The pointing device, which Apple released late last month, allows users to interact with Mac desktop computers with many of the same gestures they can use on a Mac notebook or an iPad. It's much easier to use than the typical mouse and feels more natural and comfortable.

To be sure, I come to that conclusion from a somewhat unusual vantage point: I'm a longtime touchpad user -- even on my desktop -- who has long been baffled by the mouse's enduring popularity.

A mouse is unwieldy. Moving the pointer from one side of a screen to another often requires the user to pick up and move the mouse. That can be awkward or frustrating in a cramped work space.

And they can be painful to use, literally. I gave up using a mouse about 13 years ago after I suffered repetitive stress injuries to my hands. In searching for a solution to relieve the pain in my aching hands

-- and still allow me to do my job -- I found a keyboard that had a built-in trackpad. I've used a variation of that at work and at home ever since and have rarely felt a hint of pain.

Also, compared to trackpads, most mice are fairly dumb devices. Yes, you can use them to click on a button or use a scroll wheel to page up and down. But few allow you the

range of actions you can now do with gestures on a trackpad, such as rotating pictures or minimizing windows on a screen.

Touchpads, particularly those on the notebook side, have been gaining usefulness as computers support a growing number of gestures. Some allow you to scroll up and down a page by making a circular motion, and many allow you to pinch to zoom in or out of a page, just like you would on an iPhone.

The Magic Trackpad provides support for a wide range of gestures. You can scroll through a page by swiping up or down with two fingers. You can select text by swiping up or down with three fingers.

You can also use a three-finger gesture to grab a window -- or elements within it -- and move it around. Depending on the direction, a four-finger swipe can move all your open windows off the screen, minimize them to thumbnails or allow you to quickly switch between programs by bringing up a row of all the open ones.

The trackpads on Apple's laptops already support most of these gestures, and the company's touch-sensitive Magic Mouse supports some of them. The Magic Trackpad goes beyond the Magic Mouse and brings the full range of gestures to Mac desktops, which still represent a sizable chunk of Apple's computer sales.

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I liked having all of those actions available at my fingertips. I also liked the large surface area of the Magic Trackpad. Apple says that it is 80 percent larger than the already-large touchpad that's built into its MacBook Pro computers. The size of the Trackpad put to shame the tiny one I'm using on my desktop now, providing ample room for the command gestures and to move a pointer across a screen without having to lift your fingers.

Another nice thing about the Trackpad is that Apple, just as it has done with the touchpads on its laptops, has integrated the left and right buttons into the new device. So you can basically press anywhere in the left or right corners of the Trackpad to execute a left or right click.

However, the Magic Trackpad has some serious drawbacks, chief among them that it works only with Macs, and only those running Mac OS 10.6.4, the latest version of the software. In other words, if you are running Windows or Linux, or haven't yet upgraded your Mac to Mac OS 10.6 Snow Leopard, you're not going to be able to use it.

What's more, at \$69, the Magic Trackpad is expensive relative to other pointing devices on the market. Most mice -- including some of the high-end gaming mice -- sell for less than that. And, unfortunately, Apple won't let consumers choose the Magic Trackpad as a free substitute for Magic Mouse when they are buying a Mac desktop. Instead, they have to buy the Trackpad as an addition to the Magic Mouse for the full retail price.

Further, there's no way to adjust the angle of the Magic Trackpad, which is set on a slight incline. That could be a problem for those suffering from repetitive stress injuries who might prefer a different angle.

Still, I like the Magic Trackpad a lot and hope it will spark imitators on the PC side. Not only would I like to have one for my work PC, but it also could give other desktop users a good reason to finally ditch their mice.

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Troy's RATING

4.5

(Out of 5)

Apple Magic Trackpad

Likes: Large surface area; support for large number and range of gestures; integrated buttons

Dislikes: Works only with Macs running latest OS; pricey; touchpad angle not adjustable

How much: \$69

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