

Cross-platform PowerPoint

By Geetesh Bajaj

About 30 million PowerPoint presentations are created each day, and it's fair to say more are made using Windows versions of the software than Macintosh. Microsoft and Apple have always had a testy relationship, though, so it's no surprise that an unusually large proportion of PowerPoint problems stem from cross-platform issues.

Cross-platform hiccups happen for several reasons. A company may use both Windows and Mac machines, or there might be a sales presentation that needs to be compatible with whatever platform a client has, or a designer hired to create a presentation might use a Mac when the presenter is using a Windows machine. Regardless, the differences between the Windows and Mac versions of PowerPoint have been giving presenters headaches for years with such aggravations as transitions that don't work, disappearing text, substituting fonts and animations that no longer animate – just to name a few.

Same company, different OS

Many wonder why issues between Windows and Mac PowerPoint versions are so pronounced. After all, other software products developed in both Windows and Macintosh versions, by such companies as Adobe and Macromedia, often have the same user interface and minimal feature differences. However, Microsoft differs from its competitors by making software programs more integrated with the host operating system (OS). Thus the Mac versions of PowerPoint can output movies in the QuickTime format from presentations using Mac OS native capabilities. The Windows version uses unique features within the Windows OS to offer Windows Media Player integration and CD-burning. Understandably, these functions create differences in the way PowerPoint functions on both platforms.

But there are other factors, the main one being that Apple and Microsoft are competitors on the OS level, battling for the hearts and keyboards of every personal computer user. Apple has also fanned the flames by offering Keynote 2, a slideshow-creation competitor to PowerPoint 2004 for Mac. (The fiery QuickTime vs. Windows Media debate has never completely cooled down, either.)

Regardless of politics, Microsoft employs a Mac Office development staff, and for several years alternate releases from the Windows Office team and the Mac team have been the norm. According to lead program manager of PowerPoint for the Mac, Vitaliy Kuznetsov, "Microsoft is absolutely committed to the Mac platform. We have been making software for the Mac for 20 years. In fact, the teams in Redmond [Wash.] and Mountain View [Calif.] are already hard at work planning the next version of Office based on our customers' needs."

While each platform has impressive OS-related features, people who need to work with PowerPoint on both platforms must cope with the differences. The good news is, besides some specific features, most objects within PowerPoint transfer between the platforms remarkably well. And the Windows and Mac Office teams have worked hard to share their ideas and minimize compatibility issues with each new release. It's less of a hassle than you may think.

If you must move a Mac-created PowerPoint file onto a Windows computer, or vice versa, what areas should you be concerned with? I have developed a checklist, categorized by feature, of what you need to

Did you know?

The first-ever version of PowerPoint, released in 1987, was created for the Mac. The second version was also a Mac-only product until Microsoft released a Windows version. Until version 4, both products had the same features. After that, both products were tied to platform-specific features and individual development cycles. This is when compatibility issues started cropping up.

consider.

THE BASICS

- Whether you use a Windows or Macintosh version of PowerPoint, keep in mind that versions 97 through 2004 use the same file format. So if you save a PowerPoint file, make sure the file has a PPT file extension.
- Stop thinking presentations and start thinking folders. Whichever platform you use, create an empty folder for every presentation you create. Then copy all linked content into that folder, including image, sound and movie files – even before the item is inserted as a link within the PowerPoint slideshow.
- Regularly check Microsoft's download sites for PowerPoint to ensure your version of PowerPoint is up-to-date. Several compatibility issues are resolved in these updates. For Windows check out www.microsoft.com/PowerPoint. For Mac, check out www.microsoft.com/Mac.
- Consider moving up to a more current version of PowerPoint. Versions 2002 and up (both Mac and Windows) have fewer compatibility issues than previous versions.
- While many PowerPoint creators try to keep cross-platform presentations simple to avoid compatibility issues, keep in mind this isn't as restrictive as it sounds. Newer versions of PowerPoint on both platforms may not allow the editing of certain features, but will allow these features to be viewed in slideshow mode.
- If you use PowerPoint 2004 for Mac, you can use a new feature called the Compatibility Report that identifies cross-platform and version-specific problem areas for the last eight PowerPoint versions on Mac and Windows. See "PowerPoint 2004's Compatibility Report," page 32.

TEXT PLACEMENT

- Use common fonts that traditionally ship with Microsoft Office and avoid using Mac- or Windows-specific fonts. Safe fonts for both platforms include: Arial Comic Sans Courier Courier New Georgia Helvetica Tahoma Times Times New Roman Trebuchet MS Verdana
- When designing with text, leave a little extra space in the placeholders. Due to font rendering differences between the two platforms, text may wrap differently.
- Windows versions of PowerPoint can embed TrueType fonts within a presentation. But these embedded fonts cannot be seen by Mac versions of PowerPoint.
- Some OpenType fonts, particularly from Adobe's Pro font collection, will show without problems in both PowerPoint for Windows and PowerPoint 2001 (X) for Mac. However, these OpenType fonts don't work within PowerPoint 2004 for Mac.

IMAGES

- Avoid using Macintosh PICT images. They do not transfer well into Windows versions of PowerPoint.
- Use bitmap files, such as JPEG and PNG formats, for images. PNG is the format PowerPoint uses natively. The JPEG format also works well for images and is recognized on both platforms.
- The Mac versions of PowerPoint ship with special photo effects that were originally part of Microsoft's abandoned PhotoDraw program on the Windows side. Regardless, any Mac presentation

file that contains images with these effects can be moved to any version of PowerPoint for Windows and all the special effects will remain intact. The only caveat is that you cannot apply these effects to images once the presentation has been moved into a Windows version of PowerPoint.

OBJECTS AND TABLES

- Most embedded objects in PowerPoint presentations created on Windows do not translate well within a Mac version of PowerPoint. For instance, if an embedded Word document or Excel spreadsheet has accentuated characters, these may not appear in a cross-platform presentation. Rather than embedding these files (Word, Excel, PDF, etc.), use hyperlinks to link them to the presentation file. Make sure these files remain in the same folder as the PowerPoint presentation.
- Some file formats (such as Microsoft Visio and CAD) may not translate well. In these cases, you can often convert the files to an image or PDF file within their native applications. These newly converted files can then be linked into the PowerPoint file, and will be recognized and displayed correctly on either platform.
- Microsoft Word tables and Excel spreadsheets pasted inside PowerPoint can cause cross-platform problems. Either redo the table using PowerPoint's native table engine, or create a link to the Word or Excel document.

TRANSITIONS AND ANIMATION

- All older PowerPoint versions (before 2002) include a limited selection of transitions. All new transitions do not play in the older PowerPoint versions on either platform.
- Older Mac versions of PowerPoint can use QuickTime transitions in addition to other transitions. These transitions cannot be seen once a PowerPoint file is transferred to a Windows machine. Also, PowerPoint 2004 for Mac no longer provides the option to use QuickTime transitions.
- Motion-path animations can be found in PowerPoint 2002 or 2003 versions for Windows, but the feature is not available in Mac versions. You can still view motion-path animations within PowerPoint 2004 for Mac, but they cannot be selected or edited on the Mac.
- Animations in PowerPoint on both platforms were the same until the arrival of PowerPoint 2002 for Windows arrived, which showcased motion-path animations and more. Mac users got a new custom-animation engine in PowerPoint 2004 for Mac, but it does not include support for Trigger animations.

NARRATION AND AUDIO

- When you link a narration or sound file in PowerPoint for Windows, you can still hear the audio in PowerPoint for Mac. But the opposite is not true. PowerPoint for Windows cannot play back any linked narrations and sound recorded in Macintosh versions since Apple computers use the QuickTime AIFF format to store the recordings. Microsoft PowerPoint for Windows does not support this format.
- If you need to move a sound file recorded in PowerPoint 2001 or 2004 for Mac to a Windows machine, embed the audio file as part of the presentation. Luckily, PowerPoint on both platforms will embed audio files by default, unless you choose to change the settings (within the Record Narration dialog box) linking the audio file instead.
- MP3 audio files will work in both Windows and Mac versions of PowerPoint.

MOVIES

- PowerPoint on the Mac works smoothly with QuickTime movie files. You can insert both QuickTime (MOV) movies and Quicktime Virtual Reality (QTVR) files natively. Not surprisingly, QuickTime files (even sound) don't work in the Windows versions of PowerPoint. In fact, PowerPoint on Windows has all but non-existent support for QuickTime.
- You can insert old QuickTime files (versions 1, 2 and 2.5) into PowerPoint and have some cross-platform success, but rarely does this include content created in the last five years. For more details regarding PowerPoint and QuickTime, visit <http://snipurl.com/ppquicktime>.
- Just as you would avoid using a QuickTime file when moving a presentation from a Mac to a Windows machine, avoid using the Windows Media Video (WMV) and Windows Media Audio (WMA) formats if you are moving a presentation from a Windows to a Mac platform.
- If you want movies to play in both the Windows and Mac versions of PowerPoint, use AVI or MPEG, rather the MPEG-1 file format.

MOVIE EXPORT

- PowerPoint on the Mac can export an entire presentation as a QuickTime movie. If you have visited the PowerPoint for Windows newsgroups anytime in the last few years, you'll know that this single feature makes them more jealous of the Mac users of PowerPoint than anything else. The reasons are not difficult to ascertain. Once you create a movie from a presentation, you can do anything with it – stream it on the Web or create a DVD that can be viewed on a television screen. These movies can be seen by Windows users if they have a QuickTime plug-in and player installed on their computer. More information can be found at www.apple.com/quicktime.
- While there is no similar export-as-movie feature within Windows PowerPoint, it is rumored this may change with the introduction of Longhorn, Microsoft's next version of the Windows OS, due out in 2006. In the meantime, Windows users have two options. The first is to open the presentation in PowerPoint for Mac and export it as a QuickTime movie and then transfer the file back to the Windows machine. The second option is to use a screen video-capture application, such as TechSmith's Camtasia, to record the entire presentation in a multitude of video formats. Camtasia even has a PowerPoint plug-in that places the recording toolbar inside PowerPoint.

ACTIVEX AND FLASH EXPORT

- ActiveX is the same Windows-based technology that allows you to play Macromedia Flash and Director movies inside Internet Explorer and other applications, including PowerPoint. ActiveX is a Microsoft technology and is not available on the Mac platform. What this means is if you insert Flash movies into a presentation using PowerPoint for Windows, the Flash files will not play on the Mac.
- Active X is also the technology PowerPoint for Windows uses for Control toolbox items such as Action and Radio buttons. These items will not work within PowerPoint for Mac, and if used, will cause a warning or error message.
- You can insert Flash movies inside PowerPoint for Mac presentations using the INSERT » MOVIE option. But again, these files will not play when using PowerPoint for Windows. The only way to rectify the Flash file issue is to manually reinsert the file once a presentation has been transferred to a cross-platform machine.
- You can learn more about inserting Flash movies in a Windows version of PowerPoint at <http://snipurl.com/ppflash>.

OTHER ISSUES

- The Send to Word feature found in PowerPoint for Mac (all versions) copies and extracts all text found in a presentation and places the text into a Microsoft Word document. This differs from the "Send to Word" function in Windows PowerPoint versions, which allows additional formatting choices such as transferring pictures on the slides into Word along with the text.
- Visual Basic (VBA) remains the best programming solution for cross-platform PowerPoint developers. But for those who like to play with PowerPoint's programming options using Visual Basic, the Mac versions are a big disappointment. PowerPoint 2004 for Mac has VBA 5, and some programming features that exist in the newest versions for Windows are missing from the Mac version.
- PowerPoint 2004 for Mac users can take advantage of the new AppleScript implementation, which provides a new method of automating PowerPoint for Mac. However, AppleScripts do not work within PowerPoint for Windows.
- Be aware that color gamma differences between both platforms mean presentation colors created on a Windows machine appear lighter on a Mac. This is not an issue that can be solved within PowerPoint; it is a platform issue.

Are you compatible?

I'm sure there are other PowerPoint compatibility issues that have not been mentioned here. A good resource for resolving a compatibility issue is any of the many Microsoft PowerPoint newsgroups sites (www.indezine.com/ppnews has a list of them). There are separate newsgroups for both Windows and Mac versions, but compatibility questions are more often than not discussed on the PowerPoint for Mac newsgroup.

One should not fear moving a presentation file across platforms. Working around the known compatibility issues requires some vigilance, but is not as pronounced and troublesome as it was a decade ago. With each new version of PowerPoint, the compatibility issues seem to become less and less apparent. And this is good news for presenters everywhere.

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