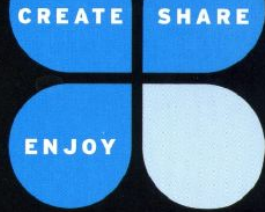


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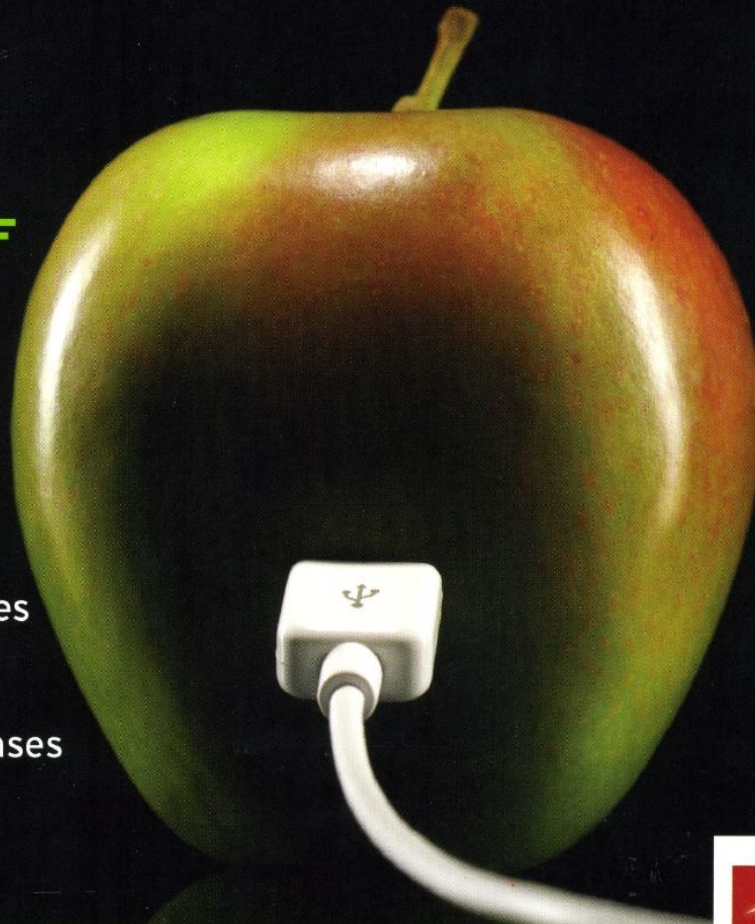
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Best Chat Apps for the Mac p46



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Let's Chat about Chat Apps

While the general concept has remained the same, instant messaging has changed a lot over the past decade. When America Online introduced the first IM program 10 years ago, emoticons weren't even part of our everyday digital lexicon. Chat apps have come a long way, adding features such as videoconferencing, screen sharing, and vivid virtual backgrounds and video effects. Here's a look at the five best IM apps for the Mac. **BY LOGAN KUGLER**

iChat



Soon, Apple's iChat may be the most advanced instant messaging app out there.

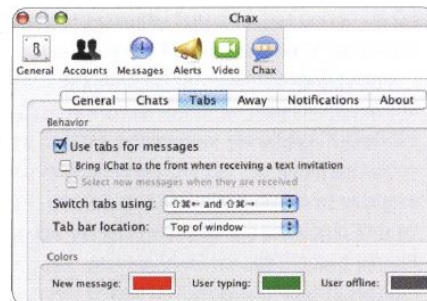
With Leopard's release in

October, iChat is set to gain a host of new features, including video backgrounds that can be superimposed behind the subject and other effects similar to—but even more fun than—those in Photo Booth. What's more, you'll be able to keep all of your open chats neatly organized in a new tabbed interface.

The latest version of iChat will also introduce iChat Theater. This new feature allows you to share photos from iPhoto or slides from Keynote within a "virtual presentation room." More exciting—especially to those of us who act as de facto

tech support to friends and family—is iChat's new screen-sharing feature, which lets you and a buddy observe and control a single desktop screen via iChat, making it incredibly easy to browse the Internet with a friend or collaborate on a project with colleagues. (For more on Mac OS X Leopard's new features, see p30.)

In its current form in Mac OS X Tiger, iChat is a sleek, serviceable IM app. But the lack of tabs and limited number of notification options have sent many of us looking for greater functionality in search of smart add-ons like Chax (see box at right) or other alternatives. Chax adds tabs and Growl messages (pop-up notifications), among many other features, to iChat.



Adding Chax to iChat adds a Chax pane to iChat's preferences.

Where to get it: Comes with Mac OS X
Price: Free
Add-on: Chax (free, www.ksuther.com/chax)

Adium X



This universal (note the small U, although it's a Universal binary as well) chat app lets you connect to almost a dozen different instant messaging

services, including AIM, Google Talk, .Mac, Jabber, MSN Messenger, Yahoo Messenger, Gadu-Gadu, LiveJournal, QQ, and more. Adium offers astonishing flexibility when it comes to customizing the Contacts and chat windows. In Preferences > Appearance, you can change the look of status icons and emoticons, the color scheme, and the overall appearance. Under Preferences > Messages (or Window > Messages), you can pick a handful of different skins for the message window, from simple to psychedelic. The app also offers a great many more choices than iChat when it comes to

message notification—Adium can bounce the Dock icon, display a Growl message, and even pop the chat window right up and interrupt what you're doing (à la AIM for Windows).

Adium also records a transcript of each and every one of your conversations, viewable through the Chat Transcripts Viewer under the Window menu, and organized by date, time, and buddy. Previous chats with a given buddy appear as grayed-out text in a new chat window unless you uncheck the box at the top of the Window > Advanced menu.

An array of "Xtras" (www.adiumxtras.com) lets you add new sounds, message styles, icons, plug-ins, and scripts to customize Adium further. The plug-in for time zones comes in handy if you're chatting with far-flung friends or family members, allowing you to keep track of each buddy's time zone so that when you

hover the mouse over a name, it appears in a tooltip pop-up. It might help explain why your UK pal goes AWOL when you start up a chat at 5 p.m. Pacific Time. (For more on Adium, see the review on p58.)



Adium offers many more options for customizing its behavior than iChat does.

Where to get it: www.adiumx.com
Price: Free
Add-on: Time Zone Plugin (free, www.adiumxtras.com)



Meebo

Released early last year, Meebo is unique in that it offers in-browser instant messaging for four different providers (AIM, Yahoo, Google Talk, and MSN) and also lets you consolidate your chatting

When you log in to Meebo, it logs you in to all of your IM accounts, if you set it up to do so.

from one interface, even if you use different IM handles. This allows you to sign on no matter where you are, which is especially convenient if you're on someone else's computer or at a place like Kinko's that doesn't allow you to download or install software.

When you register for a Meebo account, you can give Meebo your screen name and password for each of your IM accounts. When you sign in to Meebo, it will automatically sign you in to all of those services at once.

Where to get it: www.meebo.com
Price: Free



Google Talk

While Google doesn't offer a Mac-friendly version of its Google Talk IM app, Mac users can make it work via the Google Talk Gadget, which operates within a Web browser. If you already use an iGoogle personal home page, Gmail, or Google Calendar, Google Talk makes sense since you don't have to create a new username. As a pure chat app, Google Talk is not as full-featured as the Leopard version of iChat promises to be, but it boasts some

Watch YouTube videos from within the Google Talk Gadget window.

unique functionality—namely, the ability to link into YouTube and photo-sharing sites such as Picasa and Flickr.

If you copy and paste a URL for a YouTube video or a photo gallery on Picasa or Flickr, Google Talk allows the video or pictures to be viewed right in the Google Talk Gadget, without redirecting you to a webpage. Another neat Google Talk feature is Offline Messages. If the person you're trying to reach is offline, your message will be delivered the next time he or she logs in. If you'd like, you can even leave a voice mail.

If you use the Firefox browser, you can add more emoticons to the Google Talk Gadget with the free add-on GTalk Emoticons, which expands your smiley options to include most emoticons from MSN and Yahoo.

Where to get it: www.google.com/talk
Price: Free
Add-on: GTalk Emoticons (addons.mozilla.org/en-US/firefox/addon/4151)



Spark has business-savvy features, like an APB-style broadcast feature that lets you IM everyone on your roster (Actions > Broadcast Message).



Spark

If using an open-source app that doesn't make you think like a programmer appeals to you—and especially if you're looking for a chat client that has business chops—check out Spark. Based on Jabber, aka XMPP, the open-source IM platform (www.jabber.org), the Spark client looks and acts very similar to other chat apps.

When you create a new account, however, you do need to do an extra step: Type in the name of a public Jabber server—to find one, consult the list at www.jabber.org/user/publicservers.shtml. If at first you don't succeed, keep trying different servers until you do. If you already use Gmail and/or Google Talk, you can log in to Spark with that username and password, though you still need to enter a Jabber server.

The free Spark client was engineered to work with an open-source collaboration server called Openfire, which means that companies can customize Spark and Openfire to fit their exact needs. Spark's business-oriented features, including inline spellcheck, the ability to send screenshots in the message line, and the ability to drag and drop files for instant transfers, make it that much easier to collaborate efficiently with coworkers. ◀

Where to get it: www.igniterealtime.org
Price: Free
Add-on: Sparkplugs, which let companies customize Spark by building on its API (application programming interface).

After much thought, Logan Kugler has decided to adopt iChat as his sole IM app—but not until Leopard debuts in October. If you need to reach him in the meantime, send smoke signals.