Going Where?…Timbuktu

by Rob Golding, sagittae@mac.com

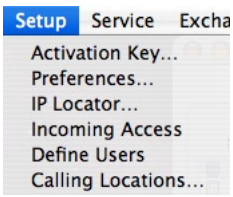
Product: Timbuktu Pro 8.6
Manufacturer: Netopia
Website: www.Netopia.com
Cost: $94.95 - $199.95 (for two computers)
Requirements: Mac OS 8.6 - 10.4+, Windows 2000, XP
Rating: (4 of 5 Apples)

Every so often you might hear about something called "remote access" or "remote desktop". Both of these terms refer to logging into a computer and controlling it from another computer. The reasons someone might need this type of technology vary: persons on the road may need to access a computer at home or the office, someone might need to control one computer from another or in a multiple computer office or school login and cleanup, install programs, and move files.

Timbuktu by Netopia has fullfilled the many remote access needs on the Mac for over a decade. In it's latest version, 8.6, new features and compatibility have been added and I got the chance to try it out on several computers I use.

Netopia has made installation a snap, just drag the application folder to your Macs hard disk, run the program and input your activation key. Although the program comes with a "At a Glance" and "Getting Started" manual I found the first to just be a quick reference while the latter is a 110 page book. I recommend that Netopia rename the "Getting Started" book to something like "Timbultu Guide" and create a very short Setup and Getting Started Guide.

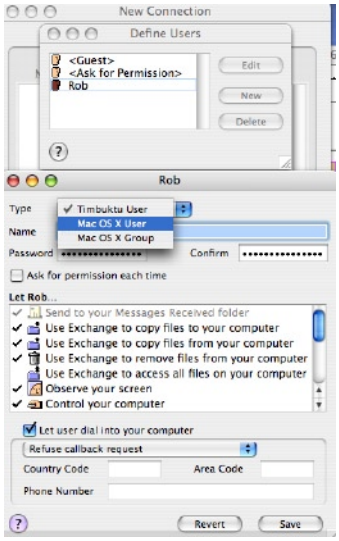
Once running I strongly recommend a trip down the Setup Menu. This makes getting the program up and running considerably easier. In the Preferences section several items should be set such as master password, and other feature sets you may wish to adjust.



The IP locator is a great feature where you can register machines you installed Timbuktu on using an email address. When you wish to connect to another machine over the internet (not your internal network) this removes you from having to know the IP address of the computer. With modern cable and DSL services your IP address can change from day to day making knowing the address a problem. Once you input an email address into the IP locator it is registered with Netopia's servers. Remember to use a unique email for each machine. When you wish to connect to that machine simply input it's email address into the Internet Connection screen in the Connection Window pictured below.

The Connection Window allows users to connect via an internal network using Bonjour/ Rendezvous, Dial-up using a modem, the Skype service, Internet via IP address or a registered email address and also scanning for users over networks.

Before going further users should finish the journey through the Setup Menu to tell Timbuktu what type of connections to allow via the Incoming Access selection and also Define Users.



By defining users you are notifying Timbuktu who is allowed to access the computer and how. This is not essential since Timbuktu will allow any user that has an Administrator Mac OS X account on that computer to also connect. If you plan on connecting using your Mac OS X account and password you must make a trip to System Preferences/Sharing and allow Remote Login. Leaving the "Ask for permission" checked caused me issues because the Remote Computer kept waiting for the currently logged in user to ok my connection so I unchecked that option.

While testing out Timbuktu I tried two connections from internal networks. The first was a Mac to Mac and the second was Mac to Windows. In both cases Timbuktu was installed on both sets of computers and is why the program is generally sold with two, five or thirty licenses with your choice of Mac or Windows.

Making connections is quite easy. You first chose what computer to connect to from the New Connection Window and then the type of connection from the Service Window pictured at right. From the top of the window you have the ability to Send files, Exchange files, Control, Observe, Chat, Notify, Intercom and more.

For my purposes the most common tasks I tried were Exchanging files, Controlling a remote computer and Observing a computer. In each case Timbuktu handled the actions flawlessly. I was able to perform each task with either my Mac or the Windows machine as the controlling computer or the computer being accessed.

When a connection is made you will see the authorization window appear on the computer you're making the connection from (pictured at left). The only issue I had at first was figuring out the difference between Registered User and Registered User (Secure).

A Registered User is one defined in Timbuktu while a Secure User is a Mac OS X user registered on the remote machine and using

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Mac OS X's Remote Login. Don't be concerned over the Secure wording. Both connections are secure and adding Timbuktu to your system doesn't make it inherently less secure or able to be hijacked while connected to the internet. Netopia has had a long history of developing Timbuktu for the Mac and taken precautions to protect systems with the product installed.

Once the connection was established the task you selected from the Service Windows is presented. Below is a picture of the Control Window where I'm controlling my iBook from my iMac.

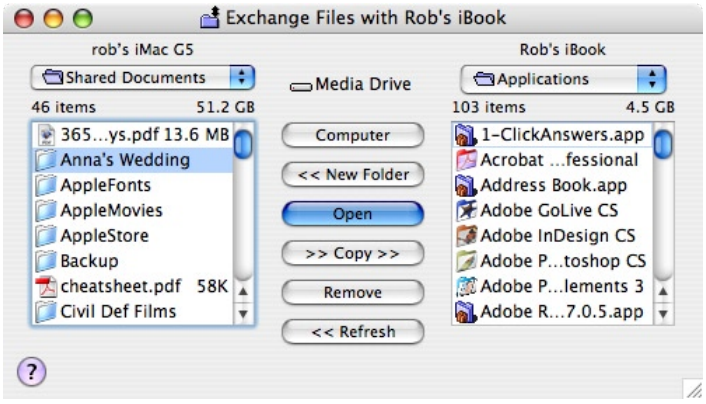
When you move your curser inside the window you instantly begin controlling the remote computer as if you were directly infront of it. I was surprised how well Timbuktu displayed the remote Macs screens. I was using an older Airport 802.11b wireless connection and still I noticed almost no lag time in the control or display of the remote Mac. I also took control of a Windows machine on the same wireless connection and was just as successful and satisfied with the performance. You can have the remote computers screen fit to the Control Window or allow scrolling within the window. If you want you can also have the remote computer display in full screen.

Along the side of the Control Widow are several icons to perform some basic tasks and functions. You can exchange the clipboard between the two computers, change the display color depth to improve performance, and take a picture or QuickTime movie of the remote computers screen.

Although I've talked about controlling another computer using Timbuktu it has several other important functions, among them are Observing, Exchanging Files, and chatting either by text messaging or the Intercom function.

Observation is quite useful in school environements or anytime when you need to monitor other activities, assist users or demonstrate using the computer or programs. The simpliest observation is to simply watch other users activities but it is also great to be able to have entire class watch you demonstrate something on screen.

When using remote access clients like Timbuktu for file transfers you may need to get used to a different interface. When you select Exchange from the Services Window and connect to a remote computer the File Exchange Window will be displayed as pictured below:



From this interface you can chose to move files or folders in either direction by simply selecting the items and locations, you then click the Copy button and the selection is copied over to the destination. Copying is depend on your networks speed.

Timbuktu has two features I did not test out but should mention. The first is the ability to text or voice chat over the internet using a Skype account. Skype is a provider of internet chatting and "voice-over-IP" (internet phone calls). Besides being able to use text or voice chatting via Skype you can also enter in your Skype account information on a machine and connect to it using that unique ID. This is very similar to the use of an email address as a connection method discussed earlier.

Since I do not use a dial-up modem for anything I did not test that connection type in Timbuktu. It does, however, have extensive support for those road warriors that might need to dial in and remote access a computer. You will naturally have to set any computer accessed by this method to answer via the modem.

As I mentioned earlier I did stumble through setting up Timbuktu a bit but I should also mention that the comprehensive manual that comes as a PDF file is well worth a read through. I found it very well organized, clear and informative.

Overall I think Timbuktu is an extremely worthy and capable remote access program. Performance was pleasingly snappy combined with an excellent feature set. In it's current version Netopia has updated the program to run on both PowerPC and Intel Macs as a Universal Binary.

My highest praise is for the cross-platform compatibility. I can now control a PC that has propriety software for microscope imaging from the comfort of my iBook! Thank you Netopia.

Pros: cross-platform remote access, excellent performance, good feature set, Universal application for Intel based Macs
Cons: needs a quick setup manual, old looking interface