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Welcome

by Robert Paul Leitao, rleitao@atpm.com

Welcome to the August issue of *About This Particular Macintosh!* While intense summer heat works its way across the nation, we'll start this month's issue with some cool news as the swift winds of change continue to breeze through the PC economy. This month we look at the climate in the PC business and provide you with an August forecast and a call for participation.

AAPL: Will Lightning Strike Again?

We all know thunderstorms can change the weather. But will lightning strike AAPL again? Apple's share price closed July at $67.96, up $2.37 on the last trading day of the month. Propelling the share price higher was an upgrade from a major brokerage firm that sees potential for significant sales and earning growth for Apple in the months ahead.

Over the past three years, AAPL has had an amazing run, showering shareholders with new wealth and many small investors with prosperity. Will lightning strike Apple's share price again to ignite another major rally? The company is pinning its short-term success on a strong back-to-school sales season.

Hot Days in San Francisco

No matter the ambient heat outside, what will be announced at this year's WWDC may heat up the rooms inside the Moscone Center in San Francisco. The Moscone Center has been the place for many of Apple's most important events and product announcements. While most industry watchers don't expect Apple to announce revolutionary new products at the Worldwide Developers Conference this month, most expect the company to showcase the next upgrade to Mac OS X called Leopard as well as the release of Intel-based Macintosh mini-towers.

Winds of Change

In July, Apple Computer released its results for the three-month period ending in June. For the quarter, the Mac and iPod maker announced the second highest revenue and earnings period in the company's history. Revenues were $4.37 billion and net earnings came in at $427 million, meaning almost ten cents on every revenue dollar flowed to the after-tax bottom line. During the quarter, the company shipped 1.327 million Macs and over 8.1 million iPods. The company ended June with well over $9.1 billion in cash and short-term investments. No wonder many Wall Street analysts are taking a second look at Apple yet again.

The Intel transition and the continued popularity of the iPod are transforming Apple Computer into a leading manufacturer of consumer lifestyle products. The winds of change have pushed the company far beyond the realm of its previous counter-culture icon status to a newfound position as a true innovator in the convergence of content creation and distribution. The PC industry, following a 25-year run, has found itself stalled and stagnated by commodity-grade product and banal ubiquity. In that climate, Apple's innovative drive has created its own inertia and crafted its own economy. The iPod Nation is now its own economic force propelling Apple ahead of its competitors and financing Apple's technology advancements in digital lifestyle solutions.

Rain on Dell's Parade

It wouldn't be a PC weather report without a mention of rain somewhere in the world. After Dell drenched the markets with a flood of bad news, the world's number one PC maker has seen its fortunes take another trip south. The company's deteriorating profit growth picture is directly related to its lack of investment in product R&D. Unable to raise prices to boost results, Dell will again resort to price cuts as a means to increase product sales. Whether or not Dell can weather another round of price cuts without further harming the company's balance sheet remains to be seen. $20 billion worth of share repurchases may only be delaying the inevitable as the company quietly implodes.

Our August Forecast

Early August will bring unseasonably hot weather to much of the nation. As we progress through the month, Apple's good fortunes from new product announcements will bring welcome relief to Mac users. Things will heat up for Apple as back-to-school buying boosts sales and market share.

ATPM Wants You

ATPM is looking to add more regular reviewers to our staff. Though all positions with *About This Particular Macintosh* are volunteer, reviewing is a great way to share your product knowledge and experience with fellow members of the Macintosh community. If you're interested, contact ATPM's Reviews Editor, Paul Fatula.

Our unseasonably cool August issue includes:

Bloggable: Earth Tones

In this summertime silly season, Mac bloggers still need something to write about. The end result has been another month of much ado about Mark Pilgrim's switch from the Mac to a Lenovo PC, and from OS X to Linux. That, and more on WWDC, Windows on the Macintosh, and Net Neutrality, in this month's *Bloggable*.

MacMuser: Beeping Mad

Are you tone deaf? Have you become desensitised to the world around you? Should Apple save the world from mono-tonality?

MacMuser: Rockin' With a Roller

Romeo, Romeo! Wherefore art thou my Alfa Romeo?

Personal Computing Paradigm: Mac OS X’s Increasing Stability

Despite its protected memory, Mac OS X was initially less stable than Mac OS 9, and it still crashes now and then. But stability continues to improve, to the point where computing feels different.

Web Accessibility: Sandvox: Sand in the Eyes

Miraz Jordan returns to ponder whether other popular applications are any better than iWeb.

Segments: My Life With Automator: How I Spent My Summer Vacation

In a few weeks, students everywhere will be returning to school. Their teachers will ask what they did on their vacations. Here’s what I did.

Segments: Spotlight

“True character is revealed in how you live your life after you win the lottery. . . .it’s time to see how our favorite computer company faces up to its destiny.”

How To: Sending Automated Birthday Greetings Via Automator

Are you always forgetting to send someone birthday greetings? With Automator’s help this may help you never you forget again.

Desktop Pictures: FIFA World Cup

Reader Robert Reis shares photos from the FIFA World Cup in Germany.

Review: Adobe InDesign CS2 One-on-One

Plenty of full-color screen shots; an enjoyable, vernacular writing style; a high-quality video to go along with every lesson—what better way to finally teach yourself how to use Adobe InDesign?

Review: EyeTV 250

Paul Fatula reviews Elgato’s EyeTV 250, a hardware and software combination that lets a Mac be used for watching and recording analog television. Move over, VCR; the 21st century is here.

Review: Keep it Simple With GarageBand: Easy Music Projects for Beginners

Being new to GarageBand and having “questionable” musical ability, I found this book helpful. Perhaps you will, too.

E-Mail

On the Topic of Leaving Mac for Linux

I very much enjoyed your commentary on the departure of one of the Mac legends for the world of Linux. Conversely, after many years of SuSE Linux, I made the opposite switch. Not having the knowledge or computer skills that your departed friend has, I nonetheless found that Linux is a very usable system, as long as you don't have a need for drivers. For example, I had to use a third-party driver loader to use my Linksys wireless card. Upgrades to the kernel are constant. Having now switched to Mac OSX, let me make some observations:

- I miss KDE, its power and its flexible features.
- I miss context menus.
- I don't miss fighting with drivers and searching all over the Net for files, due to dependency issues.
- I love the smooth, integrated environment of OS X and having one company to call for hardware and software *support!*
- I find that with OS X, I am not spending time having to work around issues. Instead, I am enjoying the machine.
- OS X has the stability, security, and eye-candy that makes me feel very good about my own switch.

I am enjoying beautiful graphics, superior fonts, more stable video drivers, and a fully-supported system. For me, this was a good move.

—Mike Reith

Maybe You Ought To Be Using Automator

Like you, I've been thinking for a while that there must be ways I could use Automator, but I never bothered to investigate until your fine article. With your helpful instructions, I have now created workflows to back up my Documents and Pictures folders to an external hard drive once a week.

I do have a question, though: I saved the workflow as an iCal plug-in, and set a recurring event to run the backup. However, in your directions you say to choose "Run Script" under Alarm Type, and choose the plug-in. First, I had no idea where the plug-in was saved to, but finally ran it to earth in the Library/Workflows folder. But it was grayed out and unselectable. So I fired up the Automator Help, which indicated that rather than "Run

Script" I should choose "Open File" for the Alarm Type, at which point I was able to choose my saved workflow from a pop-up menu. I guess I won't know if it's right until 2 AM next Saturday morning.

—Julia

> Thank you for the positive response and the correction. I am in the process now of backtracking to find the specific hint that led to my directions. As you can tell I too am new to Automator. I may have inadvertently included directions for my first attempt where I got the same behavior that you did.
>
> *—Sylvester Roque*

• • •

Thank you for spreading the word about Automator. With your help and the assistance of great Web sites like automatorworld.com and automatoractions.com, more and more Mac users are finding out about this powerful tool.

May I also recommend automator.us as a place to download free actions and projects.

Keep up the good work!

—Sal Soghoian

• • •

Y'know, I have mixed feelings about Automator. Like tripdragon and others have said, it's nice as long as you don't go outside the bounds of what's permitted. When I try to use it I'm constantly running into things I'd like to do but can't. Maybe once Automator is better integrated with GUI Scripting, and when you can more readily create a library of script actions to be used over and over again, this will improve.

I do agree that everyone should at least play with it and be aware of what it does. It may help to look at it as sort of a Visual AppleScript, or an AppleScript for Workflows.

Right now Automator feels a lot more like a technology demo than something useful. Maybe that'll change over the next couple of years.

—Drew Thaler

• • •

Automator has limited value for me. Automator is great when someone creates and distributes workflows and actions that meet my needs. But this is rare. When I need to automate a process, I find Automator too limited or too awkward. I prefer my old reliable applications: QuicKeys and AppleScript.

—Gregory Tetrault

• • •

I have copied the second workflow as described, but Safari still opens the URLs in separate windows. I am using the “display in tabs” action you said to download. Any idea why this is happening and how to stop it? Would love to make this work, as it’s a fantastic idea—looking at a few same sites and checking my mail are the first things I always do on my computer. Perfect for Automator—if only it worked! Is there any way of making it open up Firefox and not Safari? thanks.

—Lynden

> Lynden, I hope this solves your problem.
>
> For that workkflow to operate correctly you must open Safari’s Preferences and enable tabbed browsing from the Tabs pane. You must also go to the General tab and change the Open Links from applications to “in a new tab in the current window.” The action created by ATPM editor Eric Blair does not require additional configuration.
>
> If you are using the other action, you must complete an additional step. Create Internet Connection Files for the sites that you want to visit. Go to the site that you want and drag a bookmark for it to a convenient location; I put them all in a single folder. In that first step where it says “Get Specified Finder Items,” point it to the location of your connection files.
>
> I have tried several ways to get this working with Firefox. The workflow that relies on Internet Connection Files almost works. In researching this article I have not found any similar Automator actions for Firefox. It should be possible to create a similar Automator action for Firefox, but it will probably have to be done in something other than AppleScript since Firefox appears to have a limited AppleScript vocabulary.
>
> *—Sylvester Roque*

Outlining Interface Futures

I sometimes call myself an ‘industrial ontologist.’ I am one of a handful of people who make their living applying ontologies to knowledge-based software. So I have some cred when I say the ‘attack on folders’ is just plain dumb.

The concept of subsumption, containment, inheritance, IS-A, etc is fundamental to all the useful ontologies I know of. Sure there are other relationships, and, yes, subsumption can be inferred, but in practice it’s a first-order relationship.

The concept of nested folders, or outliner levels, particularly folders that allow multiple memberships (graphs), is a very useful way for humans to view and revise subsumption relationships. One of the things that drives me nuts about every full text search engine except Yahoo Desktop Search (X1) is they don't treat the parent folder string as a key search term. How stupid. OS X makes the same mistake (which is why I purchased an aftermarket Spotlight extension).

Subsumption is useful. Folder outlines are a good way to view this relationship. We need robust metadata and better ways to manage graphs, but we still need the folder metaphor.

—John Faughnan

• • •

Your observation that three different models can be supported by outline structures has some very definite practical significance. It implies that outlines are not only useful tools of thought but also pose a certain *threat* to thought. We outline without giving much thought to the meaning of the subsumptive relationship. If those relationships can have categorically distinct import, we had better be very careful not to mix metaphors in one argument. At least at first sight, any call for increasing the paradigm count sounds like an exacerbation of a bad situation.

Fortunately for outlining, I think your interesting idea is quite wrong. It is all whole/part. General/detailed is whole/part applied to properties; whole/part is general/detailed applied to objects or entities conceived as objects.

—Stephen R. Diamond

• • •

I definitely agree folders and other forms of hierarchy shouldn't be the only means to represent user constructed and emergents relationships, and I also agree they are much overused, but I did want to argue for preserving them.

I'm a full text search addict. It's been transformational. At one point I got rid of every folder in Outlook except "save" and "save older" (for technical reasons it was easier to split up my archives into past 6 months and 6 months to 10 years).

In the e-mail/Outlook world there's a lot of rich metadata, so I could make do without folders, though recently I've returned to creating temporary folders for active projects—folders don't really cause much trouble with full text search.

In the file system there's far less metadata (alas, I wish I'd had a chance to use BeOS), and containment relationships (name of containing folder) are invaluable, so I really need to treat containers as first rate metadata. I still create hierarchical structures with lots of "pointers" (shortcuts); I'm just more comfortable with shuffling them about.

With enough metadata one can deduce subsumption relationships. SNOMED, a medical ontology, does this using a Description Logic engine. In practice, hand crafted hierarchy is still needed, I think it will always be helpful.

Constructed hierarchy will play a role too…

How does this relate to outliners? I think the user defined hierarchy will always have a place (OK, pre-singularity anyway), even though acyclic and cyclic graphs are very useful too…

—John Faughnan

• • •

Almost in passing, you make another interesting point—that Mac users, being more creative and intellectual on average, drive the development of outlining applications further than does the environment of Windows users. The theory that users create a favorable environment based on the percentage receptive users rather than on their absolute number may also explain the rise and fall of the outliner on the Mac platform, which happens to coincide with a similar rise and fall on Windows. The computer was a new thing, and creative or adventuresome people were more concentrated on both platforms back then. What I find terribly interesting, though, is that while the Mac platform's outlining had important features that outliners on neither platform can yet attain, this development went much further on DOS than on either Apple or Windows.

If the summit of Mac outlining was More 3.1, the summit of DOS outlining was GrandView. My knowledge is second hand—I couldn't begin to use DOS—but confirmed by numerous trustworthy sources.

This, it seems to me, provides some very strong support for your theory that the level of the users drives the development of outlining applications. A small select group of early computer users created a temporary market for a product way ahead of anything produced today. Average level counts in this area, apparently, not raw numbers.

But the past peaks to which you look should for inspiration and guidance should not be limited by platform-chauvinism.

—Stephen R. Diamond

• • •

I agree with those who suggest that quite a few people will be upset if Apple dismisses the benefits of hierarchical folders and files too aggressively. It'll be making the same sort of mistake Microsoft made about a decade ago when someone powerful (Gates?) thought their UI should look like a Web page.

I write and edit books. Folders provide a marvelous place to “stuff” everything that goes into a book. It’d be a waste of my time to try to invent some elaborate schema that works as well as a folder for each book with subfolders for graphics and text. The very presence of something there reminds me that I need to use it. I even have a Junk folder so nothing really gets thrown away.

That said, smart folders are a good idea, particularly for time-based organization, i.e. so I can look at every file I was working on yesterday. But as a primary tool of organization—no way. Smart folders for content would force me to remember too much about how I organized something months ago, meaning coming up with long-forgotten words.

And doing keyword searches with Spotlight is a bit like many Google searches. There are so many hits, the results are almost worthless. All too often, I know in some vague sense there was another document I meant to include. But for the life of me I can’t come up with any phrase that would locate the file for me. I need everything like that stuffed in one specific folder.

In short, files/folders are still best for major projects. Smart folders are handy for time or some easy-to-remember categorization scheme like red for urgent. Most of the time searches are only useful when you’ve found the file (or at least folder) you want and need to get to a specific place in it. Searching an entire hard drive that way is absurd.

Finally, if we’re going to be attaching attributes and keywords to documents, Apple needs to make sure adding that sort of content much easier than it is now: saving, going to the Finder, finding the file, and using Get Info. One neat trick would be to give document windows a flip button, perhaps on the right away from the red light row. It would seem to flip the window over to a side where attributes could be set for each type of file and useful keywords added, as well as scratch notes for the user. That’d be much more intuitive than yet another menu selection. It’s also more likely to be used, and the eye candy would impress switchers.

—*Mike Perry*

iDisk Ennui

Mark, you might like to try FileChute for transferring data to your iDisk. It actually made iDisk usable for me, and now I regularly transfer more than 1 GB of files now with zero failures.

—*anonymous*

The Clayton’s Web

My wife owns a very nice digital camera that takes great snapshots but I’m a professional photographer and I’d never use it in my line of work—not even for taking preparation shots. If I reviewed her camera with my professional needs in mind I’d skewer that camera as badly as you’ve skewered iWeb. And I’d have done every casual photographer a disservice because for what it does and for what it was made to do her camera does a wonderful job.

Before you write any more reviews for any other product take the time to consider the market for which the product was created and who fits in that market. Then write your review with that in mind. It is one thing to say iWeb isn't the right program for many users. It is another to damn a program because it doesn't fit your conception of what a program should be.

And let me go one step further—if this is the kind of garbage I can expect to find on this Web site regularly, it is a site I'll soon eschew on a regular basis.

—David

> This was not a review. It is a recurring column about Web accessibility. Therefore, whether iWeb makes it easy for novices to create nice looking Web pages is beside the point. The issue at hand was how iWeb handles accessibility. Reviews in ATPM are explicitly labeled as such and consider a wider range of criteria.
>
> *—Michael Tsai*

XIII Review

An addendum to my review above: e-mail support for XIII from Feral was returned within 24 hours, but unfortunately was lost in the middle somewhere. So fear not! Feral is there and ready to help you with questions. (They did emphasize it's useful to use the "Generate Report" feature in the game when doing so and attach that to your mail.)

—Matthew Glidden

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Bloggable

by Wes Meltzer, wmeltzer@atpm.com

Earth Tones

In Britain, summer is known as the "silly season," because even though politicians are on vacation, the press still needs to sell papers and the broadcast media still need viewers. So they run frivolous, silly stories with blaring headlines for the entire summer.

Here we are, it's the first of August, and that story from early June about Mark Pilgrim switching to Linux just won't go away. I say it is the silly season: we have no better stories.

Now, having said that, this *is* the best story we have, and it's spawned a variety of interesting discussions. I think you deserve to know about, for instance, the debate over whether Apple should relicense its software as open source. The participants are serious, and it's interesting material.

But my usual disclaimer for this kind of material applies. On some level it reads like the seemingly endless debates over Al Gore's earth-tone wardrobe during the 2000 campaign—it's interesting, but doesn't have a chance of changing anything.

So. Tim O'Reilly and John Gruber start with the big question: is Mark Pilgrim the canary in the coal mine for OS X? As O'Reilly notes, Jason Kottke discovered that Cory Doctorow has given up his Mac, and it's entirely plausible that Paul Bausch might also. But O'Reilly's interpretation is that this has to do with Linux, that Ubuntu is reaching the point that it may surpass Red Hat as the premier distribution. He doesn't make any strong suggestions about Apple either way, but his commenters seem to believe that the usual barriers to using Linux—configuration, compiling applications, etc.—are keeping more people from switching the way they once switched to Macs. (I can say that was my experience, as a switcher from Linux to OS X.)

John Gruber notes that this shouldn't worry Apple much, because the idea with currency right now, that Apple is selling more computers than it used to, apparently isn't true. He looks at the numbers from 1996–2000 and from 2004–2006, and finds that they're selling about the same number of computers. Apparently, by the numbers Apple isn't really growing its market share significantly, OS X notwithstanding. (Then again, maybe not: *Ars Technica* reports that Apple is now ranked second in consumer preferences for likely computer buyers.) He says, "Switching is afoot—but it hasn't yet reached the tipping point where it goes mainstream." He seems to believe that, rather than being canaries in the coal mine, Pilgrim and Doctorow are just the prime candidates for reverse switching, the kind of geeks who care really passionately about their computers but who are not indicative of the computer market as a whole.

A different but related topic is the question of whether open-sourcing Apple's bundled applications could fix some of the things that people like Mark Pilgrim have complained about. I mentioned in July that Tim Bray wondered why Apple's applications couldn't be improved upon; Gruber rebutted (and somehow, I missed it) with an interesting business-based argument. He says, essentially, that while Apple *could* do that, they won't: Apple uses the software to help sell more copies of OS X. (Bill Bumgarner notes, too, that it's surprisingly complicated to open-source traditionally closed software.)

Bray isn't so sure, and writes:

> If there were an enhanced guerrilla version of, for example, Mail.app, that did message-selection correctly and had a next-unread button, both these fixes being provided by a community member, some things would happen. First, I'd use it. Second, the vast majority of Mac users wouldn't. Third, when the Leopard release of Mail.app, presumably with new goodies, came out, it would be back-ported to Tiger. Fourth, I and most of the other people using the variant Mail.app would upgrade to Leopard anyhow.

Justin Blanton adds that it wouldn't be all that surprising to see the very same users who want to hack the official software to upgrade to the latest and greatest version, so they can hack *that*. They're enthusiasts, remember. But Gruber isn't sold, mostly on the grounds that even if not very many users end up downloading these "guerrilla" versions of Apple software, by the numbers, it's still a large enough number of users to cause problems for Apple.

Now, having said all that, Rich Siegel at *Glorified Typist* makes a compelling argument that Pilgrim is making the fundamental error of confusing OS X with the applications that run on it. In other words, he's making the same mistake that so many anti-Mac partisans have before. To Siegel's mind, if you're going to use open-source software in Linux, most of it is available for OS X—why *not* stick with what works?

I think I've indicated before that I'm agnostic on the question, but that I doubt open-source software can replicate what makes OS X great. Maybe Pilgrim is right, and we're betting on the wrong horse. But I think Siegel's on to something. Just a hunch.

And Angela Merkel Photographed Topless

- You know, information about Leopard is due out in August, at the Worldwide Developers Conference, a week after this column publishes. But it's been quiet so far on the buzz. Wonder what might make it in? *Engadget* had a nice Leopard rumor round-up in early July, which makes for interesting reading. I'm skeptical, but take a look. In the same vein, the G5 tower replacement (probably the "Mac Pro") should be announced then, too, and *Ars Technica* has a nice look at what Intel chips could go in it.
- Julio Ojeda-Zapata points some of his more, uh, *misguided* readers in the general direction of still more information on how to run Windows on a Mac. I have long

refused to do such a thing, personally, but I'm willing to stipulate that it might be useful for someone. If it is for you, go ahead and take a look.

- The iPod Hi-Fi is a reasonably slick little device, but it's also outrageously expensive. An intrepid techie decided to turn his *original* Macintosh—yes, that's right—into an extra-cool and much less expensive rendition. That iconic design can live on now!

- Vint Cerf, one of the Founding Fathers of the Internet, gave an interview to John Battelle about Net Neutrality (yes, I'm still on that). He underscores, in the interview, just what's at stake here: "[Why would one] base a business on this 20th century model, when you could be thinking the way the people in the U.K., in New Zealand, in The Netherlands and places like Japan, Hong Kong and Singapore are thinking[?] What they're saying is let's open this broadband pipe up." By implication, Cerf says, we are not. We are moving backwards. Write your senators and representatives, to demand that they respect your right to your bandwidth.

MacMuser

by Mark Tennent, mtennent@atpm.com

Beeping Mad

There used to be a time when grocery shopping was a civilized affair. In those days, there were no supermarkets with aisle after aisle of toilet tissues and mineral waters to select from. The choice was simple: take it or leave it. Mineral water was, in any case, something to be treated with suspicion, being a fancy foreign product. More usually, refillable siphons full of water mixed with bicarbonate of soda were added to whisky and tonic water for a "G&T" and contained huge levels of quinine to protect the Memsahib from malaria.

The grocer behind the counter would serve you, taking items from the shelves behind him for your shopping bag. He would slice your bacon, grind your coffee beans, and cut your cheese to order. Shopping was a much slower experience, and paying for it took even longer. The bigger stores had vacuum tubes leading to the Accounts Office upstairs. The grocer put your money and his handwritten bill into a canister; he then placed it into the tube and pulled on a heavy mahogany handle. Off whisked the canister with a soft sighing sound. A minute or so later, another canister returned with your change, making a sort of farting noise as it arrived.

Other shops had a cashier sitting in a little booth inside the shop, where you queued up to pay for your groceries, somewhat reminiscent of shops in communist Russia. The grocer who served you never handled money; instead, the cashier sat behind an enormous polished brass and wooden till with huge mechanical keys. She (always a woman) pressed the keys with both hands stretched across them in a sort of forerunner to resetting the PRAM's Command-Option-P-R. In a horizontal window at the top of the till, numbers on little metal plates flagged up the total Pounds-Shillings-Pence.

How different it is at supermarkets nowadays. Stores spend tens of thousands designing their decor. Experts in retailing make sure the lighting above the meat counter makes everything look fresh. The smell of fresh baked bread wafts toward you from the back of the shop, sometimes as an artificial perfume, although they'd hate you to know that. The position of every product is determined so that, for example, newspapers, sweets, and convenience items are at the front of the shop to entice passersby. Fruit and vegetables are always near the door to encourage the feeling of being in a country market. Staffers have tasteful and stylish uniforms, with even the managers wearing the same haircut and design of suits.

So why is it that these expensive experts make the bar code scanners at the checkouts beep at such an annoying pitch?

Sainsbury's, one of the UK's major supermarket chains, has such an irritating beep as every item is passed across the scanning head that it actively discourages me from using the stores. The beeps seem to have a smug, self-satisfied tone that reflects the advertising of the stores. Down the road, the Waitrose chain has got its beeps just about right. The stores are supposed to be the best grocers, and their beeps reflect this with a sort of sophisticated and slickly subdued notification that an item's price has been accepted at the till. Plus, the volume is controllable by the operators, who all seem to have it set to the lowest (and the store's parent company sells Macs).

It is not just limited to supermarkets; just about everything seems to be designed with a beep. I bought a new cooker hob for my kitchen recently, a ceramic induction version. What I didn't know is that every control beeps as it is operated, and at a pitch and volume meant to be heard above the noise of the kitchen. I hesitate to say "pressed" because the controls are etched onto the ceramic top and don't actually need to be touched to be used, unless, that is, you have wet hands when nothing in the world will turn down the pot that is boiling over. Our new washing machine/tumble dryer has a complicated panel that has to be programmed for each task. It is as incomprehensible to me as my cooker hob is to my wife, with this annoyingly complex device beeping every time a button is pressed. One can't even use a telephone without it emitting a cacophony of discords for every number.

Very often it is possible to turn the beep off, as long as you can work out how to do so. Usually one or two buttons are designed to operate the whole device and have to be in the right mode to do the task. Why are modern devices so buttonly challenged? Surely it is not going to add a huge amount to the cost to add one control on a DVD recorder that says "Record" or "Set Start Time" and so on? After all, a whole QWERTY keyboard costs just a few pounds/dollars nowadays. And come to that, why are hand controllers so complicated? Thank goodness for the likes of Sony, whose reassuringly expensive products are at least designed to be relatively easy to use.

The worst culprits for beeping must be computer keyboards. What is the point of issuing a beep when it's obvious to anyone that a key has been pressed, especially since behind the beep is the clatter of the key? Some nasty, cheap keyboards come with a nasty, cheap beep and a nasty, cheap rattle. Apple at least designs keyboards with squidy keys that avoid the plastic on plastic click others seem to have.

In fact, why doesn't Apple turn its attention to the thing it is best at, interface design? Apple would soon clear the world of beeps or at least make them user selectable from a well-chosen range designed to appeal to everyone. Occasionally, controls need an audible feedback, and Apple encompasses this with its usual tasteful style. The Mighty Mouse, for example, has a scroll ball, which on other mice would be a wheel that clicks as a piece of plastic flicks past a cogwheel. Apple's solution was inspired; it put in a tiny piezo speaker instead, which very quietly "clicks" as the scroll ball is scrolled.

If Apple were to get its hands on user interfaces, at last I would be able to use my DVD recorder, mobile phone, washing machine, car radio, TV, cooker hob, digital receiver, and all those other things that, like me, the majority of the world's population finds a beeping mystery.

MacMuser

by Mark Tennent, mtennent@atpm.com

Rockin' with a Roller

There used to be a time when going to a motor show was the chance to view gleaming vehicles costing impossible prices, all draped with nubile nymphets wearing little more than a chamois leather bikini. In the raunchy 1970s and 80s they often wore less, but with these more politically correct times, it's just as likely to be Sven as Sheila pouting provocatively.

This year, the London Motor Show has made tuning-up more than just a petrolheads' pastime as it combines cars with a rock festival. A ticket brings rocking and a roller together in perfect harmony. The bands booked to play include golden oldies Roxie Music and Van Morrison, UB40, and Simple Minds, as well as young wannabees and justmadeits. The cars are the world's latest fashion statements, no doubt all having an iPod holder too.

For the first time, real hands-on experiences are available for free—with the cars, not the nymphets. Firms such as Mazda are letting punters get behind the wheel of their MX-5 roadster and RX-8 sports coupe, and drive a test circuit against the stopwatch. Seven other manufacturers including Honda, Peugeot, Seat, and Toyota, have built another 1.5 mile long track with a slalom, high-speed bends, and a couple of straights where drivers can floor the throttle. Not to be outdone, 4×4 manufacturers have a 500 metre course with obstacles designed to test specific aspects of a vehicle's off-road ability. Visitors sit in the passenger seat as instructors take them round the circuit in a variety of vehicles on sale at the show. The manufacturers just need to know you are over 18 and hold a current driving license to "have a go."

Finally, professional stunt drivers will be staging *Romeo and Juliet*, complete with warring families, balcony scenes, and stand-offs. Instead of people playing the characters, it will be cars, liveried as the Capulets and Montague families. By some weird coincidence, one of the UK's greatest car nuts is Lord Montague who stores his collection of vehicles at Beaulieu, his stately home in Hampshire. The house and collection are open to the public, and many years ago I met Lord Montague there. Ever the chancer, he said: "You can have my autograph for five shillings," to which my father promptly replied, "You can have mine for free!"

Back at the show, car manufacturers from four continents and umpteen different languages have managed to work together, and as a result the potential purchaser will have a far greater knowledge of their products, and will make a selection based on personal experience. It is of no consequence whether the vehicles are petrol, diesel, electric, four-door, three-wheeled, or convert into a submarine. They are all motor vehicles and share that simple feature in the same show.

Why can't we have the same sort of thing at computer shows? Every time I've bought a new computer, printer, or other piece of kit, I've never been entirely certain what I am purchasing. All the reviews in the world are never going to give the same hands-on experience that only comes after the new kit is unpacked and set up. Apple Stores try to make it easier to judge a computer, but they are always so busy it is often impossible to get anywhere near the one you are interested in. Or it won't have the software you need.

I want to test a computer, for example, running Photoshop, Illustrator, InDesign, XPress, Office, and a few other applications, all open at the same time. Then to print out *this* file I've brought with me, on *that* printer *there*, and compare it with *the other* printer over there and maybe the one in the corner too. How easy is it to fit new cartridges, and do they have to be from the same manufacturer? Will adding extra RAM really help? Show me the computer with a couple more chips in, or a different graphics card on a different monitor. Then I want to do the same with Windows or Linux and really choose the best of them.

Computer shows need not be annual Jobsfests, Ballmer Bashes, or vast halls full of kit that have no relationship with the equipment in the booth next door. With wireless networks, a little co-operation between exhibitors, and the will to do it, we could have a completely radical shake-up in how equipment is presented. Car suppliers are years ahead of computer equipment dealers in that they give, as default, a pre-purchase road-test. The only time I've ever been offered this was when Epson first released their Stylus Color Pro printers in the mid-90s. I tried the printer for a week then ordered one.

As it seems new Macs will all be able to run multiple operating systems concurrently, perhaps it is time for a new style of Apple Expo to emerge. One where Windows, Linux, and Unix software publishers are encouraged to attend alongside their Mac-only colleagues. They, in return, will be able to see that Apples are just computers, and most of the time will work with any off-the-shelf gadgets. The more integration there is of software and hardware with a greater emphasis on it being catholic and all-embracing rather than Windows-centric, the less likely it is that Macs will be sidelined.

For all the jokes we make about Vista, Microsoft's imminent new operating system, it is going to be a major competitor to OS X and some would say a lot better, too. It is inevitable that Vista will not work with many current devices and applications, so manufacturers will have to learn the new features and adapt accordingly. At the same time, they could open their minds to Apple computers and Mac OS X and make them compatible too.

The Personal Computing Paradigm

by Michael Tsai, mtsai@atpm.com

Mac OS X’s Increasing Stability

Remember why Apple felt the need to stop development of the classic Mac OS and transition to Mac OS X? Looking at the situation now, we see all kinds of benefits. For users, OS X features major improvements in graphics, text, networking, internationalization, multiprocessing, and other areas. Many of these features *could* have been added to Mac OS 9, but it was easier to use the foundation from NeXT. Developers love the Cocoa frameworks and having access to the Unix tools, and they’ve used these to start a renaissance in Mac application development.

Apple was surely thinking about these benefits, but they weren’t the main reasons given for the switch. Long before OS X, Apple announced various plans to move the Macintosh to a “modern” operating system—one with pre-emptive multitasking and protected memory. Pre-emptive multitasking is important for developers, since it simplifies the code that they write, but I doubt that most users saw it as a big deal. It was better than co-operative multitasking, sure, but we’d been multitasking since Switcher and MultiFinder. No, what we really needed was the protected memory. Mac OS crashed a lot, though less if you were careful about what software you installed. Protected memory promised crash-free computing.

Actually achieving this has taken a while. When Mac OS X 10.0 shipped, it was, for many users, less stable than their OS 9 setups. Applications crashed frequently. This is somewhat understandable. Many of the crashes were caused by bugs in the OS itself. Also, developers were writing lots of new code on top of an operating system that was still in flux and only partially documented. When a crashing application doesn’t bring down the whole system, there’s less incentive for the developer to fix all the crashing bugs, especially when there’s so much other work to do during an OS transition.

The nature of application crashes had changed. Under OS X, the protected memory system instantly shuts down an application that tries to read or write from memory that it shouldn’t. Under the old Mac OS (especially prior to Mac OS 8), illegal memory accesses often went undetected. An application could silently corrupt its data structures, or even those of other applications or the system, and it might not be until much later (if ever) that this was manifested in a crash of the machine. The fast-failing in OS X can make applications seem more unstable, but they truly are protected from one another, and the instant crashes and crash logs help developers to write software that’s more stable.

I also experienced a lot of system crashes in Mac OS X’s early days. These encompass a wide variety of problems with different causes, but all of them mean that you lose what you’re working on (in every application) and need to reboot. In 2002, I started keeping track of the system crashes to see if any patterns would emerge. That year, OS X spontaneously logged me out nine times. Six times, the screen and mouse froze. Four times, the kernel panicked. Once, the Mac wouldn't wake from sleep. Once, the entire machine slowed to a crawl and I had to reboot. And once, all the applications I was using crashed within a minute so of each other, so I thought it best to reboot.

In 2003, there were no spontaneous logouts, but stability wasn't much better. There were seven total freezes, plus four effective freezes where I couldn't do anything but watch the beachball spin. Three kernel panics. Once, all the applications quit when I plugged in my iPod. Once, it wouldn't wake from the screensaver.

By 2004, things were improving. There were no logouts and only one panic, which I attribute to a bad Toast driver for my external DVD burner. Seven freezes without the beachball. Four with it. My *guess* is that my most stable OS 9 system crashed once a month, so this is a slight improvement.

2005 was the most stable year for me: just two kernel panics. Perhaps not coincidentally, this is also the year that I stopped using Classic. There were quite a number of "soft crashes" this year, which I didn't count. Several times per week, the Mac would get slower and slower. Short scripts that used to run instantaneously would start to take up to 15 seconds. I was never *forced* to reboot, but I chose to do so every few days to recover the lost speed.

2006 hasn't been quite as good as 2005. So far, there have been three freezes (one while copying to a hard disk that turned out to be bad, and one at shutdown so it didn't really matter) and one panic. Once, iTunes froze (and couldn't even be force-quit) when I plugged in my iPod shuffle, and it was impossible to restart or shutdown the Mac cleanly. Once, Front Row gobbled up nearly 2 GB of memory, bringing the rest of the system to its knees, and I had to log out. A similar thing happened with Xcode 2.3's dedicated network builds feature, until I disabled it. And a bug in the OS made it impossible to use the LaTeX i-Installer without freezing the system, so I downloaded a different LaTeX package. The creeping slowness problems have mostly abated with some OS updates a few months into the year, though I still see regular font rendering problems that require resetting the font cache and rebooting.

Although Mac OS X's stability isn't perfect yet, it is indeed getting better. Of course, I still save my documents frequently, just in case. It's been a reflex since I started using computers. The reduced number of crashes has, I think, reduced the amount of damage to my disks' catalogs. I still run DiskWarrior and Disk Utility regularly, but they only find problems occasionally—not nearly every time, as they used to. But if the increasing system stability hasn't changed these habits, it *has* changed my state of mind. Applications still crash, and every once in a while I lose a few minutes' worth of work, but I no longer worry about the whole system crashing. Instead of expecting the Mac to crash, but not knowing when it will, I expect it to just keep running.

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Web Accessibility

by Miraz Jordan, http://mactips.info

Sandvox: Sand in the Eyes

Last month, I wrote about iWeb and how it gets in the way of creating a good Web site. Over the next few months, I want to see if any of the other popular applications does a better job. I set out to create a simple one-page document with a little text, some headings, a list, a couple of links, and a photo.

My Assumptions

In these articles, I assume the user of the software is creating a couple of fairly straightforward text-based Web pages with a few images—appropriate for a brochure site for a small business or community group.

I also assume the user isn't a professional Web designer with a deep knowledge of HTML, but I do assume she has a sufficient level of understanding about Web pages to choose suitable commands from menus or toolbars.

Nine Fundamentals

A good Web site has relevant content and is written in plain language, with plenty of headings, useful page titles, clear navigation, alternate text for graphics, and meaningful text links. For maximum benefit, the coding meets modern standards and is valid.

If every Web site were to incorporate these features, the Web would be a much friendlier place. These nine targets aren't hard to hit, but it's up to the software we use to make it possible, even easy, for us to hit them.

What Software Can Do

The human author needs to select the content, organize the structure, and write plainly, but it's up to the software to make it easy to apply page titles and headings, to add useful alternate text, and to edit link text. The software should automatically apply appropriate coding and offer an easy way to check validity.

It would also be useful if the software were able to provide some on-demand assessments of the clarity of the language, the quality of the link and alternate text, and the existence of headings. I don't know whether any current tool offers these options.

Sandvox

The regular version of Sandvox is $49, while the Pro version offers extra features for $79. A free demo is available. Mac OS X 10.4.4 is required.

The Process

Without reading the manual, I started up the demo version of Sandvox 1.0.3 and chose the first offered theme for my new page. I entered some text on the default page. Then I tried to add a link or two and a photo, and to format my text a bit: a few headings, some emphasized text, and a list.

The Interface

It was easy to add links, although it's a definite no-no these days to open a link (without warning) into a new window. Sandvox gives you a check box for opening a link into a new window right when you create the link.

The photo was a bit trickier because the media browser showed only iPhoto and my Pictures folder, while the photo I wanted was in a separate folder. I was able to drag the photo in from the Finder and use the Inspector to add alternate text, wrongly called a Description.

Next I set out to:

- turn the headings from ordinary text into heading text
- mark up three lines of text as a numbered list
- emphasize a few words

These common tasks proved to be a problem.

Headings

Real headings on a Web page aren't just big and bold text, but are marked up with `<h>` tags. I looked all over the interface for something that would let me apply a level three heading, even referring to the wiki documentation and the quickstart PDF. My only options appeared to be to make the text bold and/or to increase the font size. I put this task on hold temporarily.

Lists

Next I tried to make three lines of text into a list, with or without numbers. Again, I could see no way at all to do this. Another task on hold.

Emphasis

Sighted visitors looking at a Web page see bold and may leap to the conclusion that bold means words are emphasized. Blind visitors and software such as search engines don't understand bold as emphasis, though. The correct markup is to use either the `<strong>` tag or the `<em>` tag.

Something such as a book title could be marked up as bold, because there it's simply a visual aid—the title could equally well appear in a different font or color.

I had a few words to emphasize. I selected them and reluctantly chose Bold from the Format menu, since there was no other option available.

The Code View

Having failed in two of my three formatting tasks, I went looking to see how Sandvox had marked up my page. For this I used the View▷Web View▷HTML Source menu item.

Accessibility generally refers to the experience visitors have with a rendered Web page, but the tool used to create Web pages should itself be accessible. The HTML source of my Web page was an undifferentiated mass of tiny black text. Many tools use syntax coloring—they make tags blue, for example, while text may be black and perhaps attributes are red. Sandvox's HTML source was impossible for me to read. It was also not possible to edit the HTML directly.

Unfortunately, I could find no way to enlarge the source text. The standard Command-+ keyboard command switched me back to the Web View, while commands such as View▷Make Text Bigger silently failed. I pasted the text into my trusty text editor and enlarged it there.

The Coding

The document I created used modern XHTML coding and passed the validation test with no errors. That only proves that validation tests if code is syntactically correct, not whether a page has been well put together.

Because I had found no way to create headings or lists, those aspects of my page were deficient. The page did not reflect my writing intentions and did not communicate effectively. I could have marked up the headings as bold, but as I've written before, bold does not equal heading on a Web page.

The text I had wanted to emphasize had indeed been marked up with a `<b>` tag, rather than the `<strong>` or `<em>` that was appropriate. The only real use for bold as a menu item these days is to create a `<strong>` tag.

My Conclusions

Sandvox is lacking in some of the simplest and most fundamental functions for making accessible Web pages. I should be able to easily apply heading and list formatting to my text; I should be able to choose `<strong>` rather than bold.

And that's just the basics. There are plenty more intermediate and advanced tasks that Sandvox seems to have no capacity for, such as adding title attributes to links.

Like iWeb, this software may be useful for creating pretty pages for friends and family to view. It's not up to the task of creating the kind of Web pages a small business or community group needs.

Useful Links

- Quick Tips to Make Accessible Web Sites, Web Accessibility Initiative.
- W3C Markup Validation Service.

Related Articles

- Web Accessibility: The Clayton's Web, ATPM 12.07, July 2006.
- Web Accessibility, ATPM 10.01, January 2004.

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Segments: Slices from the Macintosh Life

by Sylvester Roque, sroque@atpm.com

My Life With Automator: How I Spent My Summer Vacation

Dear Teacher,

Sorry to disappoint you, but I didn't do anything exciting on my vacation like go to the Grand Canyon or visit Yellowstone. I stayed home the entire time, but we did have a family reunion. That was a lot of fun. In my spare time, I wrote a few articles for *About This Particular Macintosh*. It's an online magazine about Macintosh computers. The writers don't get paid, but it's fun anyway. If I'm really lucky, I get to help someone learn about his computer.

Last month, I wrote a How To article, "Maybe You Ought To Be Using Automator." When it was published, I was attending a family reunion. Later that night, I received an e-mail informing me that comments had been added to the article. I read and responded to the first comment. Someone named Julia had posted a positive comment and a correction. Thanks, by the way, for keeping me on my toes. Despite the necessary correction, I was pretty excited. It usually takes several days for one of my articles to generate any comments. Some articles don't generate a comment for months. The next day was a different matter entirely as a strange series of events started. By the time everything was over, someone named Sal Saghoian had taken up a lot of my vacation time. Well, technically, he didn't. His program was the cause of all the trouble. If you want to find out how, read on.

On July 2nd came a flurry of e-mail activity bringing both good and bad news. On the one hand, I was flattered to discover that Sal Saghoian, Apple's product manager for these computer programs called AppleScript and Automator, had read the article. I never dreamt someone of his stature would read my article. That was the good news. What would turn out to be not-so-good news came in the form of Willis Nash's comment describing his desire to send automated birthday greetings to contacts in his Address Book.

Normally, I try to answer a reader's question right there on the Web page. This time, I needed a little more information. A couple of e-mails later I was hooked on trying to make his idea work. I should be able to knock this idea out in no time, right? Besides, it gave me a good excuse to sharpen my budding Automator skills. After all, I knew iCal could schedule sending the e-mails at a convenient time. I also knew that iCal generated a "Birthdays" calendar based on entries in your address book. Unfortunately, it turned out not to be as easy as I thought. As far as I can tell, you cannot attach the necessary script to that calendar.

Somewhere around July 4th, I began working in earnest on a solution. In addition to Automator, I started using Address Book, which I had never used before. It didn't take very long to cobble together a rough draft of a workflow that would e-mail birthday greetings to everyone in my Address Book with birthdays on any given day. Individuals with good sense would have stopped there, but my tendency to make things difficult took over.

The Downward Spiral Begins

Once the basics were worked out, I realized that among the few cards in my address book were people who didn't have a current e-mail address. Sending greetings to them would require several days' advance notice. Perhaps enough time to get a card and send it via snail mail. A week or two should do it. Maybe there was someone who needed a major party. That might take a month or two of advance notice. Enough time to buy a cake, hire a clown, or even decorate a bit. That might take even more notice. A month or two would be sufficient.

At this point, things became a sequence of get an idea, test for errors, try again. Lather, rinse, repeat. Oh wait, that's a different problem. That's how the next several days went with occasional breaks for trivial things such as eating and personal hygiene. I also took a brief detour to write the Keep It Simple With GarageBand review. At this point, I had a pretty good idea how to do each of the component tasks. I could send an e-mail on the right day, check for birthdays coming up in the next two weeks, and finally check birthdays coming up in the next two months. The problem was that I didn't want all three components to run every day. That just wasn't very efficient. In programmer speak I needed Automator to branch out and run different workflows depending on the circumstances. All of this should be done with little or no user intervention. The whole point was to create something the user didn't have to remember to run.

I knew from my research for last month's article that, left on its own, Automator does not deviate from its specified steps. It's a little like the toy that keeps walking in a straight line until it hits the wall. Left to its own devices, Automator would just run right into the proverbial wall. Sometimes it tells you when it's hit the wall, but it never tries to avoid running into the wall. You can make it deviate from its predetermined path by chaining a series of workflows together.

Sit Up and Pay Attention

I had already figured out how to remove people with no e-mail addresses into separate workflows. Automator didn't know what to do if no one had a birthday on any given day. After looking at several AppleScript code samples, I solved that problem. With luck, maybe this would be done in time for a follow-up article for ATPM. The biggest problem was that sometimes sending e-mails just didn't work. It was sending one e-mail but not sending the confirmation e-mail. Four days' work figuring out that problem.

I know teachers are always telling students to pay attention while doing their work. Boy, were they right. If I had been paying attention, I would have realized that e-mails were indeed going to the right accounts. It looked wrong to me because I have Mail configured in such a way that I can see e-mails from all my accounts in the same Inbox. If I had paid closer attention, I would have noticed that before now. This reminds me of that time in junior high when I got five pages of arithmetic wrong because I didn't pay close enough attention to the directions. You can't add the whole numbers and subtract the fractions all in the same problem. I can't quit now. This is the best toy I have played with in a long time. Besides, you can do some really useful stuff with Automator.

Under other circumstances I probably would have quit by now. Who am I kidding? I wouldn't have even begun this task in anything other than Automator. I am not, I repeat not, a hard-coding programmer. Quit for a day or two and that urge to get back to work was just irresistible. I can't help it: Automator is addictive. It was a little like a silicon version of good cop–bad cop. One chip telling me I was "this close" to finishing and one chip telling me to quit for my own sanity. In the end, I kept working. Thanks, Sal, for making such an addictive program.

What I Have Learned So Far

By now, three weeks have passed. I took time to create a few other small Automator projects. I can launch iTunes in one click and go to any genre of music in my library. I can launch iTunes with or without ever having to hear a podcast. It also lets me create a Finder command to rename a file without accidentally opening it by mistake. I do that all the time. Those things weren't as exciting as the birthday greetings project, but they work. Projects like that reassure me that anyone could be having fun with Automator.

The three weeks weren't a complete loss. I know more about Automator than I did a month ago. Not only can I make it do what Willis wanted, but I also know how to do a few other things. Maybe next year I'll have a more normal vacation.

Segments: Slices from the Macintosh Life

by Angus Wong, atkw@anguswong.net

Spotlight

I laugh every time I read about a new "iPod killer" thingamajig in the news. It's almost like the dotcom period manifest in consumer electronics. "We're going to be the next iPod. Do you know how big the market is for MP3 players? If we even capture a small piece of this huge pie, we will make tons of money in the next decade." Every time these wannabes put out another press release on *Business Wire*, I think about all the profits their advertising agencies will be making, launching the new players around the world. And now Microsoft is getting into the game with Zune. Ever see that unofficial video about Microsoft packaging? Zune's launch will probably be just like that, except more expensive.

But aping the iPod is not the biggest game in town. I'm seeing people trying to replicate Apple's success in hardware design and operating system design. These are, by and large, the same people who were clueless about the original iMac. ("Why would anyone want a computer in a specific color?") Now we see Dell and other PC OEMs burn midnight oil churning out "cool looking" PCs from third-world factories. Meanwhile, Microsoft is "improving" the user experience with Vista, which as usual tries to look like the Mac OS on the surface. Us experienced users will know that beauty is more than pixel-deep and, like almost all of Microsoft's applications, once you start trying to use the damned thing, you'll likely trip on the crazy arrangement of functions, icons, and "features" that seemingly only Microsoft can so badly mangle. I continue to be surprised that a company with the resources and talent that Microsoft has is able to produce such lousy products. Even startups, or solitary shareware authors (not to mention unpaid open source gurus) produce far better software than the largest computer company on Earth.

I suspect the "cancer" that pervades Microsoft is not that there aren't intelligent people working within its organizational bowels. I'm sure Microsoft hires excellent people. So I can only conclude the problem lies with the design philosophy of the company. Looking back, this shouldn't be surprising. A company that, instead of innovating, used strong arm tactics in the market to push its wares, probably finds it easier to just add a feature to a product in the quickest way possible, than to think carefully how best to add that feature, so as not to slow down release. Revenue is generated through upgrades, so the more versions people buy, the better it is for the bottom line.

The flip side of this viewpoint is epitomized by Apple, which spends oodles of time and money thinking of ways to make the user experience better. One can argue that the old Apple never really focused sufficiently on the bottom line, preferring innovation over accounting. Google's looking the same way. The result of this is less money earned, and increasingly happy, and loyal, customers. The Microsoft philosophy results in more money earned, and increasingly unhappy, and even hostile, customers (read: forced users). While

Wall Street applauds the short-term results of the latter route, it can only end in disaster while the other method risks company sustainability (as we have seen before with Apple) but creates a user base that can actually help carry a company through horrible periods of history.

One of the proof-points I have for my theory on "The Microsoft Way" is the success of the Xbox business. I have an Xbox, and I've been recommending it with almost the same zeal as I do Macs (almost, but not quite). The Xbox platform is by far superior to any other gaming platform out there, and especially when compared to Sony's PlayStation. I don't expect success out of the PS3.

The intriguing thing is, from what I understand (and I could be wrong), the Xbox team was created at Microsoft not unlike the way the Macintosh project started off at Apple. Now that's where the similarities probably end. Apple was always innovative. But perhaps the Xbox got to be successful precisely from its lack of Microsoft Manifesto. Maybe this is what is going to be needed for the company to finally be respected by the technical community. I recall wanting to use Microsoft BASIC in the 1980s. I even thought the early incarnations of Word and Excel to be superior to competitive offerings. But somewhere between Windows 3.1 and XP, the company lost the way and succumbed to the evil temptations of the fast buck.

I bring this up because I see Apple headed that way. Not in the same godawful execution as Microsoft, but because I foresee astounding success with Apple. True character is revealed in how you live your life after you win the lottery. Google's tried to articulate a "no-evil" stance which has already been compromised. Linux tries hard, and is still trying. Now it's time to see how our favorite computer company faces up to its destiny.

How To

by Sylvester Roque, sroque@atpm.com

Sending Automated Birthday Greetings Via Automator

In this month's Segments column, I described my experiences with Automator for the last month. In short, ATPM reader Willis Nash posted a comment lamenting the fact that neither Address Book nor iCal provided advance notification of a contact's approaching birthday. While this may be possible with third-party software, the question was whether it could be done with Automator.

After a few e-mails for clarification, I realized that Willis wanted to send automated birthday greetings via e-mail to anyone in his address book. As usual, I went a little overboard and expanded the idea a bit. The result is three Automator workflows and an AppleScript. Let's take a brief look at the role of each component.

- One workflow looks two months ahead for anyone with an upcoming birthday. This gives you time to plan a party if you like. Although it only runs once each month, this workflow always looks two months ahead. If it looked less far ahead, sometimes you wouldn't receive much notice.

- The second workflow runs each week and looks two weeks ahead, providing time to send greetings via regular mail. The logic is the same as with the first workflow. Running weekly and looking two weeks ahead means you should always get more than a week's advance notice of someone's birthday.

- The third workflow, inspired by Willis's idea, checks your address book daily for anyone with a birthday on that day and sends them an e-mail greeting. Each of the workflows sends you a confirmation e-mail if any birthdays are found.

- The included AppleScript is the "brains" of this entire project. It decides which of the workflows to run on any given day. Left to its own devices, Automator does not provide this decision making capability. All the AppleScript that you need to know is included in this article, but if you really don't like the idea of experimenting with AppleScript, the workflows could also be run as separate events triggered by different iCal alarms.

What You Need to Get Started

This project does not require extensive Automator knowledge, nor does it require extensive knowledge of AppleScript. If you have never used Automator before, my column from last month should cover everything you need to know to finish the project. You will also need to install an action called Stop If Input Is Empty. Download the action, double-click the Zip file, and run the installer. Automator must not be running or else the action will not install properly.

As you drop the various actions into place, pay attention to the textual information on the top and bottom right of each action. Text at the top alerts you to the type of data the action is expecting (text, mail message, etc.). Text at the bottom alerts you to the type of information that will be passed to the next action. If the text turns red, there is a possible mismatch that needs to be resolved. Perhaps it was looking for the body of an e-mail message and got something completely different.

Automator attempts to resolve these issues on its own but will need your assistance occasionally. In these cases, check the logic of the workflow. If it appears to be correct, test-running the workflow may resolve the problem. When the workflow is run during testing, a circle will appear on the left side of each action. A red circle indicates that a problem occurred at that step. Green circles are used to indicate steps completed successfully.

In addition to a rudimentary understanding of Automator, this project assumes you are using Apple's Address Book to manage your contacts and a properly configured Mail to handle your e-mail. We will also use iCal to schedule execution of our little program at a convenient time.

Left entirely on its own, Automator proceeds step-by-step until something completely breaks down or it completes the process. In order to adapt to changes, Automator needs to turn over most of the "logic" for decision-making to another language. In this case I chose AppleScript because it's the only one of the scripting languages that the OS understands that I have any experience with—and I have very little of that. This project could probably be accomplished with other languages, but I have not tried it that way yet.

It's important to proceed with this project in an orderly fashion. We will start by creating three smart groups in Address Book. We need the names of those groups to complete the workflows. Once the workflows are completed and saved as applications, we will complete the AppleScript code that glues everything together. AppleScript needs to know where the three workflow applications are in order to compile.

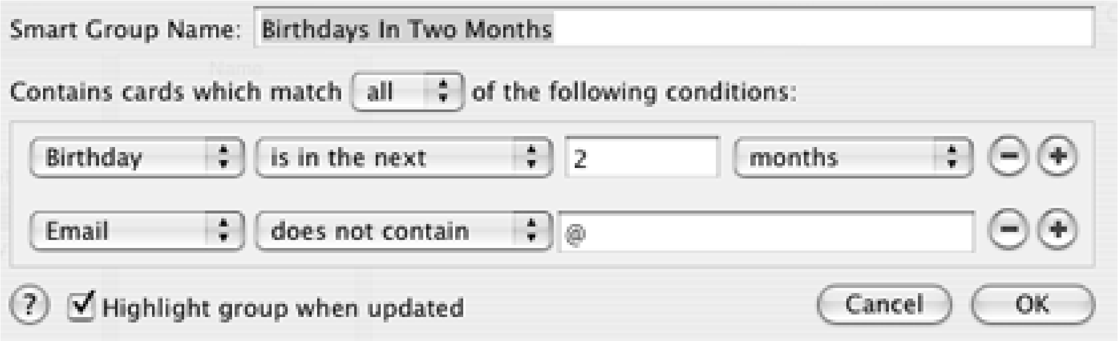
Preparing Your Address Book

For purposes of this project I will assume that you have already added some contacts to your address book. Be sure to enter some birthdays and e-mail addresses. If you haven't added any contacts yet, add two or three to provide some test data; this will make sure the workflows are behaving properly. Don't worry: adding new contacts later is as simple as entering them in your address book. We are going to make Automator smart enough to adapt by creating smart groups in Address Book. Smart groups are similar to smart playlists in iTunes. The groups are rule-based—as new contacts are added, Address Book places them in the relevant groups. With the right rules in place, these groups adapt dynamically. Automator uses these groups to do its work so it remains current without the user having to re-enter existing data. Now that we have a few contacts to work with, let's create the smart groups at the heart of this project.

From Address Book's File menu choose New Smart Group. In the sheet that appears, give the group a descriptive name. I named my group "Birthdays Today." Jot that name down for later use. We will need it to double-check the workflows later. Set the group to meet all of our conditions. Working from left to right, the first condition should say, "Birthday is in the next 1 day." Click the + symbol to add a second condition. This one should say "Email contains @." Together these two conditions will create a group containing every contact with a birthday today who also has an e-mail address. Based on limited testing, it appears that this condition may be unnecessary. Mail seems to only attempt to send messages to members of the group with valid e-mail addresses. I put the condition in as an additional error check until I have time to fully verify Mail's behavior. If you click the check box at the bottom of the screen, Address Book will highlight this group when its content changes. Click OK to close the sheet.

Follow the process described above to create a second smart group. Just as before, give the new group a descriptive name. I chose "Two Week Birthdays." The first condition should say "Birthdays in the next 2 weeks." Click the + sign to add a second condition. This one should say "Email does not contain @." This smart group contains the people with birthdays in the next two weeks who don't have an e-mail address in your address book. People who do have valid e-mail addresses will eventally be handled by the workflow that sends daily greetings. I chose two weeks to provide time to send a card by regular mail. Decide whether you want changes highlighted and close the sheet.

With that smart group completed, we are almost finished with our work in Address Book. Repeat the process described to create a third smart group. I named this group "Birthdays In Two Months." For this group, the first condition says "Birthday is in the next 2 months." Condition two says "Email does not contain @." Close the sheet when you have finished creating the smart group. Before we leave Address Book, make sure that you have some contacts entered and have written down the names of your smart groups.



Smart Group Name: Birthdays In Two Months

Contains cards which match all of the following conditions:

Birthday | is in the next | 2 | months

Email | does not contain | @

☑ Highlight group when updated

Building the Automatons

Now that we are through with Address Book, it's time to build the workflows that are at the heart of this project. I recommend creating a folder to hold all of the workflows in a single place. Keep in mind that if you store this project inside your home folder no one else will be able to access it. I suggest putting it in a folder inside your Applications folder or in the Shared folder. Let's start with the workflow that looks two months ahead.

Launch Automator. As you know from last month's column, Automator's actions are grouped according to the application that makes use of the action. Throughout the rest of this section, I will list the steps in the order they must be added. Drop each action into the pane on the right. If any settings need to be adjusted for that action, I will include a description immediately below that step. Once you have completed the settings for an action, you may want to collapse the box by clicking the white triangle. This will save some screen real estate.

Name the workflow "Birthdays In Two Months Final" and remember where you saved it. You can add the actions by either double-clicking the action or by dragging it into the pane on the right. Here are the actions for this workflow:

1. Address Book ▷ Find People In Address Book

   Expand this action by clicking the white triangle. The options here are similar to the smart group sheet in Address Book. Working top to bottom and left to right, use the pop-up menus to create the condition "Find People Whose Group is 'Birthdays In Two Months'." Automator tries to assist by showing all of the groups it can find. You don't have to type the names.

2. Automator ▷ Stop If Input Is Empty

3. Address Book ▷ Get Contact Information

   Expand this box to choose what contact information you want the confirmation e-mail to send you. You will receive one e-mail with the combined list of all relevant contacts.

4. Mail ▷ New Mail Message

   Expand the box to add your e-mail address as the recipient. Add any text you would like to the body of the message. If you have more than one e-mail account, choose the account that you would like to use to send the message. Contact information for each person in the group will appear below your message.

5. Mail ▷ Send Outgoing Messages

   That's it for this workflow. Double-check the settings and make any necessary corrections. Save this as a workflow in case we need to edit it later. Now choose Save As from Automator's File menu and save the workflow as an application instead of a workflow. Calll it "Birthdays In Two Months Final." AppleScript will rely on the application version to do its work.

The Second Workflow—Finding Birthdays in Two Weeks

The second workflow finds birthdays in the next two weeks and follows the same logic. The steps are identical and require only minor changes from the workflow we just created. If necessary, re-open the workflow version of "Birthdays In Two Months Final." From the File menu choose Save As and save the workflow as a workflow with the name "Birthdays In Two Weeks."

Now that we have saved the workflow with a different name, let's make a few minor changes. In step 1, expand the action and use the pop-up menus to modify the condition. When you are finished, it should read, "People Whose Group is 'Two Week Birthdays'." In step 5, you may want to modify the body text to reflect that the birthdays are coming up in two weeks. If you need to change the e-mail account that will send this message, change that as well.

That's all the changes that we need to make to this workflow. Save it once as a workflow for future editing. Once that is complete, choose Save As from the File menu. Save this copy as an application named "Birthdays In Two Weeks Final."

The Third Workflow—Daily Birthday E-mails

This workflow is a little different from the first two. There are two Send Outgoing Messages actions. The first sends birthday greetings to everyone with a birthday today. The second sends you a confirmation e-mail. The steps and settings are as follows:

1. Address Book ▹ Find People In Address Book

   Use the pop-up menus to set the condition to find "People Whose Group is 'Birthdays Today'."

2. Mail ▹ Send Birthday Greetings

   Type in an appropriate greeting. The same greeting will go to each recipient. Choosing "Random Image For Each Recipient" will assure that each person gets a different picture.

3. Mail ▹ Send Outgoing Messages

4. Automator ▹ Stop If Input Is Empty

5. Address Book ▹ Find People In Address Book

   This is the same action as in step one. If you do not want the confirmation e-mail to contain contact information, this step is unnecessary,

6. Address Book ▹ Get Contact Information

   Choose the contact information that will go into the confirmation e-mail that will be sent to you. If you do not want the recipients' contact information in this e-mail, omit this step.

7. Mail ▷ New Mail Message

   Enter your e-mail address and the body text. If you want to send the message from anything other than the default account, change this setting as well.

8. Mail ▷ Send Outgoing Messages

That's the last change for this workflow. When you are sure that everything is correct, save it as a workflow in case future editing is needed. Now use the Save As command to save a copy of the workflow as an application called "Daily Birthday Emails Final." By now you should have three different workflows saved as applications. We don't need Automator any longer. It's safe to quit the program.

Tying Everything Together

Earlier I said that Automator was not very good at deciding when to deviate from a path. We are going to turn that task over to AppleScript. Fortunately, AppleScript is already installed. Don't be afraid; I knew almost no AppleScript when I started this. I did get stuck at one or two points and had to ask for assistance on the Apple Discussion board.

We could build this script using the Run AppleScript Command in Automator, but it is a little larger. It will be much more efficient to use Script Editor. Navigate to Applications/AppleScript and double-click Script Editor. When the script window opens, copy the following code and paste it into the window. If your window is divided into an upper and a lower pane, paste the code into the upper pane.

```
- Sets variable TargetDate to today's date
set TargetDate to day of (current date)

- Sets variable TargetDate to day of the week
set TargetDay to (current date) as string

- On 1st of the month check birthdays for the next two months
if TargetDate = 1 then
    - Verbal notification of progress
    say "Checking Birthdays In the next two months"

    - Runs the workflow that checks dates/sends email
    tell application "Birthdays In Two Months Final" to launch
else
    - Each Saturday check birthdays for next two weeks
    if TargetDay contains "Saturday" then
        - Verbal progress notification
        say "Checking Birthdays in the next two weeks"
        - Launch Automator Workflow
        tell application "Birthdays In Two Weeks Final" to launch
    end if
end if

- Verbal progress Notification
say "checking Todays Birthdays"

- Sends e-mails daily if needed
tell application "Daily Birthday Emails Final" to launch

- Waits two minutes for messages to be sent
delay 120

- Close Address Book
tell application "Address Book" to quit

- Close Mail
tell application "Mail" to quit
```

I won't go through the code line by line, but there are a few things that you need to know.

The two lines of code beginning with the word `set` are loosely based upon the "Current Date And Time" script included with Mac OS X. If you want to modify when the weekly and monthly workflows run, adjust the date or day in the `if` statements to suit your preferences. I also had a little assistance from members at the Apple Discussion Board. Michael Henley was nice enough to point out that I needed to use `launch` rather than `open` to get the workflows running from within AppleScript. Neil helped me to work out the procedure to quit mail. If your workflows are named something different from mine, change the relevant names to match the names of your workflows. If you do not want verbal feedback each time the script executes, delete the lines beginning with `say`. Click Compile in the Script Editor window to check for any errors.

During the process of compiling the script, AppleScript will likely indent some of the lines of text. This is normal behavior and improves readability of the code. Script Editor may ask you to locate the Automator components that do most of the work. Use the dialog box that appears to locate each of the Automator workflows we built earlier. Make sure that you link to the *application version* of each workflow. If no errors are found, use Save As to save this code as a script. Give it any descriptive name that you like. For test purposes you may want to create a fictitious person in Address Book with a birthday set for today. Set the e-mail address to yours and run the script. You should receive a birthday greeting for that person as well as a confirmation e-mail that the message was sent.

Setting the Trigger

If you wanted to manually run this project each day, save the AppleScript as an application. It could also be run as a login item. The first option means you have to remember to run it. The second option would run each time you log in. You probably don't want either of those options. The solution is to let iCal handle this for you. Let's run the script as a recurring iCal alarm, making use of its ability to run scripts. When you are trying to decide the time for this to run, realize that the screen blinks briefly as the e-mails are created so you may want to set the alarm to execute when you are away from the computer. This may also be nice if you have a large number of contacts.

Now that you know when you want this project to run, launch iCal. Click on a date to create a new event, and name that event. In the Info drawer, set the time for the action to occur. Set the repeat to "every day." In the "alarm" section, choose "Run script" and locate the AppleScript that you saved as an application. It's now safe to quite iCal. That does it. You have successfully completed this project. Give yourself a pat on the back.

Final Thoughts

This project still has a few rough edges. It is possible for Mail to quit before all of the e-mails are sent. This is not a major issue since sending seems to complete the next time Mail is opened. I am sure someone more familiar with AppleScript could solve this problem. I think it would be possible to use AppleScript to read Mail's activity monitor and only quit when the process is finished. It should also be possible to eliminate the "blink" which occurs as the messages are sent-perhaps by hiding Mail. I have yet to get this to work reliably. When I do I will post the code in the comments at the end of this article.

This project could easily be adapted to announce anniversaries. Create an appropriate smart group based on the anniversary field and adapt the workflows with appropriate rules. Change the names of the AppleScript and the Automator actions, and you have a new program. This could be triggered by a different alarm.

That's it for now. I'll see you next month. I have no idea what the next column will be about, but I'll think of something. I'm considering other projects that leverage interaction among common built-in applications to solve a problem. By the way: thanks Willis, for the idea. Also thanks to everyone else who provided assistance.

Desktop Pictures

Alaska

This Month's Desktop Pictures

This month's photos of the FIFA World Cup in Germany were taken by ATPM reader Robert Reis.

Previous Months' Desktop Pictures

Pictures from previous months are listed in the desktop pictures archives.

Downloading All the Pictures at Once

iCab and Interarchy can download an entire set of desktop pictures at once. Use the "Web ▹ Download Entire Site" command in the File menu, giving it the URL to the pictures page above. In iCab, use the Download command to download "Get all files in same path."

Contributing Your Own Desktop Pictures

If you have a picture, whether a small series or just one fabulous or funny shot, feel free to send it to editor@atpm.com and we'll consider publishing it in next month's issue. Have a regular print but no scanner? Don't worry. E-mail us, and we tell you where to send it so we can scan it for you. Note that we cannot return the original print, so send us a copy.

Placing Desktop Pictures

Mac OS X 10.3.x and 10.4.x

Choose "System Preferences…" from the Apple menu, click the "Desktop & Screen Saver" button, then choose the Desktop tab. In the left-side menu, select the desktop pictures folder you want to use.

You can also use the pictures with Mac OS X's built-in screen saver. Select the Screen Saver tab which is also in the "Desktop & Screen Saver" System Preferences pane. If you put the ATPM pictures in your Pictures folder, click on the Pictures Folder in the list of screen savers. Otherwise, click Choose Folder to tell the screen saver which pictures to use.

Mac OS X 10.1.x and 10.2.x

Choose "System Preferences…" from the Apple menu and click the Desktop button. With the pop-up menu, select the desktop pictures folder you want to use.

You can also use the pictures with Mac OS X's built-in screen saver. Choose "System Preferences…" from the Apple menu. Click the Screen Saver (10.1.x) or Screen Effects (10.2.x) button. Then click on Custom Slide Show in the list of screen savers. If you put the ATPM pictures in your Pictures folder, you’re all set. Otherwise, click Configure to tell the screen saver which pictures to use.

Mac OS X 10.0.x

Switch to the Finder. Choose “Preferences…” from the “Finder” menu. Click on the “Select Picture…” button on the right. In the Open Panel, select the desktop picture you want to use. The panel defaults to your `~/Library/Desktop Pictures` folder. Close the “Finder Preferences” window when you are done.

Book Review

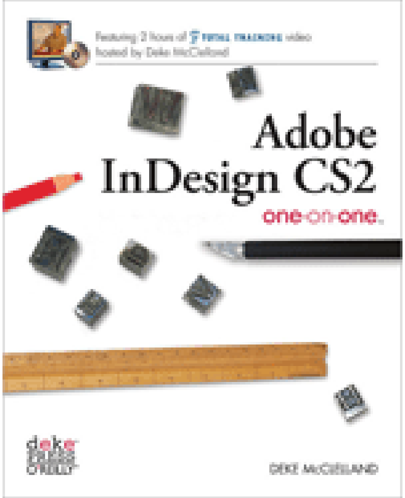
by Lee Bennett, lbennett@atpm.com

Adobe InDesign CS2 One-on-One

Publisher: O'Reilly
Author: Deke McClelland
Price: $45
Trial: Chapter 8

ATPM RATINGS
EXCELLENT

Adobe InDesign CS2 One-on-One is 528 pages of extremely intuitive training for Adobe's page-layout application. It truly is the book I wish I had when I first started using InDesign several years ago.


Featuring 2 hours of TOTAL TRAINING video hosted by Deke McClelland
Adobe InDesign CS2
one-on-one.
deke PRESS O'REILLY
DEKE McCLELLAND

Admittedly, today I'm quite accomplished in the use of InDesign and fully understood probably 90% of the material in this book. This did not, however, make it any less enjoyable to read. The lessons reinforced what I have taught myself over the years, and they offered juicy morsels that I did not previously know.

Novices to InDesign will appreciate the structure of the 12 lessons in this book. Following an introduction, each lesson clearly outlines what you'll learn and concludes with a quiz to help you retain what you've learned. You'll want to keep your computer—with InDesign running—within reach. The clear steps of each tutorial are easy to understand, but are best comprehended when you actually perform the steps yourself.

On practically every page, the tutorials are dressed with full-color images, mostly screen shots. There are enough images that go along with the lessons to help ensure you don't get lost while following the tutorial steps, while not needlessly cluttering the page with a shot of every menu that is clearly described in the text.

Also of benefit are the liberal appearances of “Pearls of Wisdom,” which go into greater detail of a topic, but can be skipped without fear of not understanding the lesson.

Keeping to the classroom-style presentation both the book and video lessons employ, there are a number of “Extra Credit” sections, benefitting those who can’t absorb enough of the primary instruction. These are the parts where even someone with a lot of InDesign experience is likely to find some gems of new information.

Fans of the Total Training series will be thrilled to learn that the book includes a DVD-ROM that not only contains all the documents and support files for each lesson, but also more than two hours of video hosted by the author himself. And we’re not talking about dwarfish, highly compressed, thumbnail videos. Even though the DVD is intended to be used on a computer and does not play on television DVD video units, the video files are full-size resolution at 30 frames per second with no blatantly visible compression artifacts. Every detail of the palettes shown during the video tutorials is clear.

The video lessons were so helpful to me that I found myself wishing the entire book was available in video format. Yes, Total Training has a complete, 16-hour InDesign training video but, judging from its sample clips, I’d much rather listen to McClelland.

As much as I loved the book and am liable to keep it handy at work as a reference, a couple things bugged me. For beginners and novices, this doesn’t really matter, but I saw no reason to advise some adjustments to color workflow settings in an attempt to make the lessons on your screen appear to match the color of the book. Even if the press that printed the book were dead-on accurate, there’s no accounting for a reader’s monitor that isn’t properly calibrated, nor the color temperature of the lights under which the book is being viewed. This section should either have explained how to work with your press to determine the best color settings, or it simply should have been left out.

On the topic of color, it seemed somewhat bizarre for a particular point in a video lesson to suggest that there are times it’s okay to use 100% of all four process colors (400% ink density). Fortunately, the final video lesson does cover ink density and hints that most presses need it to be under 300%.

In addition to color adjustments, the author also provided a file on the DVD-ROM to make small tweaks to the keyboard shortcuts. I applaud the effort of changing some obscure shortcuts to a more civilized keystroke and adding shortcuts to a few commands that need them. However, for us slightly more advanced users, I’d have appreciated an appendix or something listing all the modifications in case there are some I’d rather leave alone.

I was hoping the book would include a lesson on grid layouts. InDesign’s ability to manage grids is fairly powerful, and it was a little stunning to read in the preface that grids would, quite specifically, not be covered.

And finally, to find typos in a book that has an entire tutorial on the use of spell check just seems unpardonable. Missing a homonym could perhaps be forgiven, but finding “iincorrect” on page 282 is something of an ironic double whammy!

Let me remind you, however, that I still offer high marks for this book. O’Reilly has a well-known reputation of publishing quality books with very helpful information, tutorials, and support material. *Adobe Indesign CS2 One-on-One* is no exception. This latest of more than 80 titles authored by McClelland—an accomplished and popular electronic publisher and lecturer—combines a clear writing style, hundreds of screen shots, and well-produced video lessons, making this book a resource any InDesign fan would be proud to own.

Hardware Review

by Paul Fatula, pfatula@atpm.com

EyeTV 250

Developer: Elgato Systems
Price: $200
Requirements: 500 MHz G4, Mac OS X 10.4. Universal.
Trial: None

ATPM RATINGS
VERY NICE

My home entertainment system is pretty low-tech. I've got a 19″ CRT television, a no-frills VCR, and a five-disc DVD changer that a friend found in a dumpster and I never got around to hooking up. It's rare that I sit down and focus my attention on watching TV, but I often have it on while I do other things, like work or play games on my Mac.

EyeTV 250 is a hardware and software combination that allows one to watch and record analog TV on a Mac. The immediate attraction, for me, was that I could get all my entertainment on one screen instead of looking back and forth. But EyeTV offers a wealth of features that go well beyond basic TV-watching, turning my Mac into a TiVo-esque device capable of pausing and recording TV, and storing and editing recordings for future use.

Hardware

The EyeTV 250 is a small silver and white box with ports in the back for connecting a coax cable, a USB cable, and a power supply (unfortunately, the device requires more power than USB can provide). On the front of the box is an S-video port, a receiver for the remote control, and an extremely bright blue light. My only complaint about the hardware: the light is so annoyingly bright that I covered it with a piece of black electrical tape.

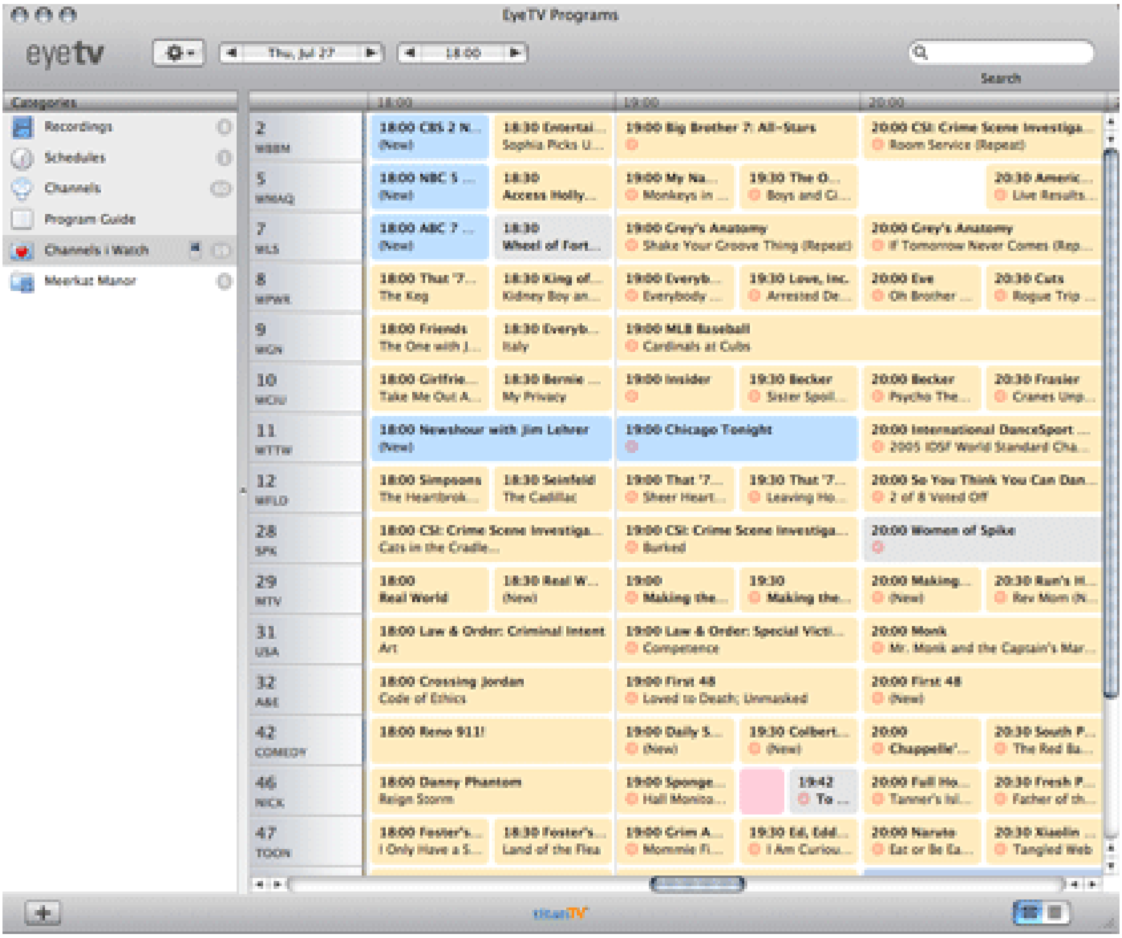
The EyeTV 250 hardware unit isn't just a converter box to let data flow through a coax cable into a Mac's USB port. The device also contains a compression chip which converts the incoming data into MPEG-1 or MPEG-2 format. Sure, my computer could do that, but it'd be highly processor-intensive. Since the EyeTV 250 is doing the heavy lifting, "older" computers (like my two-year-old PowerBook G4) can be used to watch and record TV.

The EyeTV 250 package also includes a remote control. It works, but it could be better designed. The buttons are poorly arranged: for example, the buttons to play, pause, record, stop, etc. are at the very foot of the remote, requiring an awkward grip to use. In addition, some of the buttons are badly labeled, such as a button showing a musical note which is used to open the main EyeTV window. Annoyingly, pressing the remote control's power button does not launch the EyeTV application; you'll have to get off the couch and walk over to your computer to start watching TV. The remote control documentation provided on the EyeTV CD shows a completely different remote control with significantly better-placed (though not always better-labeled) buttons.

The hardest part about installing and setting up the EyeTV 250 was getting behind my TV and setting up the wiring. My incoming cable connection (coming out of the wall) is already split, sending wires to my cable modem and to my VCR (and from there to the TV). So I had to get a second splitter and two more pieces of coax cable (not included with the EyeTV 250), and insert all that between the first splitter and the VCR, with the new coax cable going to the EyeTV 250. It's not a strike against Elgato, but installation requires lots of running cables and crawling around.

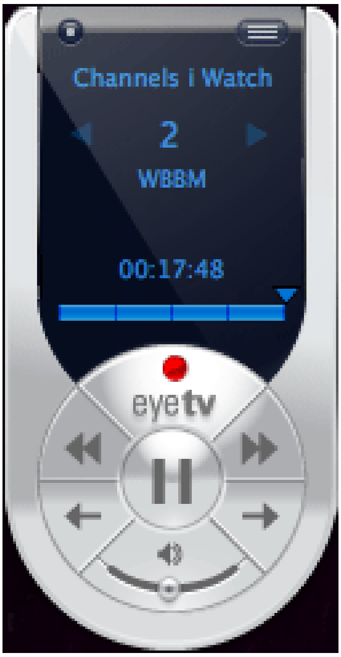
Software

The EyeTV 250 device is controlled by an application called EyeTV. Installation and setup are straightforward and simple. After I entered my zip code and selected my cable provider, an Electronic Program Guide was downloaded from TitanTV. (In the past, I've gotten my TV listings from Excite; the data is the same, but I like EyeTV's EPG interface better than using a Web browser.)



	18:00		19:00		20:00	
2 WBBM	18:00 CBS 2 N... (New)	18:30 Entertai... Sophia Picks U...	19:00 Big Brother 7: All-Stars		20:00 CSI: Crime Scene Investiga... Room Service (Repeat)	
5 WMAQ	18:00 NBC 5 ... (New)	18:30 Access Holly...	19:00 My Na... Monkeys in ...	19:30 The O... Boys and Gi...		20:30 Americ... Live Results...
7 WLS	18:00 ABC 7 ... (New)	18:30 Wheel of Fort...	19:00 Grey's Anatomy Shake Your Groove Thing (Repeat)		20:00 Grey's Anatomy If Tomorrow Never Comes (Rep...	
8 WPWR	18:00 That '7... The Keg	18:30 King of... Kidney Boy an...	19:00 Everyb... Everybody ...	19:30 Love, Inc. Arrested De...	20:00 Eve Oh Brother ...	20:30 Cuts Rogue Trip ...
9 WGN	18:00 Friends The One with J...	18:30 Everyb... Italy	19:00 MLB Baseball Cardinals at Cubs			
10 WCIU	18:00 Girlfrie... Take Me Out A...	18:30 Bernie ... My Privacy	19:00 Insider	19:30 Becker Sister Spoil...	20:00 Becker Psycho The...	20:30 Frasier Cranes Unp...
11 WTTW	18:00 Newshour with Jim Lehrer (New)		19:00 Chicago Tonight		20:00 International DanceSport ... 2005 IDSF World Standard Cha...	
12 WFLD	18:00 Simpsons The Heartbrok...	18:30 Seinfeld The Cadillac	19:00 That '7... Sheer Heart...	19:30 That '7... Leaving Ho...	20:00 So You Think You Can Dan... 2 of 8 Voted Off	
28 SPK	18:00 CSI: Crime Scene Investiga... Cats in the Cradle...		19:00 CSI: Crime Scene Investiga... Burked		20:00 Women of Spike	
29 MTV	18:00 Real World	18:30 Real W... (New)	19:00 Making the...	19:30 Making the...	20:00 Making... (New)	20:30 Run's H... Rev Mom (N...
31 USA	18:00 Law & Order: Criminal Intent Art		19:00 Law & Order: Special Victi... Competence		20:00 Monk Mr. Monk and the Captain's Mar...	
32 A&E	18:00 Crossing Jordan Code of Ethics		19:00 First 48 Loved to Death; Unmasked		20:00 First 48 (New)	
42 COMEDY	18:00 Reno 911!		19:00 Daily S... (New)	19:30 Colbert... (New)	20:00 Chappelle'...	20:30 South P... The Red Ba...
46 NICK	18:00 Danny Phantom Reign Storm		19:00 Sponge... Hall Monito...	19:42 To ...	20:00 Full Ho... Tanner's Isl...	20:30 Fresh P... Father of th...
47 TOON	18:00 Foster's... I Only Have a S...	18:30 Foster's... Land of the Flea	19:00 Grim A... Mommie Fi...	19:30 Ed, Edd... I Am Curiou...	20:00 Naruto Eat or Be Ea...	20:30 Xiaolin ... Tangled Web

EyeTV's main window has an iTunes-like two panes. The left panel contains entries for Recordings, Schedules, Channels, Program Guide, and any custom playlists (of channels or recordings) the user creates. Clicking on one of those items makes its contents display in the larger right pane of the window. A Search bar makes it easy to find out when favorite programs will be on. Better still, the list it brings up has a little red dot next to each program found: click the dot and EyeTV will record the program when it comes on. It's all pretty simple and intuitive.



There's also an (optional) on-screen remote control, which appears when you click on a button with a grid-looking icon on the real remote control. It looks nice (if you like that sort of thing) but it's not terribly useful. There are no number buttons on it for changing channels, and I prefer using keyboard commands for things like fast-forwarding. I usually keep the on-screen remote hidden and use the real remote control to control EyeTV. If I want to switch channels and the remote control isn't nearby, I double-click on the channel I want from the Channels or Program Guide screen: it's much easier than making multiple clicks on a small arrow on the on-screen remote control.

Usage

Since I don't have a TiVo, the ability to pause, rewind, and fast forward live TV was new to me, and I quickly saw the attraction. Not only could I hit Pause when I wanted to get up and get something to drink, but having paused the program for a few minutes also meant I could Fast Forward through the next commercial break. My TV-watching habits quickly altered: I'd turn on a program I wanted to watch and leave it paused for a while, as I did other things. Then I'd watch the whole show, skipping the ads.

Recording a show is also really simple. Every day the Electronic Program Guide is updated from TitanTV (or tvtv if you're in Europe). When viewing the EPG, there's a small dimmed red circle for each program. Clicking on it schedules the show to record. If EyeTV isn't running when a recording is supposed to start, the program starts up automatically. EyeTV is also supposed to be able to wake the computer from sleep to start recording, if necessary; unfortunately, that doesn't always work. On my PowerBook G4, I found that EyeTV cannot wake the computer from sleep if the screen is closed down over the keyboard. (If the computer is asleep but the screen is up, EyeTV wakes the computer as expected.)

When EyeTV records a show, it remembers the show's name and description from TitanTV, which is handy for later use. The data can be edited if you want. All recorded programs show up if you click Recordings on the left pane of the main window. They can also be put into custom playlists, manually or automatically, making it easy to keep a large recording collection organized. Recorded shows can also be exported to a variety of different formats, including the ones used by the video iPods.

Speaking of large recording collections, though, programs recorded with EyeTV take up a lot of hard drive space: using the default MPEG-2 format, an hour of television will consume about 2 GB of space. (Switching to MPEG-1 will cut that in half.) Fortunately, EyeTV includes an editor which lets you remove any parts of a program you're not interested in saving. To be honest, at first I found the editor to be unintuitive and confusing. After consulting the manual and editing a few programs, though, the editor is pretty easy to use. It takes only a few minutes for me to cut all the commercials out of an hour-long program, freeing up over half a gig of space.

The most annoying flaw I found with EyeTV is that it clears its cache when it starts recording. Here's what happened to me: I was watching one program, about a quarter-hour behind "live." EyeTV was set to record a program on another channel starting at the next hour. EyeTV can't record one channel while you watch another one live, but it can record one channel while you watch a program you already recorded, so I didn't expect a problem: the cached show is recorded, right? But when the time came for EyeTV to start recording the show I'd programmed it to, it cut off the show I was watching mid-stream. There was no way for me to find out how the show ended, because the cached show was deleted rather than retained when recording started. That's frustrating and seems unnecessary.

Performance

According to Elgato, EyeTV requires 256 MB of RAM, and 512 MB is recommended. Based on my usage, though, I'd recommend at least a gig of RAM. While EyeTV runs fine with 512 MB of RAM when it's the frontmost application, I've often found performance suffers when I try to multitask with EyeTV running. The problem is that the Mac operating system, plus EyeTV, plus a few other programs, can easily mean you start using virtual memory. With EyeTV writing to the hard drive and other programs also using the hard drive, something's got to give—especially with a relatively slow hard drive, like laptops tend to have.

If you want to multi-task with an application that uses the hard drive a lot, EyeTV can be set to cache to RAM instead of to the hard drive. That's a great idea, but only if you have lots of RAM. Most of us don't have 2 GB of RAM total, let alone 2 GB to devote just to EyeTV, but a smaller sized RAM cache might be doable for some users (with the sacrifice of quality, duration, or both).

Conclusion

Though it's always been possible to use my VCR to record shows and watch them later, skipping through the ads, I rarely bothered doing so; it was just too cumbersome to program the VCR and keep track of tapes. Programming EyeTV is as easy as a single click, and recorded programs are easy to find on my computer. Elgato's EyeTV 250 packs a lot of functionality and convenience into a small package. If the idea of watching TV on your computer appeals to you, and you have a good amount of RAM, you should be happy with EyeTV.

Book Review

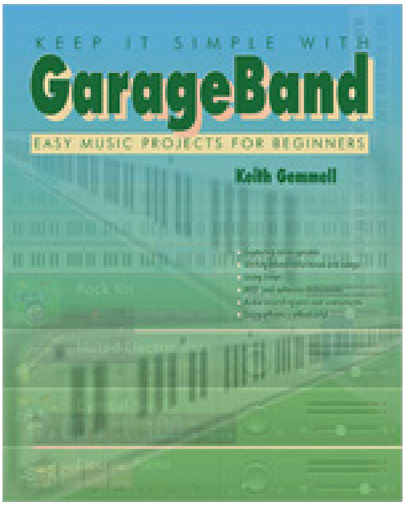
by Sylvester Roque, sroque@atpm.com

Keep it Simple With GarageBand: Easy Music Projects for Beginners

Publisher: PC-Publishing/O'Reilly
Author: Keith Gemmell
Price: $15
Trial: None

ATPM RATINGS
EXCELLENT

I don't usually jump at the chance to review books that begin with phrases such as Keep it Simple With (insert name of program here). I usually prefer to learn the basics of software via the keep-poking-at-it-till-you-get-it-right method. Given that, why would I volunteer to review a book entitled *Keep it Simple With GarageBand: Easy Music Projects for Beginners?* Well, I have absolutely no musical talent at all. I need help.



Even though Apple's GarageBand, which ships as part of iLife, is supposed to be music making for the non-musician, I was a little intimidated the first time I opened the program. Some of the other music programs I had looked at over the years were even more intimidating. Keith Gemmell's *Keep it Simple With GarageBand: Easy Music Projects for Beginners* might be just what I needed. In fact, it seems to be aimed right at Mac users like me.

The Basic Premise

Gemmell's book attempts to help people like me. In ten chapters spread over 89 pages, he walks readers through creating a basic music project from start to finish. By the end of the book, you will turn six pre-recorded loops supplied with GarageBand into a finished piece of music lasting about 40 seconds.

Now, the first thing that occurs to me is that with ten basic steps to a music project there is a lot of room for people like me to make mistakes. Somewhere around step nine, I get the nagging feeling something went wrong at step two. Time to start all over again. Fortunately, this book provides help for people like me. Beginning with chapter two, the finished product for each chapter is available for download so you can compare your results with the author's finished product. The downloads are between 1 and 4 MB each.

Conceptually, this book could be divided into three different sections. The first three chapters might de described as Music Composition 101 with GarageBand. In this segment, the author introduces us to such basic musical concepts as *beat* and *bars*. He also introduces us to GarageBand's basic features. By the end of chapter three, you will have the first four tracks in place.

Before reading this book, I had opened GarageBand for all of about 15 minutes and had no trouble following these directions. The first three chapters took me about 15 minutes each to complete. This doesn't include time fiddling around just for fun or time spent completing the assignments at the end of each chapter. If you are completely new to the Mac platform, it might take a bit longer but not that much longer. The steps are numbered throughout each chapter, and there are numerous screenshots as well.

Extending Your Music

By the end of chapter four, basic instruments are in place in your musical masterpiece: Electric Piano, Drum Kit, Acoustic Guitar, and Acoustic Bass. At this point you are ready to begin adding a bit more "depth" to your composition. In chapters five through seven, horns, additional strings, and a voiceover track are added to the composition. Just as in previous chapters, directions are clearly numbered, and there are numerous screenshots. For those who like to use keyboard commands more than the mouse, GarageBand keyboard equivalents are introduced at the point of need.

Chapters four through eight are about beginning to fine-tune your musical composition. How do you make the horn section start at just the right time? Does the first note in the loop that forms the horn track fit the rest of the composition? As the author walks you through answering these questions, he presents a brief description of why he chose to arrange the piece the way he did. A few additional musical terms get added as needed, but the definitions are clear, concise, and for the most part, included at the point of need.

In this section of the book, I found the chapter projects tended to take 20–30 minutes per chapter. In both chapters four and five, I found myself having to complete that part of the project twice. I'm not entirely sure what went wrong the first time. Maybe I skipped a step in making the transposition from the printed page to the screen. In fact, I downloaded the finished projects for these chapters to compare with mine. In fairness to Mr. Gemmell, I don't think the problem was his directions. This time things went much better.

Chapter seven is devoted to recording a basic voiceover track. In the course of that discussion, the author briefly discusses the Mac's built-in audio capabilities and why you might want to purchase external hardware if you are going to be recording often or if your projects require higher-quality audio. The overview is pretty basic and won't contain anything new for many Mac users.

I have mixed feelings about this chapter. The good news is that Mr. Gemmell provides an overview of the Mac's audio-recording capabilities and alternative equipment without getting bogged down in technical minutiae. The bad news is I found myself wishing there were a little more detail. That's probably just me. I haven't done a lot of recording on the Mac, but it is something I am interested in and have been looking at for a while.

It's in the Mix

Chapters nine and ten could easily fall into the "polishing up" category. In chapter nine, it's time to view some MIDI data to enhance the baseline of your music. Chapter ten tackles mixing your project into its final form. I had tried reading some information about mixing tracks before and found it somewhat confusing. This book is different. The advice is very practical. In fact, it confirms something I have always suspected—some aspects of "mixing" a musical composition are purely a matter of your personal taste. At least Mr. Gemmell is aware of that and gives you some good reasons for why he mixed his version of the project the way he did.

That's a Wrap

There is a lot of information packed into the 89 pages of this book. The directions are clear and to the point. With the exception of a few steps in chapters five and six, I had no trouble following the directions. The many screenshots are very helpful—particularly in the later chapters. Useful tips and tidbits are scattered in the margins throughout the book. I personally would prefer at least some of the screenshots to be in color since that seems to help me process the information better. If you have a bit of background in music-making on the Mac, you will probably want something a bit more advanced. But if you need a good introduction to GarageBand and aren't musically inclined, *Keep it Simple With GarageBand Easy Music Projects for Beginners* is an Excellent addition to your computing library.

FAQ: Frequently Asked Questions

What Is *ATPM*?

About This Particular Macintosh (ATPM) is, among other things, a monthly Internet magazine or "e-zine." ATPM was created to celebrate the personal computing experience. For us this means the most personal of all personal computers—the Apple Macintosh. About This Particular Macintosh is intended to be about your Macintosh, our Macintoshes, and the creative, personal ideas and experiences of everyone who uses a Mac. We hope that we will continue to be faithful to our mission.

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What Are Some Tips for Viewing PDFs?

- For Mac OS X 10.3 and 10.4 users, we recommend Apple's Preview. You can download Adobe Reader for free. If you have a Power Macintosh, Acrobat Reader 5 has better quality and performance. ATPM is also compatible with Acrobat Reader 3, for those with 680x0 Macs.

- With Adobe Reader, you can zoom the PDF to full window width and scroll through articles simply by single-clicking anywhere in the article text (except underlined links).

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- Try turning Font Smoothing on and off in Acrobat Reader's preferences to see which setting you prefer.

- All blue-underlined links are clickable.

- You can hold down Option while hovering over a link to see where it will lead.

- For best results, turn off Acrobat's "Fit to Page" option before printing.

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What If My Question Isn't Answered Above?

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