ATPM

About This Particular Macintosh: About the **personal** computing experience.™

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Welcome

Robert Paul Leitao, rleitao@atpm.com

Welcome to the April issue of *About This Particular Macintosh!* Spring has arrived in the northern hemisphere, while fall has begun for our neighbors south of the equatorial line. No matter the season you may be experiencing, this issue of ATPM provides the best news, views, and reviews in an easy-to-read monthly format. We follow the changes in the Macintosh world as we all experience this change of seasons.

Apple TV Has Come to Be

Despite a delay in the release of Apple's latest home entertainment and computer peripheral product, called Apple TV, the long-awaited product has arrived in living rooms. The reviews of the product have been generally favorable for what might be described as an entertainment convergence device. Enclosed in the box is a low-power Intel processor and a version of OS X that allows the buyer to stream music, photos, and video from a Mac or PC to their television.

Because it's much of a Mac with an Intel processor, a version of OS X, and a hard drive, hackers have already taken pleasure in making custom modifications such as activating the otherwise dormant USB port. The product's detractors have focused on the small 40 GB hard drive and lack of a DVD player for direct playback of commercially released movies.

NAB 2007

Apple will have a big presence at this year's NAB conference scheduled to convene on April 14th. Billed as the world's largest electronic media show, speculation suggests Apple will release a new version of Final Cut Pro during the event. Many Mac enthusiasts hope the company will also announce release dates for new Macintosh content creation hardware at this assemblage of broadcasters and other media professionals.

The March Quarter

Similar to the way economists forecast economic activity and journalists report on the results, Apple has its own cadre of followers who track sales, estimate the company's performance, and discuss seemingly infinitum the results. Apple is scheduled to report its results for the March-ending quarter on April 25th. We will discuss the results in this column in the May issue of *About This Particular Macintosh.* Early reports indicate that Macintosh sales are stronger than originally forecast despite the lack of Mac product upgrades during the three-month period and the competing release of Windows Vista during the quarter. Apple ended its fiscal quarter with the company's share price at $92.91 and off from its all-time high of $97.80 set in January, following the iPhone announcement.

The Education Quarter

The June fiscal quarter has traditionally been Apple's strongest three-month period for sales to schools, particularly in the K–12 space. Watch for good news this quarter from Apple

on education sales and the return of schools that abandoned the Mac years ago over price and single-source supplier issues relating to Apple's previous go-it-alone chip architecture strategy. The migration to Intel-based Macintoshes has renewed interest in the Mac from schools and enterprises looking for cost-effective and easier-to-use computers. Absent the bloat of Windows, the lesser security risk of Mac OS X, and pricing that matches and often beats competitors on similarly equipped computers, Apple should enjoy brisk education sales this season.

Will Leopard Change Its Spots?

Mac OS X 10.5 is one of the most talked about upgrades to the Macintosh operating system since the Public Beta release of Mac OS X almost seven years ago. The coming release of Leopard will represent the longest period between commercial upgrades of Apple's modern operating system. On April 29th it will be two years since the release of Mac OS X 10.4 called Tiger.

In public comments about Leopard, Apple CEO Steve Jobs made reference to certain unannounced features to be included in the new OS. These features will be revealed as Leopard is prepared for commercial release. What additional changes might be in store for Leopard? For one, Apple has developed a versatile OS to meet the needs of computer users, developers, consumers interested in entertainment devices and the demands of our increasingly mobile society. Depending on your vantage point, Leopard will have a new look and many new uses.

Seasons of Change

The personal computing experience now extends beyond a user and a desktop. The iPod, Apple TV, and the forthcoming iPhone illustrate the manner in which the needs and desires of computer users are no longer confined to a sedentary spot in the home or office. Laptop sales are beginning to eclipse desktop sales to consumers. The editors of ATPM chronicle the changes in the personal computing experience each month, saving you time and providing useful information in a concise way no matter the season.

Our April issue includes:

Bloggable: They Hit the Snooze Button

To say that Windows Vista isn't exactly overwhelming users with joy may be understating the case a tad. Wes Meltzer found a couple of Windows geeks who are talking about leaving Windows completely—and at least one is using a Mac. Where is the real world and what have you done with it? That, plus Bill Gates, Fire, and a little post-hoc fallacy fun, in this month's *Bloggable*.

Mac About Town: Who's Got Your Back?

You find out who your real friends are when times are tough. Turns out that the same can be said for tech support. But who thinks about tech support until he sees his bright shiny

Mac turning into a bright shining brick? Mike Chamberlain reports on his most recent experience with Apple Care.

MacMuser: Size Is Everything

Most men never believe the old chestnut that size isn't everything. But now Pfeiffer Consulting has the evidence to prove them wrong.

Next Actions: Getting the Hang of Collection/Gathering

Getting everything into the digital "in box" can be tricky because of multiple buckets. This column looks at different ways to do collection/gathering stage work.

Photoshop For the Curious: Levels and Curves and *Oh my!*

After reading this month's column, you may never use the Brightness/Contrast adjustment ever again!

Web Accessibility: What Browsers Can Do

When you visit a Web site, you aren't powerless or at the mercy of the Web designer, but can take some control of the site's appearance and functionality. This article considers the powers available to users of Safari, the browser that comes installed on every Mac.

Segments: Takeaway Lessons From Billy Madison

"I've been betrayed. Several days ago, I came across a very disturbing post on…a publication for which I have previously written: …By paying the 'discounted price' of just $200, you can move to the head of the line and get your product reviewed…"

Desktop Pictures: New England

This month's desktop pictures were taken by Lee Bennett during a 1997 trip through New England.

Cartoon: Cortland

In this month's *Cortland*, our hero finds himself traveling to other dimensions, while persons from other dimensions travel to ours, and the Dark Lord I.T. is trying to travel to other dimensions, or our dimension, or…Heck, there's just a lot of dimension-traveling going on this month!

Review: Audacity 1.2.6

A working review of the open-source sound editor Audacity, which does much of what expensive editors offer at a price anyone can afford.

Review: Aviator Laptop Stand

A new jack-of-all-trades portable laptop stand that really excels for in-flight computing.

Review: Dodge That Anvil! 1.0.4

Multiple difficulty levels and many power-ups make Dodge That Anvil! enjoyable for a long time.

Review: HomeDock Deluxe

The HomeDock Deluxe has the potential to be a very nice conduit between your iPod and your home entertainment system. Unfortunately, in the condition in which it's currently shipping, that conduit is more like a gauntlet.

Review: Take Control of Mac OS X Backups 2.0

Joe Kissell provides a thorough and useful guide to nearly every conceivable scenario for backups on the Mac.

Review: Wings3D 0.98.34

Wings3D will appeal to those of you looking to get a start in 3D modeling. Even if you're not interested in 3D graphics but want to keep your computer-savvy kids busy and out of online trouble, install this small simple program for them to explore. It is that easy to use.

E-Mail

Color Calibration Capers

Thanks. I've never had the nerve to mess with calibration. I figured it was for the real pros. Armed with your article I could boldly dive in.

My second monitor is a refurbished (cheap) Mitsubishi Diamondtron. It always seemed to have a lemon-tint to it, but it never occured to me that I could fix that. Well today, on that screen, my photos look awesome.

—Robert Ballantyne

> Congrats with the calibration!
> You can rest easy about your second monitor. Even at work where I have my primary monitor calibrated by a pro service bureau, I only do quickie calibrations on my second monitor because all I ever put over there are my palettes and both my e-mail and instant messenger windows. Color is of no matter to me on that monitor. But I'm glad you managed to get yours looking better!
> *—Lee Bennett*

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We just got a new Intel iMac at the office. When I attempt to calibrate, the Apple is sitting on a background comprised of black and white horizontal lines! But the Apple is a solid tone. It is impossible to make the apple disappear into the graphic lined background. What gives?

—Larry Lazzardo

> The trick is to make the logo seem to blend into the background. You'll want to pay attention to the interface's message that says it helps to sit back and squint your eyes a little bit. You're basing this calibration on having the logo's color be a closely blended match to the background. If you look sharply at the pixels, it is harder. Relax your eyes and let the image blur a little bit, and you'll do better.
> *—Lee Bennett*

ScanSnap S500m

I've had a ScanSnap S500 for about four months now. I agree with your excellent review. It's the bomb. One thing you might try however, is a new PDF manager that's seduced me away from DEVONthink. It's called DocumentWallet, and I like it even better

than DEVONthink, which is very good in its own right. For my purposes as an attorney, DocumentWallet is more intuitive and easier to organize my cases. It's like an iPhoto for documents, only much more responsive than iPhoto. Plus, it costs about a third of the price of DEVONthink as I recall. I have no connection to the developer of DocumentWallet.

—Neil Chapman

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I have an earlier model of the ScanSnap. I agree wholeheartedly with your review. I emptied boxes and boxes of academic journal articles that traveled with me for years as I relocated several tmes; also, scanned tax records, etc. It's fast and the duplex mode is great. E-mailing PDF documents from within Acrobat is a great timesaver. Its small footprint and simplicity is very Mac-like. Highly recommended.

—J. Renders

We'd love to hear your thoughts about our publication. We always welcome your comments, criticisms, suggestions, and praise. Or, if you have an opinion or announcement about the Macintosh platform in general, that's OK too. Send your e-mail to editor@atpm.com. All mail becomes the property of ATPM.

They Hit the Snooze Button

Am I now Rip Van Winkel, asleep for 20 years under a shady tree, only to wake and find that in my absence everything has changed?

When I went to sleep, in July 2006, "serious" computer users were still running around claiming that Macs weren't "open" enough, or "not business-like" enough. An insider's tip, readers: any time there's enough new material for me to write a whole a column about something, that means a lot of people are chattering about it. Mark Pilgrim, Tim Bray, and Ted Leung are some big-name figures. Now, in March 2007, it seems like the only hater left is Charlie Brooker. (More on him later.)

What happened?

Well, Microsoft released Windows Vista. And instead of changing the world, a lot of those same important computer users are talking about moving to OS X, or "downgrading" to Windows XP. It seems—as I mentioned last month—that Vista's not exactly wowing its users with its ease of use, ease of installation, panache, or, um, compatibility.

We're living in the Bizarro World, and I know it. Microsoft isn't innovating at all anymore, and Leander Kahney can write a column for *Wired* about how everything is going Apple's way—without stretching to find examples.

Chris Pirillo of *Lockergnome* (whose search box's label is `C:\PIRILLO.EXE`) starts us off with a litany of complaints about how Vista is failing him. This is from a man, I'd like to remind you, who has been happily using *Windows XP,* the operating system that I'd rank somewhere between a colonoscopy and a root canal. Anyway, he says, the onboard software's buggy, hardware and software support is limited and problematic, there are too many options to tinker with, and just using it seems to require sacrificing productivity in ways that drive him up a wall.

He continued, later in the same day, to expound on the topic. You see, it seems that everyone in the Windows community turned on him for daring to expose the emperor's limited clothing:

> Tell ya what: I'd rather run Vista in a virtual machine on an XP desktop than vice versa. I realize there are always going to be hassles, but when those hassles cause me to pause my own workflow…they become more than hassles, they become obstacles. I have to start thinking around my operating system instead of my operating system doing the thinking for me. If you want a *real*, *tangible* fact…I rely less and less on desktop-based software and more and more on Web-based apps.

[. . .]

Believe me, nobody feels worse about this decision than I do. I'll still be running Vista on my laptop (despite recently having to reinstall the OS after something went awry with a Windows Update procedure), but my primary desktop will soon be XP again.

Thomas Hawk, writing about Pirillo's series of posts, notes that it's really time for Pirillo to get a Mac. He says, he stuck by Windows for 16 years, but at some point, he got tired of being "hit in the side of the head with a shovel one too many times," as he put it. He hasn't exactly regretted it, to say the least. Hawk wrote, cheerily:

[I]t has been the most positive thing to happen to my computing since. I live with my computer. It's a big part of my life. I use it upwards of 20 hours a day. And although there was about a 72 hour learning curve and I had to ask Kristopher some really dumb things like "how do I rename a folder," after this short learning curve it was over and done and now I'm far, far more efficient with my computing than I've ever been.

Programs don't freeze. Everything with a USB connection I've ever stuck into the thing has just worked. It wakes up when it's supposed to. In three months of heavy, heavy use I've probably only had to restart maybe three times. Photoshop goes faster. Bridge goes faster. Everything goes faster. And everything just works. That's the bottom line, everything just works.

Don't get me wrong. Things *can* go wrong on a Mac. It just happens like 20x less than on a PC.

On top of it all it feels better. The built-in cam and mic are awesome. The way the volume goes pop, pop, pop as I turn my music up and down is soothing. The keyboard is more comfortable. It's really cool how I can use two fingers on the touchpad to move my screen up and down, two fingers on the pad and click to right click, etc.

You can't make up that kind of publicity, can you? Chris Pirillo, take a hint. Get a Mac.

Pirillo isn't the only important pundit to take one look at Vista and punt. Scot Finnie, of *Scot's Newsletter*, recently ran a three-month trial with a MacBook Pro, "as part of [his] research in gauging whether Vista is most people's best operating system choice." Finnie has written a series of updates, all along, about how his trial has been going, but it was obvious from the beginning that he was enjoying the experience of using his Mac.

In November, Finnie wrote:

If I could strip out aspects of Vista like Microsoft's aggressive anti-piracy measures, some of its onerous protective mechanisms, and the high cost of Vista

Ultimate, I might continue as a more or less content Windows user. But the emergence of Vista has sparked something new inside me, a serious need to explore my alternatives.

It went well; after just two weeks, he wrote, "Exploring the way the Mac works is actually fun." Gasp! From a Windows user! (The second update was less earth-shattering.) Then, Finney drove in the stake, in the wrap at the end of his trial:

> After hundreds of hours testing Vista and living with the Mac for three months, the choice was, well, crystal clear. I've struggled to sort out my gut feeling about Windows Vista, but the value and advantage of the Mac and OS X are difficult to miss. Microsoft's marketing materials for a past version of Windows used the phrase, "It just works." But the only computer that tagline honestly describes is the Macintosh. Don't translate that in your mind as, "Yeah, so what, the Mac is easy to use." Any new computing environment takes some getting used to. The easy-to-use aspect is nice, but not all that significant. When Mac users say, "It just works," what they mean is that you spend more time on your work, and a lot less time working on your computer.

Doesn't it feel good to be vindicated, guys? I bought my first Mac in May 2002, and by July 2002, I knew that I wouldn't ever go back. I used to be a Linux user—I'm sure I've written about this—and I spent a lot of time, in those days, tinkering, trying every possible piece of software in a category. Now my idea of tinkering is trying out a single new piece of software for a month or two, and seeing if it works out for me.

About the only person left who seems to hate Macs is the *Guardian*'s tech columnist, Charlie Brooker, who seems stuck in the Real World. To him, Macs are just toys (actually, I believe the phrase he uses is "glorified Fisher-Price activity centres"), a statement so hilariously retro it brings me back to an argument I had in 1997. I'm not really sure what to say, other than, "Has he used a Mac?" and "Did he just get dumped by a Mac-user girlfriend?"

Stephen Manes, at *Forbes*, realizes that Vista may have finally crossed the line between tinkering and working. He says that the lack of polish, plus the endless security notifications, makes it a major problem:

> Vista is a fading theme park with a few new rides, lots of patched-up old ones and bored kids in desperate need of adult supervision running things. If I can find plenty of problems in a matter of hours, why can't Microsoft? Most likely answer: It did—and it doesn't care. . .

The real slogan: "No innovation here." Vista can't compete with that.

I Plead Nolo Contendere

- You may have seen the *Newsweek* [interview](#) with Bill Gates in February. (Sorry, it looks like I neglected to link to it.) John Gruber was not happy with the fact that reporter Steven Levy lets Bill Gates get away with a few fast ones. So he [called him out on it](#). Anyway, Richard at *Smart Like Streetcar* points out that, rather than spending his time arguing with Gates about something tangential to the interview, Levy chose to stick to the topic at hand and [talk to Gates](#) about Vista. And Levy did a terrific job, he says: "[Levy is] constantly pressing Gates, pumping him for info, pissing him off, but never making Microsoft's founder so angry that he shuts him down. It's the razor's edge, a thing of beauty."

- [Fire is gone](#). I guess its time had come: what little of the Mac instant messaging market wasn't already held by Adium, iChat, and Proteus just wasn't enough to sustain a neglected client. But still, it's always bad when a project folds like that. It was the original OS X AIM client (though I still remember when Adium eclipsed it, sometime in 2002). Goodbye, and long live Fire.

- Someone at *MacNewsWorld* is mistaking effect for cause, it seems. The mere presence of more Mac security software is not *prima facie* evidence for [more Mac malware](#). A growing market for preventative devices sometimes precedes growth in whatever the device prevents, and is not necessarily followed by whatever that thing is. (In other words, the US's development of an anti-ballistic missile defense shield is not evidence of ICBMs being launched against the US, in and of itself.) Anyway, *MacUser* did a nice job of [pointing this out](#). I haven't seen an uptick in OS X malware. Have you? Can you say, hello, post-hoc fallacy?

- How did Apple become one of America's best retailers? Good question. *Money* magazine asked the same question, and the answer seems to be, [relentless focus](#) on customer experience. Imagine that! Jerry Useem quotes Apple's Ron Johnson saying, "As an icebreaker [in a focus group], we said, 'Tell us about the best service experience you've ever had.'" Of the 18 people, 16 said it was in a hotel. This was unexpected. But of course: the concierge desk at a hotel isn't selling anything; it's there to help. "We said, 'Well, how do we create a store that has the friendliness of a Four Seasons Hotel?'" I'd just like you to ask yourself how many computer-hardware companies have customer service that even rates Motel 6 levels of customer satisfaction? Give me a break.

And that's the month that was, folks. I'm going to go back to sleep for another 20 years, and we'll see where we are then.

Mac About Town

by Mike Chamberlain, mchamberlain@atpm.com

Who's Got Your Back?

Shh! Don't tell the PC people, but the truth is that sometimes our "designed in Cupertino" but "assembled in China" Macs have…how shall we put it? Problems. I had intended to say that thankfully these seem rather rare, but the truth is that depending on the model of Mac that you own, repair experience can be surprisingly high. A quick look at MacBook and MacBook Pro reliability statistics over at MacInTouch, for instance, reveals some surprisingly high percentages for laptop repairs. As you might imagine, user comments and experiences range from the sublime to the terminally aggravating. Will it not ever be so?

I'm writing this month's column on my "newly returned from AppleCare" MacBook Pro. I am, thankfully, one of the happy campers.

About a week ago, I began to notice some quirks with my left mouse button. When I began to experience the same problem with the trackpad button, I called Apple support and was led through the standard series of resets and restarts. One new tactic (to me, anyway) was to remove the battery and hold the power button down for 10 seconds. Evidently, this resets something at a deep level, and I will now add it to my list of button-pushing, chicken-waving, incantation-chanting approaches to life's digital glitches. In any event, the solution worked only temporarily, and before the weekend ended I was back on the phone with tech support. We went through the same drill with the tech finally pronouncing that I had "a hardware problem."

The response to my problem was excellent and would have been available to me even if I did not have AppleCare since my MacBook Pro is less than six months old. I was issued a case number and an empty box was dispatched so that I could return my MacBook Pro for service. The box arrived the next morning, and I packed my Mac and had my secretary call Airborne Express. By 10:30 the box was on its way.

As a side note, the tech asked me if I had my data backed up. I had to smile smugly, as I have been faithful to the resolution that I made in my January column to back up more regularly. My entire drive was backed up one day before with SuperDuper! (hat tip again to Richard Albury). As far as I was concerned, tech support could feed my drive to the wolves. I was golden.

The following day I received an e-mail that my computer had arrived and was being repaired. When I checked the enclosed link, I discovered that the repair was already complete and the computer was waiting for shipping back to me. This morning at 9 AM it was delivered. Total elapsed time from dispatch to return: 42.5 hours. The diagnosis: a failed top-case

assembly, which was replaced (parts: $230). It's worth noting that had I been outside the warranty period and not had AppleCare, the repair total would have easily been more than the $349 AppleCare price tag.

I'm not sure about you, but I can put up with a lot when responsive service is available. People on my staff who have to deal with Dell, Sony, Toshiba, or Best Buy were stunned at the turnaround on my computer (and thankful as well since I can get cranky without it). I was just thankful that it was Apple that had my back.

So what experiences have you had? Have they made you more, or less, likely to point a friend to a Mac? Feel free to share the thrill (or the pain) with your postings.

See you around town.

Size Is Everything

Most men never believe the old chestnut that size isn't everything. But now Pfeiffer Consulting has the evidence to prove them wrong.

They examined large-screen, high-definition monitors, in particular the 30-inch Apple Cinema HD Display, an object of lust for many a designer. Pfeiffer found that there are definite gains in productivity, and the return on investment can be paid off over the period of a year or even less. The complete report is available online.

I'm of the generation who started "real" computing on the old Amstrad Joyce with its little green-and-black screen, before moving via the Atari Mega ST to a Mac that came with a brilliant (for 1990) 13-inch color display. My colleagues bought even larger screens that were hideously expensive and had lower resolutions than today's laptops. Their fronts looked like the curvature of the earth. Moving the mouse from top to bottom saw the pointer travel in an arc and end up "underneath" somewhere.

For years I stuck with 17-inch displays, enough for any man, surely? But then a job that involved designing A3 landscape pages and 840mm spreads just wouldn't show up large enough. An 23-inch Apple screen came to live on my desk, and I realized the error of my ways. Bigger is better, more productive, and easier on the eyes for just about any computing task. That's exactly what Pfeiffer found as well.

Productivity and efficiency gains were measured and found to increase significantly for users of the display, in office applications as well as for digital imaging and design. Users changed their work strategies to incorporate the screen real estate and ended up working in ways that would be impossible on smaller screens. This is something I can vouch for, especially with the new widescreen format, compared with the old 4:3 ratio.

LCD screens are also a lot easier to use because they have a stable image and whiter whites. Whenever LCD users return to an old cathode ray tube screen, the first thing they notice is the flickering caused by the scanning of the CRT gun.

Modern computers allow multiple applications open all the time, each often with many windows. They can fit side-by-side on a wide screen, enabling easy access to them all. Pfeiffer found dramatic time differences between screen sizes. For example: applying selective formatting in large spreadsheets on a 17-inch screen took nearly double the time taken on a 30-inch one.

Application palettes are also an essential part of our work, and on smaller screens closing and hiding them to see what's behind takes time. Pfeiffer measured exactly how much

this cost when opening and closing palettes takes up to 10 seconds. Repeated 100 times that adds up to over 15 minutes wasted. If that's time lost by a highly paid accountant or director, purely because they cannot see enough information on screen at one time, the extra costs of larger monitors are soon regained—a benefit I must remember the next time I want a new screen.

Finally, one thing Pfeiffer didn't look at is the effect on games. If the game can handle it, and your video card up to it, games look absolutely brilliant.

Getting the Hang of Collection/Gathering

Prepping for this article proved more difficult than I anticipated. This is due primarily to the fact that my first article, a survey of GTD solutions, missed a number of good solutions—and several have emerged on the scene since then. In GTD parlance, you could say that I've been stuck in a "collection/gathering" stage and haven't been able to move on to processing and doing. In light of that, it seems appropriate to give attention to how to handle the collection stage of GTD on the Mac.

Those who have read David Allen's book *Getting Things Done* will remember his discussion of getting started, which begins with a whole-life collection stage. Allen describes how this can take an entire work-day, and result in a huge pile of things to be processed (he also discusses how the processing can take another full day or more). One of the keys to sticking with GTD is to continue collecting; this is obvious in one sense—the obvious, hard-edged actions and tasks are one thing. The more ambiguous actions that are hiding behind other information are another thing altogether, and a well-implemented GTD system will accommodate these regularly as well.

I'm not going to try to teach you how to maintain this collection process beyond this one reminder from Allen: "Give me as many buckets as I need, and not one more." I'll assume that you have put this advice into practice and have sufficient buckets for the different motions and contexts of your life. The important thing is that collection is done consistently and often. Collection isn't limited to the daily or weekly reviews, but should be done throughout the day (otherwise, it stays on your mind). Most people have a number of ways to do this. Maybe you use a traditional planner (DayRunner, Franklin-Covey, etc.) and you're comfortable with what it offers, or you've committed to a PDA and that serves your purposes. Maybe you carry a Moleskine notebook or a Hipster PDA. Maybe you spend so much of your time in front of your computer that you don't need an external bucket, or maybe you simply keep a pad of Post-It notes everywhere you will be. In the spirit of GTD, I'm not worried about *what* tools you use, but *how* you use them—and how they will integrate into your digital implementation of GTD.

How do you move from collection in the various buckets to one streamlined action list in your Mac? There are a number of different approaches that the various applications take. I'll focus only on those that apply to the Mac directly; things like PDA entry won't be considered here.

Virtual Inbox

Nearly all of the solutions have a distinct inbox for collecting directly within the application. (All of them have a means of creating a new task or list item.) This works well in many

situations, and could be all that is needed. For example, when I process my physical inbox (including my Moleskine notebook) during my daily and weekly reviews, I keep this part of my GTD application open and use it to build new tasks and projects. Some solutions do this part particularly well; Thinking Rock, for example, has a very good collection system, and makes building new tasks a breeze. EasyTask Manager, Actiontastic, and Vortex also have real strength here. For those who work well with multiple applications at once and who spend 90% or more of their time at the computer, this may be a sufficient collection apparatus.

That's not how I work—and I suspect that most people cannot afford for this to be the only bucket they utilize. Even if I'm at the computer, I like to have multiple options for collection.

This is one major reason why I believe that iCal integration and/or synchronization is an important feature for GTD applications to include. Why iCal? Because Apple has built into it (and into the OS itself) a handful of ways that iCal can effectively serve as central headquarters for task management. Sync Services, for example, is built to tie things like PDA and smartphone synchronization to iCal—so if you use one of these as a bucket, you can automate a significant part of the regular collection process. Most people figure out, however, that iCal is by no means the final answer for most task and project management efforts—and certainly not for the committed GTD user. So having a separate application for processing (to be covered in another column) that is tied to iCal in some way—one that can at least pull tasks from iCal, if not a two-way sync—is a good way to make collection and processing simpler, which makes more time for the tasks.

iCal as a Bucket

iCal's centrality in OS X makes it an ideal bucket—and this will only grow with Leopard, since plans are in place for somewhat more global entry of to-do items, starting with Mail, and hopefully expanding beyond that.

Tools already exist for adding tasks to iCal from Mail. AppleScripts like Fuhgeddaboutit and some of those found in Mail Scripts make creating iCal to-dos from Mail straight-forward. And Indev's free plug-in MailTags 1.2 can also do this, with a more developed interface. Combine MailTags with Indev's free Mail Act-On and you can do it by a simple keystroke. (It's worth noting here that MailTags 2.0, currently in beta, has a more robust interface still, and can create both tasks and events in iCal; it is a paid-for version, and costs $25 in pre-release.)

You can also add to iCal from anywhere with AppleScripts for iCal Events and To Dos [Warning: link is a download.] These were originally designed to be Quicksilver triggers (more on these in a moment) but can be used independently through FastScripts or set up as independent actions through the Script Editor.

I mentioned ZooDo briefly in the last article; it is essentially an iCal to-do creator in a stand-alone utility. It also works with Mail, or independently.

Other Entry-Points

Not everything works with iCal—and there are times when it would be cumbersome if they had to do so. Other ways of getting new things into the virtual inbox, either directly or indirectly, are also helpful, and perhaps necessary for some users.

One of the most popular utilities for hardcore Mac users is Quicksilver, which is characterized as a launcher, but has a lot more function than this. Many of the GTD-specific applications have good Quicksilver support, including Kinkless, Frictionless, Actiontastic, and EasyTask Manager. With the combination (and when "Advanced Features" is enabled in Quicksilver), a few quick keystrokes brings up a text box in Quicksilver, into which you type the information about the new task. Another couple of keystrokes enters it into the designated application. This makes on-the-fly entry easy at any time, no matter what application you are currently using.

Other solutions are available; a couple of applications brought droplets or bookmarklets as options, which means you can drag selected text onto these and create new tasks. I don't know how useful this is, broadly speaking—I'd be interested in hearing feedback on this.

Online Buckets

One of the benefits that all of the online "Web-applications" have is that they allow entry from anywhere, whether you are at your Mac or not. As a laptop user, this option is almost a non-factor for me, since anytime I have Web access I probably also have my MacBook with me. For those whose Macs are desktops, who work on multiple Macs, or who do a good bit of work on other peoples' computers—consultants, for example—I can certainly understand how valuable this option would be.

Many of these also support remote entry of new tasks through e-mail. This could be huge if you use one of these solutions. You don't even have to open your browser to create an entry—just pop off a quick e-mail. There are ways to make this even faster, such as putting an alias to that e-mail address in the dock, or using Quicksilver to launch a quick composition to the address. Neptune, Backpack, Basecamp, and Remember the Milk all offer this feature.

If this option is attractive but you use a local application—and that application syncs with iCal—CyBeRHQ has an AppleScript that will work with Mail's rules to create a new iCal to-do based on a few criteria; you simply e-mail yourself a message with the prefix TODO at the beginning of the subject line, and it will automatically be added to iCal. Pretty smooth. (And if you're a bit averse to using interfaces like MailTags or manually selected AppleScripts like Fuhgeddaboutit, try Will Henderson's Note to Self in combination with the CyBeRHQ AppleScript rule to accomplish the same thing from within Mail.)

Automated Collection

One of the more promising GTD applications, Midnight Inbox, will actually do more than provide a standard collection-stage interface; it will actually do some of the collection for you. Inbox aims at being an always-open, everything-connected headquarters for all

task and project management. It will collect desktop files, text documents, recent e-mail, new bookmarks, and new events and to-dos from iCal automatically when you enter the collection window and enable collection.

Inbox does a good job with this, and settings allow you to specify what you want collected—from today only, from yesterday and today, the last week, month, or for all time. It tries to do this dynamically; after enabling collection, I created a basic new to-do in iCal, and Inbox recognized it, but only showed it as "New To Do" even though I had given it a title. As Inbox develops, this should improve.

For the right users, this could save a lot of time. For anyone, this allows one of the key principles of Getting Things Done to reign: get it out of your head. What better way to get it out of your head than to truly forget that you added that bookmark when researching, or created that meeting appointment for three weeks away—only to be reminded of it when you go to review? This is a good feature, though it may not fit into every workflow.

New Finds

As I mentioned, the collection phase for this column continues to be a substantial piece of the project. Even as I write this, new tools have come to my attention: Nexty, Scrybe, Propel'r, Gravity-GTD (at press time, the link was no longer working), Toodledo, ActionItems, and myLifeOrganized will all be covered in future New Finds. For now, here are the ones that I've had an opportunity to look at seriously.

Web/Browser-Based

gtd-php is a PHP application designed to be locally installed. It is a fairly simple interface, with tabs across the top for changing views. It is designed for GTD, and includes capture and process stages, as well as a weekly review, in addition to mere project management. It is currently at version 0.7 (last updated September 2006), and is free.

Mojonote is not specifically designed for GTD, but gives the options for multiple lists in addition to basic task lists. Reminders by e-mail and SMS are available, and lists can be shared with others. A free account gets five lists, five notes, and 10 reminders; $5 per month upgrades that to 100 of each.

Neptune is another Web-based task management application designed around the GTD principles; it includes a collection "inbox" and both context- and project-oriented task management panes, as well as storage for inactive (Someday, Waiting, etc.) projects and tasks. Daily e-mail reminders help with keeping track of tasks, and new tasks can be added by e-mail as well. Data may also be exported by download in XML format. Neptune costs $10 per year, with a 15-day free trial available.

Nozbe is a more complex implementation of GTD Web applications, with "complex" meaning that it has a stronger feature set. Task lists and setup include markers for which action in a list will be the *next* action, and a time estimation is allowed for each. Contexts are always visible, and easy to identify with custom icons. And quick access to creating new tasks and projects from any view makes it easy to collect and process quickly. The youth

of this Web-application is apparent, however: it has already changed servers in the first month, and I had difficulty accessing the sign-up and login in pages consistently. Still, Nozbe is free to sign up.

SimpleGTD works like many other Web-based GTD implementations, with tabs for next actions, contexts, projects, and done actions. SimpleGTD distinguishes itself with drag-and-drop task organization (drag from one context to another) and easy "un-doing" of tasks mistakenly marked done. It wants to be the option for those who find Backpack too complicated, and it may reach that goal; currently it is still a little buggy. Launched in mid-January 2007, SimpleGTD is still young but shows promise.

TaskFreak is another locally-installed PHP solution, and includes categories/contexts, priorities, due dates, and a progress scale that is a useful feature (and one that is surprisingly absent from most GTD applications). Another interesting feature is the large number of user-contributed plug-ins that expand the function and capability substantially. Single-user (for both MySQL and SQLite) and multi-user (for MySQL) versions are available, and are free. The current version is 0.5.7.

Vitalist implements a wide-scale GTD system, with collection, project management, re-curring actions, and tickler files. It includes a mobile edition for Palm, Windows Mobile, or BlackBerry; iCal and RSS feeds; and e-mail and SMS reminders. A "premium" (paid) version also includes security encryption, collaboration, file attachments, and (soon) cal-endaring. The premium version also removes sponsorship ads. Premium accounts cost $5 monthly. Vitalist was released in January 2007.

Zenlists is not designed for GTD, but is simply a task list manager. However, it does have the capacity for setting up categories or contexts for task lists, and therefore would adapt fairly easily if a list manager is all that is needed. It is in active development, but there is no indication of what, if anything, will be added to the current feature-set. Zenlists is free.

Stand-Alone Applications

iKog (an acronym for "it keeps on growing") was designed to be ultra-portable, so any computer with Python installed can run this application off of a flashdrive. It is a pretty straightforward way to manage lists, though the all-text, low-GUI interface will throw some people off. iKog is free, and currently at version 1.85.

PyGTD is a Python GTD implementation that boasts a strong feature list. Apart from the normal necessities for a task list, PyGTD includes start dates, contingencies, effort required, subtasks, and project notes. PyGTD seeks to combine the strengths of Steven Covey's prioritization principles (taking both urgency and importance into consideration) with the essence of GTD. The interface is clean and simple. PyGTD is free.

Vortex has a simple interface with a two-panel view for all options, giving a left-hand column for choosing between contexts, projects, someday/maybe tasks, and review. New tasks, projects, or waiting for items can be created with a simple button for each. Vortex includes contingencies and dependent actions, so it is easy to set up a series of actions that

automatically triggers the next "next action" when the first is completed. It also includes indices for time and energy requirements in addition to priority assessment. Vortex is currently version 1.0.10, and costs £25 ($48.70 US).

What To Do is designed as an explicit GTD application, but is effectively a simple and straightforward task manager. Three distinct views are offered: context view, project view, and priority view (which hardcore GTDers will recognize as non-canonical). Drag and drop makes organization very easy. Current version (1.0.3) costs $29.

The List

Even as new solutions come onto my radar and/or onto the scene, existing ones continue to develop. My first list was organized according to which ones I felt were the most "GTDish" but I've re-organized the list alphabetically.

Web/Browser-Based Solutions—GTD-Specific

30Boxes is an AJAX creation, which means that it is an active application that runs within your browser in the same way that Writely and other similar applications do. 30Boxes is lean and fast, which gives it an advantage over some AJAX applications. It has a calendar, task list, and limited Gmail interaction. It also has RSS and iCal feeds, SMS function, and sharing with others. The interface is nice, with a familiar feel—it has an OS X-style "dock" on the side to navigate between sections. 30Boxes is in beta, and is currently free.

d3 is a TiddlyWiki solution, a single-file wiki that you store locally (or you could run it from a server, if you preferred). Thus, this and other TiddlyWiki solutions combine the flexibility of a wiki with the straightforward approach of GTD. Currently at version 1.1.0, and open-source (free).

GTDGmail is a Firefox extension that brings GTD into integration with Gmail. Pre-packaged labels and a fast method for applying them. Also includes a Review process, allows specialized searches within Gmail, has a quick-entry method for new tasks, and a printable format (3×5 index card). Current version, 1.31, is open-source; requires Firefox.

GTD TiddlyWiki is the original TiddlyWiki solution for GTD. Current version is 1.0.6 (updated September 2005); open-source.

iCommit is browser-based; it runs online (and cannot be locally installed). Like a wiki without the hassle of setting up. Currently at version 1.9.0, free but first-come, first-served.

MonkeyGTD, like d3, is another TiddlyWiki implementation that uses the newer version. (The latest revision of TiddlyWiki is 2.1.3, released in November 2006). MonkeyGTD is currently at version 1.0.10, updated January 2007.

MyTicklerFile incorporates a broader concept in the GTD system. Includes explicit syncing with iCal; e-mails your upcoming tasks to you weekly for a GTD-style "weekly review." Costs $9/month for 15 projects, 150 reminders, and an unlimited number of Ticklers; $19/month doubles that. (1 Project is free.) *News:* Current version is 2.1, last updated in February 2007.

Park takes the TiddlyWiki idea and localizes it, adding a few more features: part note-taker, part task-planner, it includes Spotlight support. Park is free, and is currently beta at version 0.9.

Tasktoy lets you categorize by context or project. Allows attachment of notes to tasks; focuses on low-resistance task building with repeatable tasks that are easy to set up; also mobile device compatibility through the mobile service provider's Internet access. It isn't GTD-specific, but was designed to be GTD-friendly. It is free as a beta version.

Tracks comes with a Web server that allows it to run locally, or have it hosted online through tracks.tra.in. It is fast, lean, and pretty. It doesn't work with iCal, but offers calendaring functions of its own; it also has a multi-user component. Tracks is open-source, and currently at version 1.043 (last updated August 2006).

Web or Browser-Based Solutions—Not GTD-Specific

37signals' Basecamp and Backpack are both capable project managers with iCal integration. Both have varying degrees of localization. For a simpler scale, you might also check out 37signals' Ta-Da Lists, a basic task list manager. Basecamp and Backpack both have free and paid versions.

HiveMinder has a "brain dump" feature, a one-click task creator. It also has RSS feeds, iCalendar feeds, and printing features. Searchable, shareable, has a Task Review, and can be set up to e-mail tasks to you. HiveMinder is free, but ad-supported; they plan to offer a paid-for version in the future which will eliminate the ads.

Remember the Milk offers many input and output options: online, e-mail, SMS, RSS feed, Web-enabled PDA or smartphone, and instant messenger. Can create tasks through e-mail. Remember the Milk is free, and beta.

Sproutliner is a task list with some hierarchy and context management. It is open-source, and they say it is "beta" (last updated May 2005).

King Design's Tasks is GTD-compatible, can work with iCal, and will send e-mail reminders of the tasks on your list for that day. New version 2.7 update includes tags, RSS feeds, and customization. Version 2.7 (recently updated) costs $30, while version 1.7 of Tasks Pro ranges from $125 to $500. Tasks Jr. (version 1.9.1) is free.

Stand-Alone Applications—GTD-Specific

Action Tracker is a FileMaker Pro document, and a well-designed GTD environment. It serves as an interface for your project management: in addition to a task and project management element, it also organizes notes, contacts, and other files related to the project, and it can create iCal events as well. Action Tracker version 1.3.1 is free, and if you don't have a FileMaker Pro license, a runtime version is available.

Actiontastic is a simple yet capable task manager, offering views of the inbox, projects, or contexts. Creating new tasks is straightforward, and the inbox serves the purpose for collection, while a "Process Inbox" engine will help you through the processing phase. There

is also a Quicksilver plug-in, and ActionTastic will sync your tasks to iCal or an iPod, as well as working with Mail and MailTags. It is currently at version 0.9.3. *News:* While this application is still in beta, the developer has just announced that he is making it free and open-source for all future development. He is also planning a companion Web site, called Actionatr, that will sync with the local application.

EasyTask Manager manages only tasks, which can be sorted by project or category, and assigned due dates, priorities, and notes. It syncs with iCal, and it's easy to perform regular daily and weekly reviews, while the drag-and-drop ability makes for easy sorting and categorization in process stage. It has some maturity, with version 1.8.2 available for $20. *News:* upgrades have jumped from 1.7.6 since the last article, and some nice new features are present: printing (including Hipster PDA support) has been added, syncing improved, and a new online sync is available for free, so you can track your tasks (and sync them) when away from your local computer, or sync multiple copies of EasyTask.

Frictionless is possibly the most thoroughly GTD of all of the GTD applications. New tasks go immediately into a flat file of actions, which can be organized into a hierarchy of projects and sub-projects. A Next Actions window is ready to give context-specific counsel about tasks, and the This Week window allows for very easy weekly reviews. Frictionless also has Quicksilver integration, and it has an AppleScript that allows an action to be created directly from Mail. The current (free) version is 0.8.4.

Ghost Action sports a simple, single-window interface with tabs for Contexts, Projects, and Actions. It syncs with iCal and .Mac, and will also sync with a PDA or phone through iSync. *News:* Ghost Action is now in release status, at version 1.1, and costs $19.

KinklessGTD isn't itself an actual application, but an elaborate template and AppleScript set for OmniOutliner Pro. It allows you to view by Project, Context, or Next Actions. It syncs with iCal after some modest setup, and also can receive input through Quicksilver, and therefore has an Inbox view that lets you organize stray tasks into a project or context. KinklessGTD is free under the GNU public license, though it requires purchase of OmniOutliner Pro, which costs $70.

The mGTD plug-in, made for Hog Bay Software's Mori, is a "digital notebook" complete with Spotlight functionality, AppleScriptability, and brings a thorough GTD system into Mori. The mGTD plug-in (current version: 1.2 "pre-final") is free, but Mori (current version: 1.4) will cost you $40.

Midnight Inbox is a top-to-bottom implementation of the GTD system. It gathers events and tasks from iCal, messages from Mail, and other documents, bookmarks, notes, and other files and allows you to process them through the GTD model: collect, process, review-plan-do. You can monitor your progress, archive projects that are completed, and and organize your work patterns. It's currently at version 1.0.5, with a price of $35.

Ready-Set-Do! is not a task manager per se, but instead functions like a virtual version of the paper method of collecting, processing, and review-plan-do-ing. Ready-Set-Do! is an

extensive set of AppleScripts that transforms your Mac's desktop into a GTD processing station. It integrates with iCal, and allows a "whole system" approach that isn't possible with any of the other GTD applications. Currently at version 1.1 and costs $20 for a single-user license.

Thinking Rock has a distinct operation for each of the three main steps; it is easy to enter lots of new tasks at once. As a Java application, it is portable. Version 1.2.3 (last updated December 2006) is free.

Local Applications—Not GTD-Specific

DoIt (formerly "ToDo") is low-profile but still packs a fair amount of punch with a Quicksilver plug-in, limited integration with Address Book and iCal, .Mac support, and AppleScriptability. Also supports file attachments and categories for lists. Version 2.3 is donationware.

High Priority is a system preference pane and creates a menu item in the menu bar that lets you create and update your iCal tasks. It's currently at version 1.11 and costs $6 for a personal license (family and business licenses are available).

iClock offers a menu bar–based method of managing task lists. iClock is at version 3.0.5, and costs $20.

Life Balance offers "meta-feedback" about tasks: how much time are you spending in different areas of your life (i.e., work, family, hobbies, etc.), and are you keeping it balanced? Life Balance for the Mac costs $65, or $80 if bundled with the Palm OS version. Currently at version 3.2.9 .

Stapler is a combination notepad and to-do list manager with creation date, notes, and a checkbox for completed items. Tasks can be color-coded based on a low-level preference setup. 7.50€ (about $9.70) gets you version 1.1.

To-Do X will import tasks from iCal, but has no further interaction with it. It offers categories, priorities, and attached notes. Version 2.1 costs $15.

ZooDo is a basic task-creator for iCal, serving as a "collection bucket." Version 1.0 is free.

Photoshop For the Curious

by Lee Bennett, lbennett@atpm.com

Color Calibration Capers

Photoshop's Brightness/Contrast adjustment is for wimps.

There, I said it, and I'm not sorry. Sure, it's simple, handy, and produces results that are easy to anticipate. But it can be a little dangerous. It's a pretty good bet that every time you use it, you actually lose part of your photo. The problem with Brightness/Contrast is that it performs the adjustment with absolutely no bias. When it comes to your photos, that's a bad thing. When you change the brightness, *every pixel* is adjusted, and that isn't usually what's best for a photo.
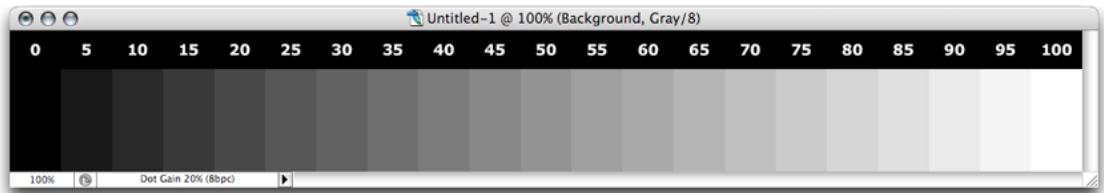
This is our control specimen. Think of it as a grayscale photo. It represents shades of gray in 5% increments, 0% = black and 100% = white.

Why Brightness/Contrast Is Dangerous

For example, suppose you want to brighten a photo by 15%. If you assume that 0% is solid black and 100% is white, then every pixel's percentage of gray between 0 and 100 will have 15 added to it. Consequently, every pixel that's already at 85% or higher will become 100%. The same is true in reverse if you darken a photo.

There's often a lot of detail in those brightest and darkest areas in those photos. You may recall the tutorial from February where I started with just the Brightness/Contrast on the grayscale photo. The results looked better, but the subtle light gray details in the clouds turned solid white, and details in the dark shadows in the grass nearly disappeared.
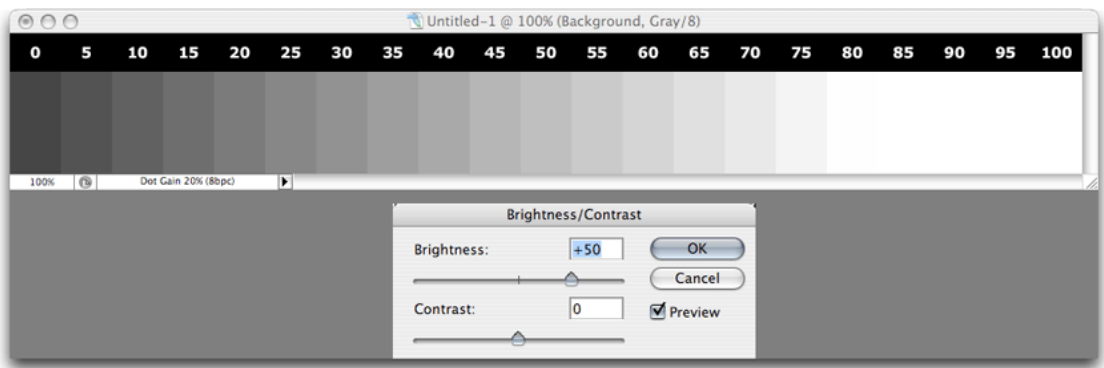
Increasing the brightness blindly lightens every pixel.

As you can see above, 80% and above has completely blown white, and as much of a concern is what +50 on the slider actually means. It clearly doesn't mean 50%. Even though the Brightness/Contrast sliders range between +100 and -100, those numbers don't even translate to percentage. Also notice that the solid black is now a dark gray.

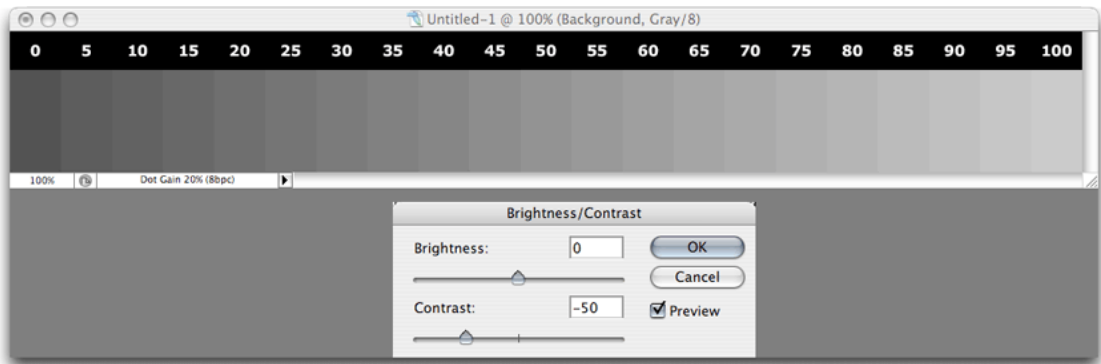Similarly, darkening a photo plugs up the blacks and changes white to a dull gray.
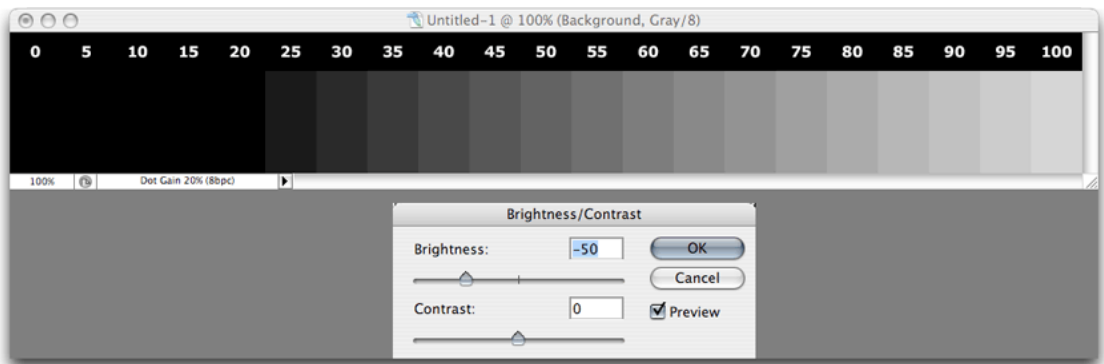
At -50 on the slider, 20% and darker has become solid black.

Using the contrast slider essentially doubles the problem.
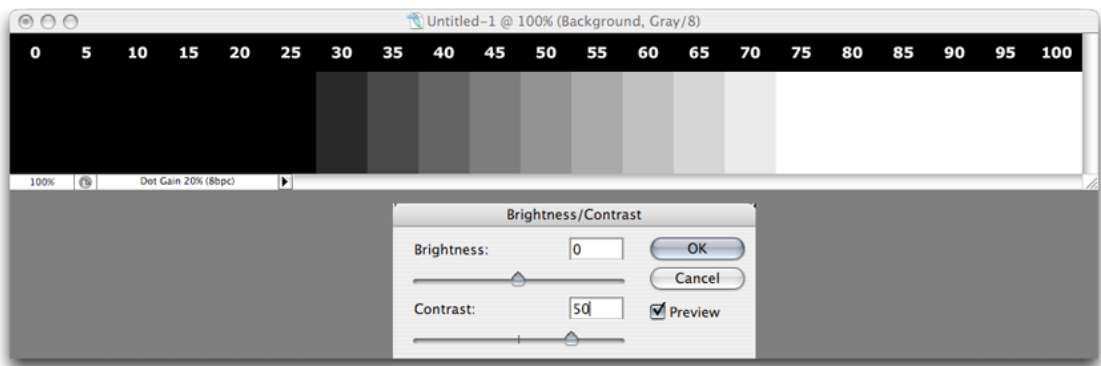
Increasing contrast blows detail out of both the shadows and the highlights—a two-fer!

Reducing contrast flattens out all the shades, causing the shadows to lighten and the highlights to darken.

I said above that Brightness/Contrast works with no bias. The truth is, most photos do not need adjustment in the darkest darks or whitest whites. It's generally the middle shades that are in need of adjustment. So how do we adjust brightness and contrast on just those midtones?

The Levels Adjustment Window

Here's where the Levels and the Curves adjustments enter the field. Levels is the simpler of the two and will suffice for most purposes.
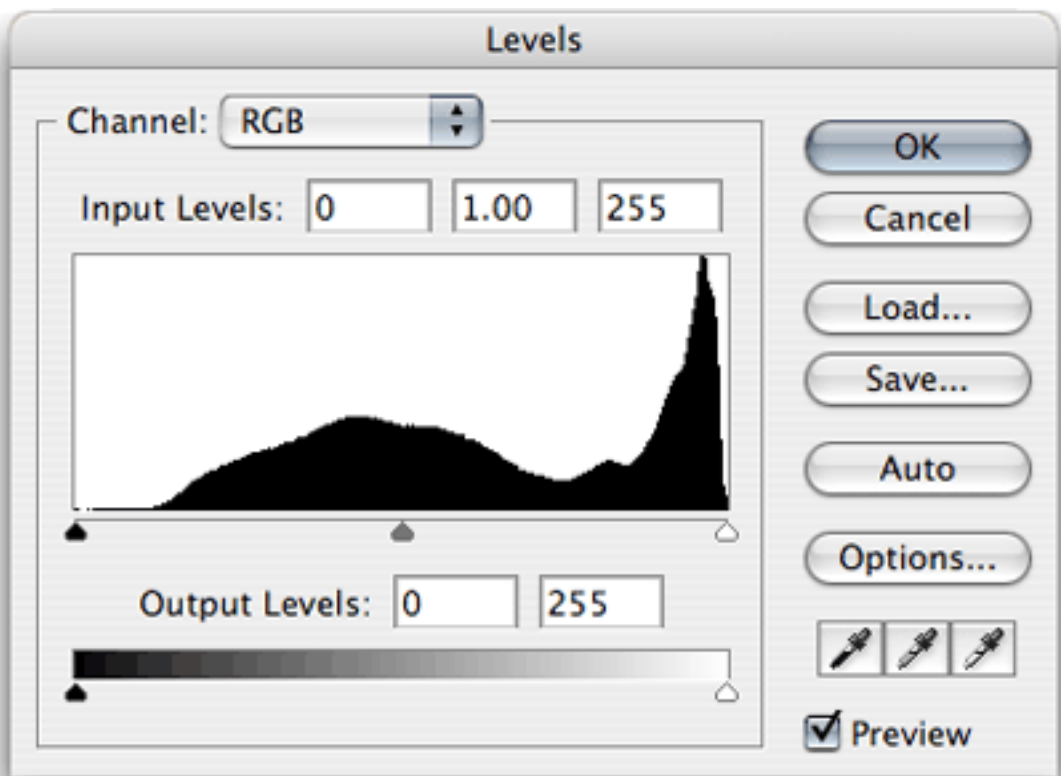
The Levels adjustment window, accessed via the Image ▷ Adjustments menu.

With the Levels adjustment, you have five sliders instead of two, but there's really only one you'll usually need. Look at the histogram in the Levels window above. That's the part with the odd-looking black blob that peaks tall on the right side (but remember that its shape will be different for every image). It's a representation of how much of a shade is in your photo—blacks (shadows) on the left, grays (midtones) in the middle, and whites (highlights) on the right. You'll also see five little triangles that can be slid horizontally. The left slider of the upper three is colored black. Sliding it to the right affects the shadows.
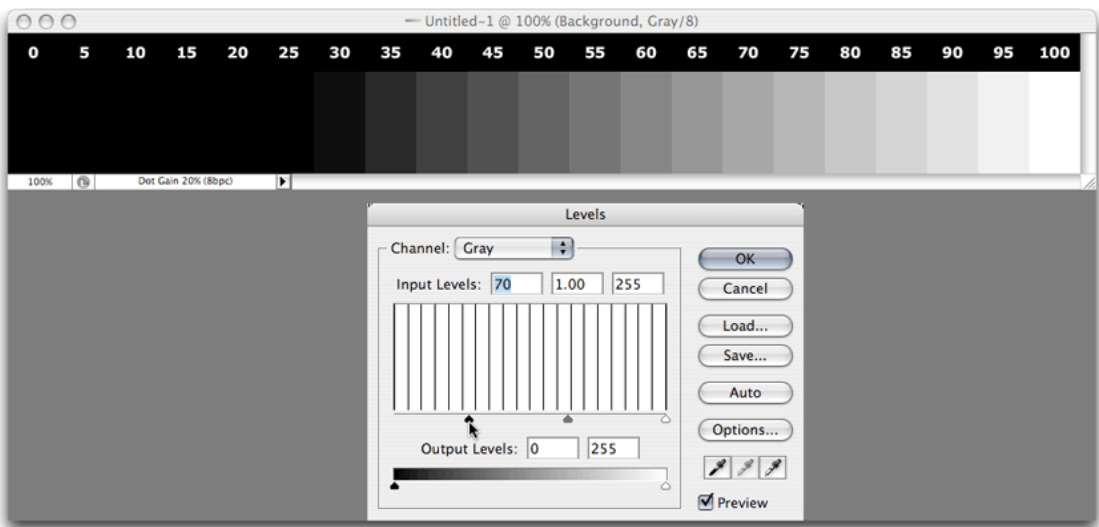
This shadows slider sets the point at which pixels become solid black. Every shade at the same point as the slider and darker (to the left) is black.

You'll notice that the histogram area is no longer a black blob, but is now many vertical lines. Since my sample photo contains specific 5% increment shades in equal amounts, the lines you see in the histogram are representations of each shade. The black shape in the prior image above is more typical of what you'll usually see. Most of the tones will be in the middle, though there is often a spike in the highlights whenever a photo includes a bright sky.
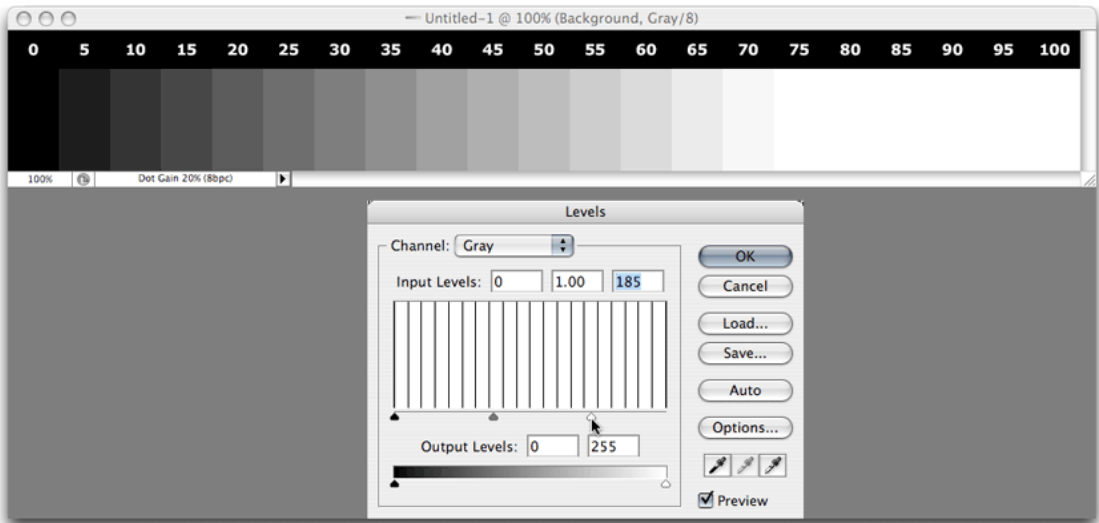
The highlights slider performs a similar, but opposite, function. Every shade at the same point as the slider and brighter (to the right) will be completely white.

Since the majority of tones are usually in the middle, this is the reason why being able to adjust only the midtones while leaving the highlights and shadows alone is frequently the best way to adjust a photo.
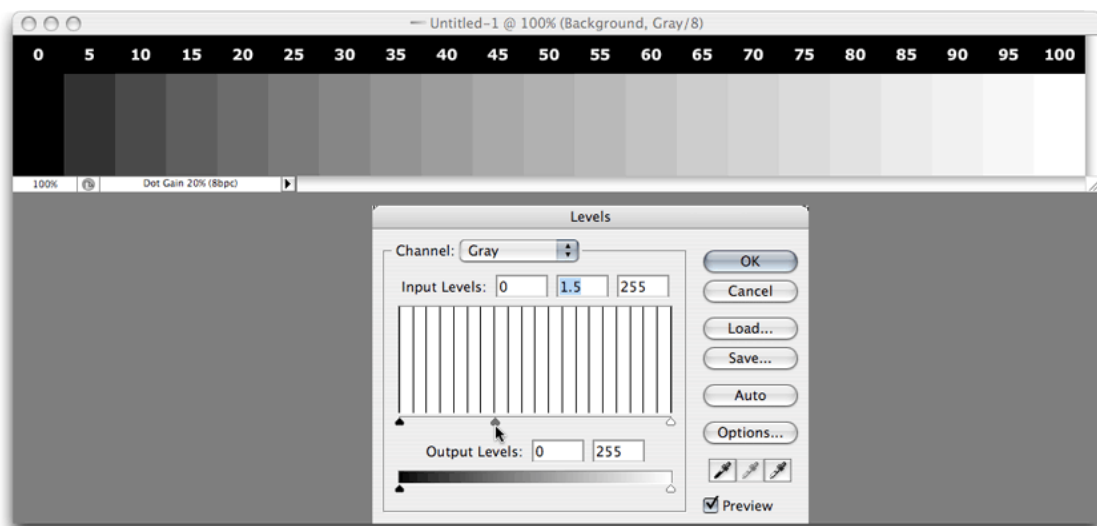
The gray-colored midtones slider defines what shades will be 50% gray.

When using the Levels adjustment, the midtones slider is most often what you want to start with. In the image above, you see that it has been slid to the left. You've already learned that the darker shades of a photo are represented toward the left side of the histogram. And you've also learned in the above image's caption that the slider defines what should be 50% gray. Therefore, when this slider is moved to the left, you're defining a darker shade as 50%. If you compare the above screenshot with the control specimen (the first image up above), you'll see that all of the shades in the middle have become brighter, but the shadows are still black and the highlights are still white.

So, this enables you to brighten or darken a photo without destroying the highlights and shadows. But what if you want to change the contrast? That's where the the shadows and highlights sliders come into play. Let's look again at the histogram of a more typical photograph:
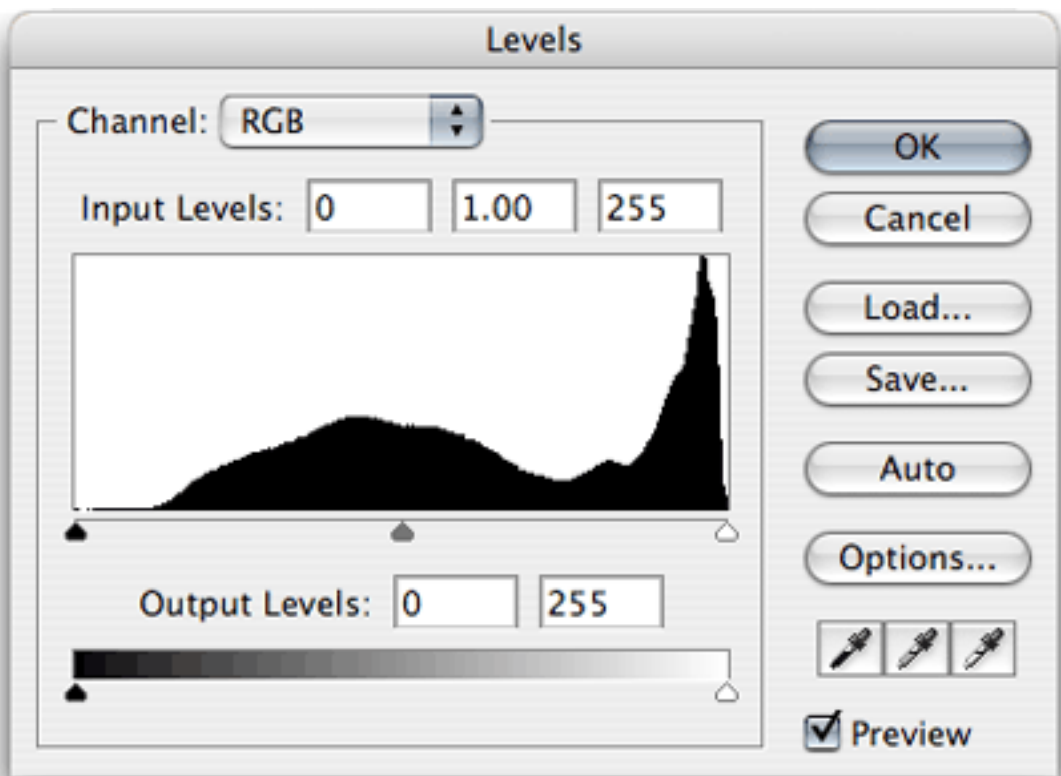
The spike on the right side is representative of a large, bright area in a photograph such as a sky.

The spike for the sky notwithstanding, the histograms of many photos will exhibit a hump-like pattern with very little of the darkest or brightest portions and the most common shades in the middle. You might be thinking that you'd want to set the midtones slider wherever the hump is at its highest. By all means, try it, but look at your photo while you do it. Setting the midtones slider at that point isn't necessarily the best place to leave that adjustment.

Getting back to contrast, you'll see that the left side of the histogram falls off to nearly solid black before reaching the far left edge. This means that very little or none of the photo is actually solid black. You can move the shadows slider to the right to come closer to where the darkest shades fall off, but I don't recommend placing the slider directly beneath where the falloff occurs. The shadow detail will retain better visibility if the slider is a bit left of the falloff point.

Similarly, you can do the same with the highlights, dropping the highlights slider to the left, not quite to where the falloff occurs. However, in this example, dropping the highlights slider would begin to blow out the subtle details in the brightest highlights (represented by that spike).

In the interest of completeness, I'll describe the remaining two sliders at the bottom of the Levels adjustment window. However, you'll probably find that these sliders are used extremely infrequently—if at all.
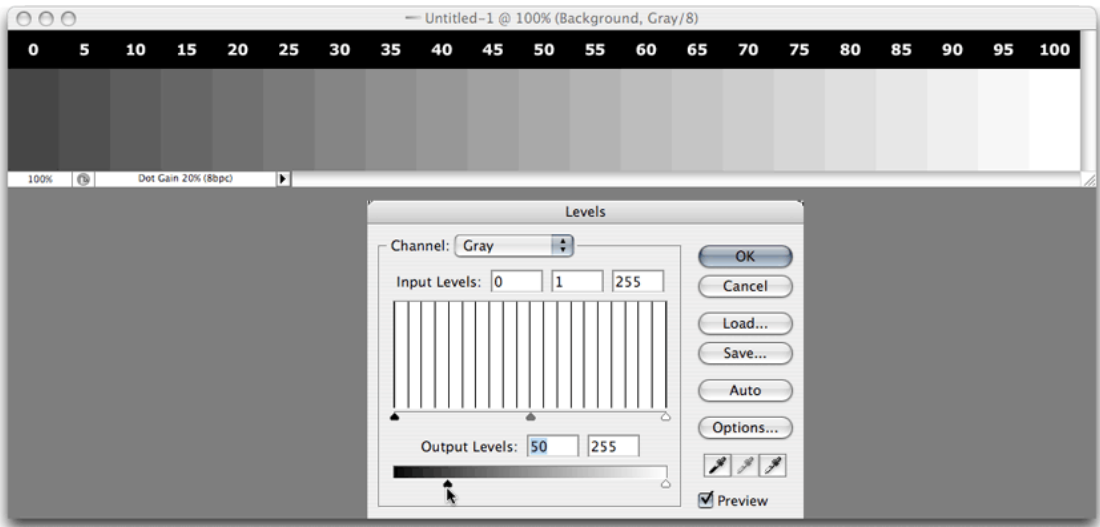
The shadows slider in the lower portion has the opposite effect as the shadows slider in the upper portion.
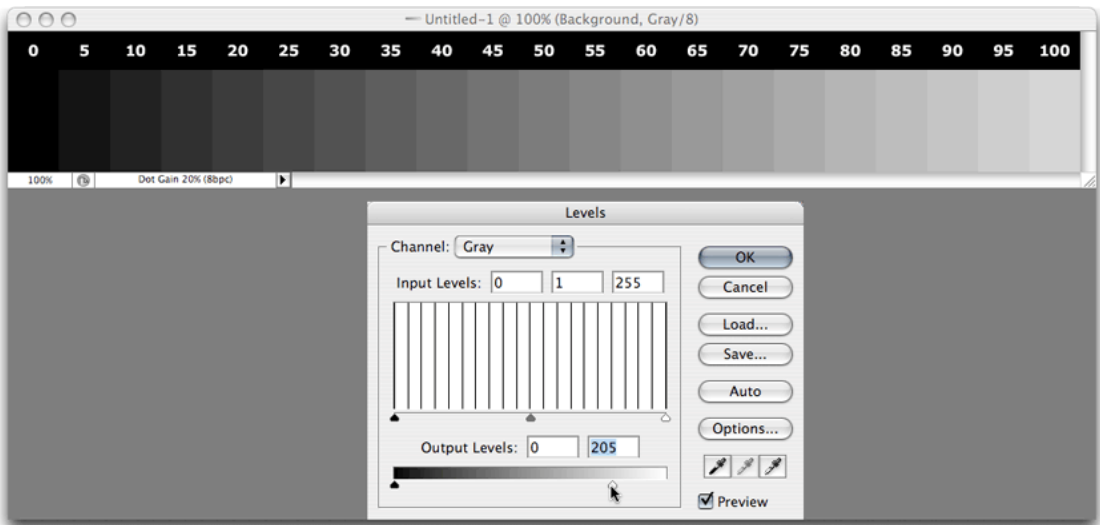
Likewise, the highlights slider in the lower portion has the opposite effect as the highlights slider in the upper portion.

Raising the shadow slider in the Output Levels section will brighten the shadows. If it is raised approximately 20%, then no portion of your photo will have shades darker than 20%. Conversely, dropping the Output Levels' highlights slider will darken the highlights.

Lowering it approximately 20% will mean that no portion of your photo will have shades brighter than 80%.

There's no denying that using the Levels adjustment is a bit more work than using the Brightness/Contrast adjustment, but once you get comfortable with using Levels, the benefit far outweighs the little bit of extra work.

I used the Levels adjustment for a very long time—even for photos bound for commercial offset printing—before starting to use the Curves adjustment instead. Therefore, you can feel quite confident that if using the Curves adjustment window seems too complicated, staying with the Levels adjustment window is completely fine. Having said that, if you're adventurous, or simply like to experiment, let's move on.

The Curves Adjustment Window
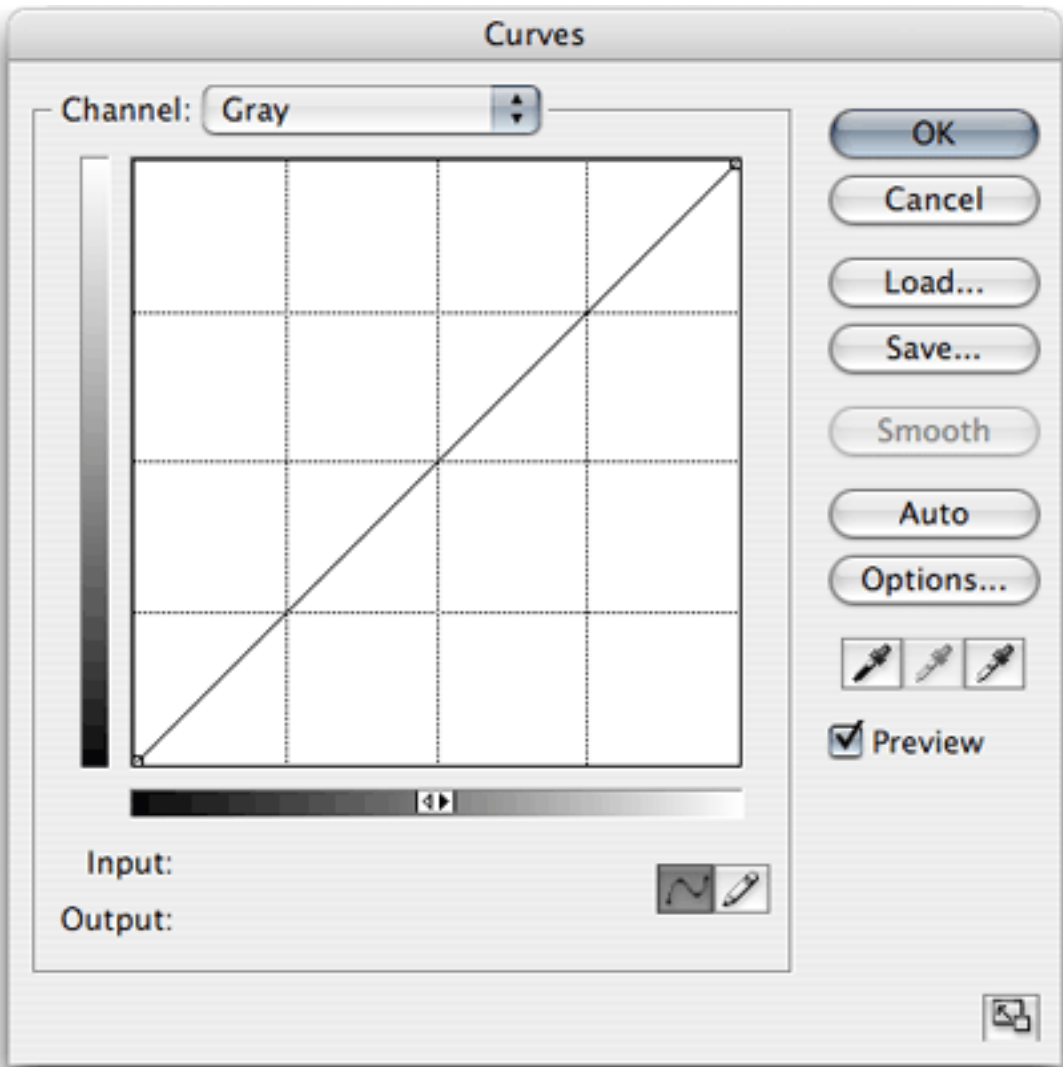
Calling it the Curves adjustment window might at first seem like a misnomer. If it's called Curves, why are there only straight lines?

Before going any further, I have two suggestions. I'm not telling you that you *must* do these steps, but I highly recommend doing them.

First, move your mouse around inside of the grid area. You'll see numbers appear next to the Input and Output lines near the bottom. These numbers correspond to the 0–255 scale often used to represent an amount of red, green, and blue color (RGB)—0 for none and 255 for maximum. For me, it is far easier to think in terms of percentage. If you agree, click the little double triangle in the middle of the gradient bar, just above the Input label. You'll see both gradient bars reverse so that the whites are in the lower left instead of the blacks.

And, if you move your mouse around the grid, you'll see that the Input and Output values are now represented from 0–100%.

Second, since we're dealing in percentages, it might make more sense to use a grid in 10% steps instead of 25%. Hold down the option key and click anywhere in the grid.
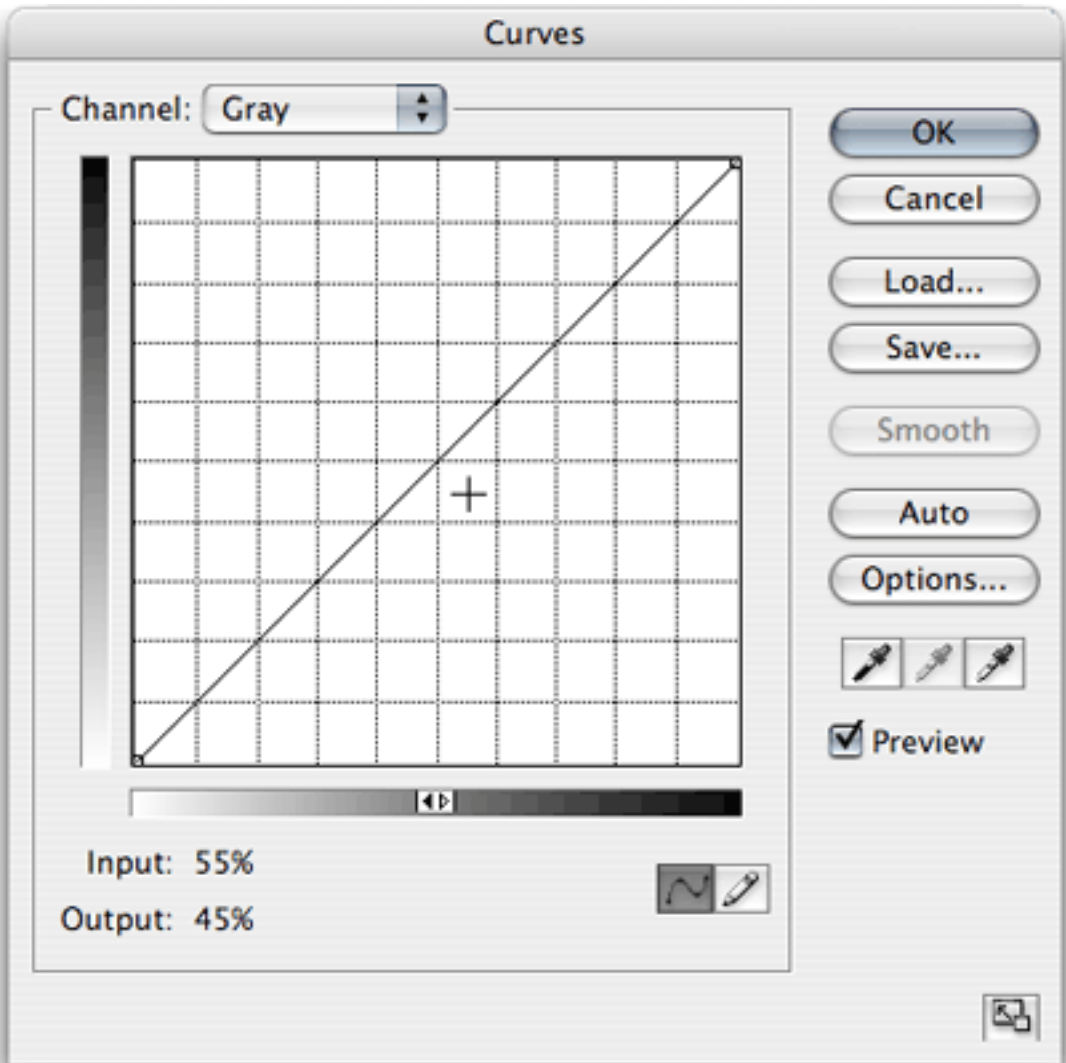
The Curves adjustment window has now been adjusted to use percentage values and show a tighter grid.

I'll probably get comments that call me out on something that may be a point of confusion, so let me try to answer such comments in advance. In my images above, you'll see that I represented black as 0% and white as 100%. However, if you implement my suggestions to the Curves window, it seems to imply that black is 100% and white is 0%.

The fact of the matter is, it really *doesn't matter.* It's all in how you like to think. The Curves adjustment layer, when set to percentage mode, requires me to think that 80% is a

dark shade of gray. I accept that. But for most other tasks, my brain works better to think of 80% as a light shade of gray. That's just how I'm wired. It only takes a reversal of math to switch. For simplicity, I probably should have made the above screenshots for the Levels adjustment window to show black as 100% and white as 0%. But I didn't, and I'm glad I didn't because it allowed me to make this point, that you would do well to not permanently lock your thinking on the 0–100% scale only representing black to white or white to black.

So what is so much better about Curves than Levels? You'll remember that the Levels adjustment window only offers adjustments to define what part of your photo will be 100%, 50% and 0%. The Curves adjustment window, on the other hand, allows you to make the same definition at *any* percentage, and to make as many definitions as you need.
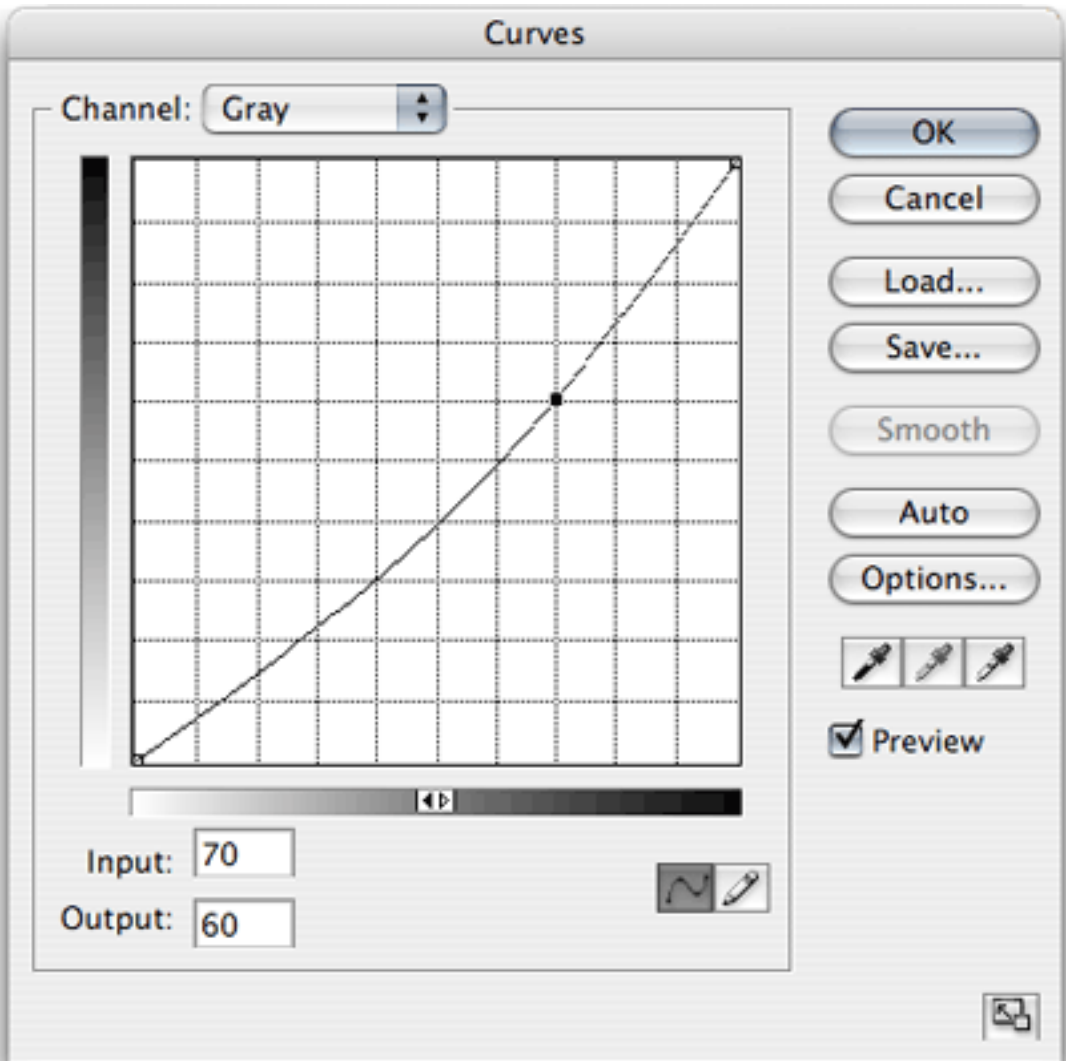

A common Curves adjustment for my photos.

As you can see above, I have adjusted an image by clicking a new control dot on the diagonal line at the 70% mark and lowered it to 60%, as seen in the Output section. For my tastes, brighting the darker shades around 70–80% produces a better brightening than using the 50% midtone slider of the Levels adjustment. Of course, you can always set a control dot at the 50% point in the Curves adjustment window and accomplish the identical function as the Levels window's midtone slider.

It now becomes clear why this is called the Curves adjustment window. Initially, the diagonal line is linear to evenly represent that every percentage represents the actual number. 0 is 0. 25 is 25. 60 is 60. You get the idea. When a control dot is created and adjusted, all the other percentage values bend toward that control dot to create a smooth blend from one dot to the next.

For photos that are in extremely poor shape—or for having some funky fun with a photo—you can try more extreme curves.
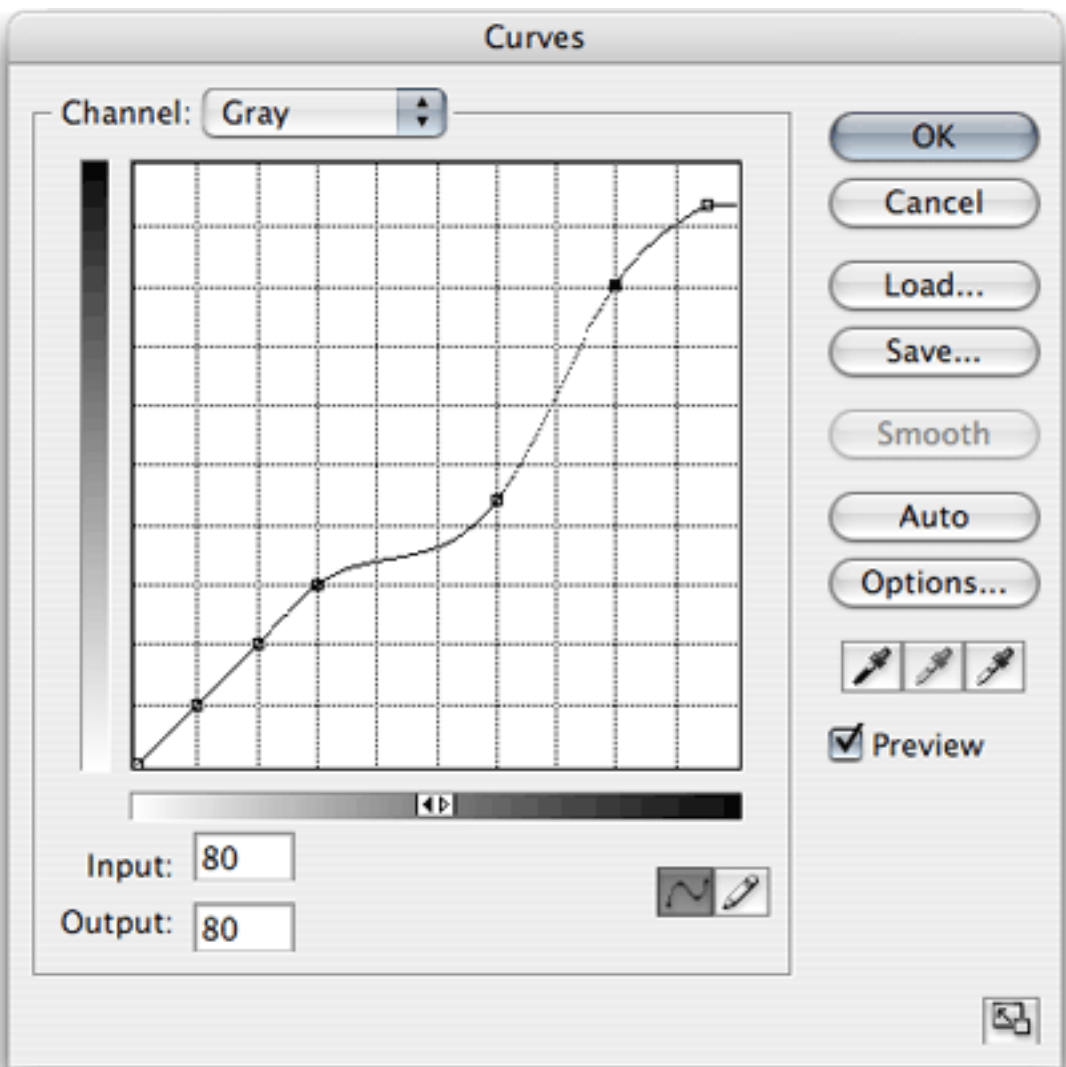
A rather extreme Curves adjustment.

The curve depicted above is in the general neighborhood of an adjustment I made to a photo that needed a lot of help. You can see that I locked the 10, 20, and 30% points so that my highlights wouldn't change. I then shifted the 60% point a considerable amount. It was this area of shade within the photo that needed a considerable amount of brightening. You'll also note that I locked 80% in place, but pulled the 100% adjustment away to lighten the blacks.

Believe me, this particular adjustment was anything but ordinary. But looking at this type of adjustment goes to show the high degree of control you can have instead of relying solely on the Brightness/Contrast adjustment.

The most important tip I can leave you with is this: regardless whether you use the Levels or Curves adjustment windows—or even if you bullishly stay with the Brightness/Contrast adjustment—*always* look at your photo while making the adjustments. It's easy to pay more attention to the adjustment window than to the photo being adjusted. I've even overheard advice to just blindly bump the Levels midtone slider to the left by a certain percent, and your photo will be fine. While it's true that this universal tip may work much of the time, it won't always be true. Again, *look* at your photo while making the adjustment, and don't always assume your photo even needs a massive amount of adjustment. I can think of numerous times I made such a subtle tweak to the Curves window that most people would never be able to tell the difference. But *I* could tell the difference, and I liked it. After all, unless I'm doing work for a client, the whole point is to make the photo look like what I want it to look like, right?

Homework Assignment

I think you already know what this month's homework assignment will be. Dig out the original, unaltered versions of some of your favorite photos. Make copies of them (as always, *never* work on your original photos—only on copies) and start experimenting with Levels and Curves. Try some extreme adjustments just to see what they do, but don't forget that very subtle adjustments are most often the key.

Next Month and Beyond

Based on suggestions both from readers and staff, as well as my own whim, I've already got a respectable list of tutorials to prepare for upcoming issues of ATPM. In order to keep myself on track, and to help you know what's coming, I'll keep a "Coming Soon" list, of sorts, at the bottom of this column from now on. Note that even though the intent is that these will each be covered in successive months, they could rearrange or gain additions at any time.

- Do Not Adjust Your Television Set—but Definitely Adjust Your Photos (Moving Beyond Levels and Curves)

- What Does "Dots Per Inch" Really Mean? (A Tutorial On Resolution)

- Effective Layer Effects

- Conjuring Speech/Thought Bubbles

- Creating Seamless Tiles

- Mask-erades

- Fun With the Automate Menu

  - Photomerge

- Fun With Filters

- File Format Fever

If you have an area you'd like me to cover, just speak out. I'm definitely interested in expanding this list with topics that are of interest to you.

What Browsers Can Do

When you visit a Web site, you aren't powerless or at the mercy of the Web designer, but can take some control of the site's appearance and functionality.

One of the most common actions is to block unwanted pop-ups—most browsers now have a setting to do that. It's also common and easy to make text larger or smaller, and to alter a Web page's appearance in other ways.

This article considers the powers available to users of Safari, the browser that comes installed on every Mac. There are others, such as Firefox, Opera, Netscape, Camino, OmniWeb, and Flock, but future articles will look at them.

Safari

Safari is included with all new Macs. It has been developed so rapidly that there are many different versions around. This article refers to version 2.0.4 (419.3), which was current at the time of writing.

The first step in taking control with Safari is actually to enable a couple of features that are disabled by default: the status bar and tabbed browsing.
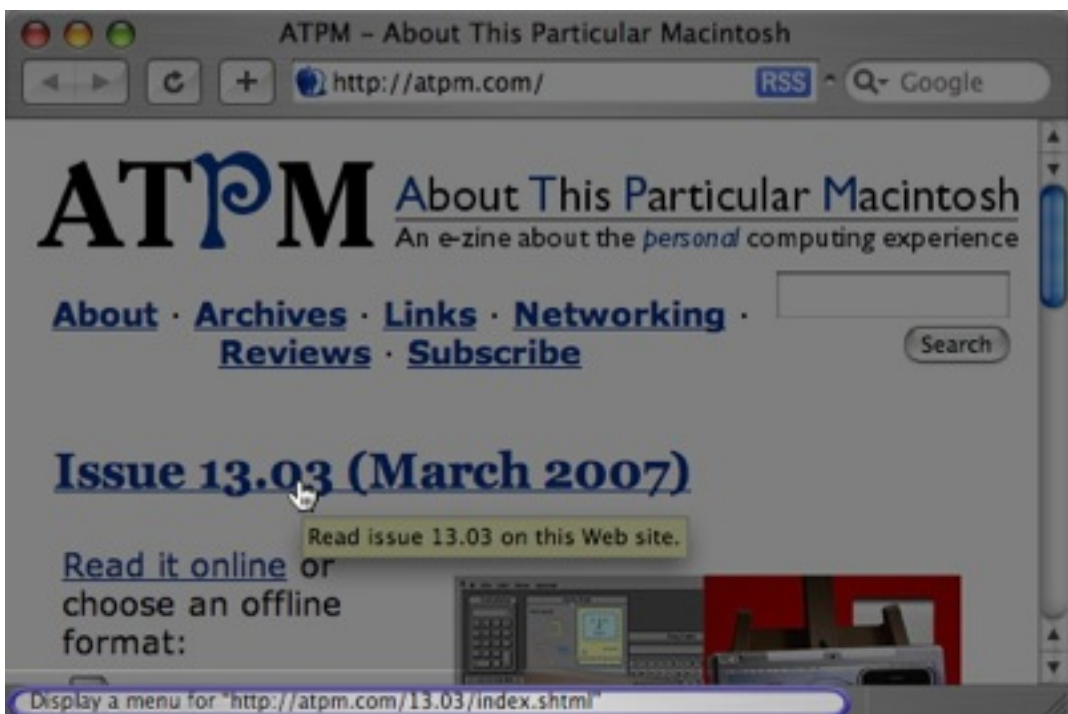
Status Bar

The status bar is a gray strip at the bottom of the browser window. It displays information relating to the page you're viewing. To enable it, choose View ▷ Show Status Bar. Watch the status bar as you work with Web pages, as it gives you more information and therefore more control as you browse the Web.

For example, call up a bookmark or enter an address manually, and the status bar should carry messages such as "Contacting www.example.com" or "Loading www.example.com."

Hover over a link, and the status bar should display where that link will take you. Sometimes a Web page is created in such a way that it is able to override the useful information with text the Web designer thinks is more important, but mostly the information in the status bar is useful.

Similarly, you can usually spot e-mail addresses. Be careful if the URL you see in the status bar ends with a file extension such as `.pdf`, `.doc`, `.xls`, etc. as that means the link goes to a file of that type, which may download to your computer.

As I hover over the link to ATPM issue 13.03, the status bar shows that if I click I will visit
http://atpm.com/13.03/index.shtml. In this screenshot there also happens to be a tooltip visible (the text
on the yellow background), but many Web sites don't offer that.

Block Pop-Up Windows

Some sites cause extra windows to pop-up without your asking for them. These may be
perfectly legitimate, but more often they are advertising, or even spam.

All modern browsers, including Safari, allow you to block pop-ups, while allowing the
harmless ones to appear. Choose Safari ▷ Block Pop-Up Windows.

Text Size

Some sites use text that's just too small to read comfortably. Of course, "too small" is very
subjective, and can depend on the time of day, how tired you are, and other factors.

Increase the size of text on a page by pressing Command +. Press Command - to reduce it
again. These commands are also available under the View menu as Make Text Bigger and
Make Text Smaller.

You can press the key combinations repeatedly until you either find a comfortable size or
Safari refuses to make any further changes. My tests suggested about eight or nine steps
were available.

While you can enlarge or reduce text, images remain the same size.

Minimum Text Size

But wait! Look in the Preferences, under the Advanced tab. Here you'll see that you can set a minimum font size. This is great if you consistently find yourself enlarging the text. To really see the difference try the extremes: 9 and 24.

With a minimum text size of 9, the text on the page is tiny.

I've set the minimum text size to 24, so the text on the page is huge.

Choose Your Own Style Sheet

In modern Web design the HTML coding should be plain and simple: a set of tags to mark out headings, paragraphs, lists, and so on. All the layout is controlled (or rather, *suggested*) by a style sheet.

A style sheet may contain rules to say that all headings should be bold, centered, and maroon, while paragraph text should be left-aligned, black, with margins of a certain width, and so on.

The style sheet sets up how the Web designer thinks the page would best communicate its message, but such styles are not hard and fast.

For example, the designer may create different style sheets for print, for handheld devices, or even for how a page should sound when read aloud, though this last isn't yet very popular or even very reliable.

For a visitor to a Web page, style sheets make possible a degree of control. Safari lets visitors choose their own style sheets and use them to override the designer's suggestions.
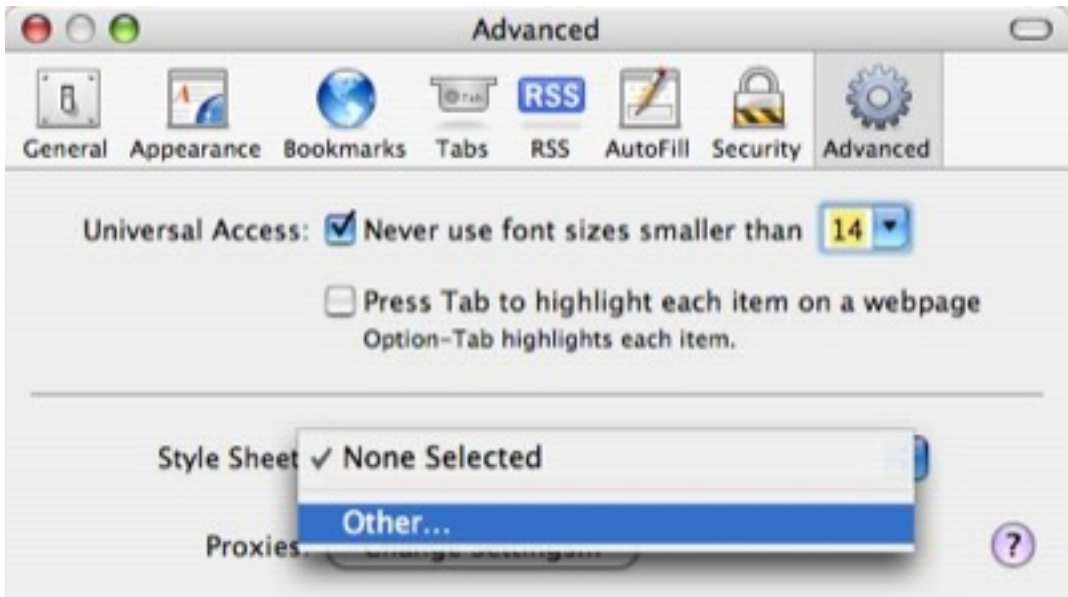

Choose your own style sheet in the Advanced tab of Safari's Preferences.

Try downloading this my-styles.css file and then choose it as a custom stylesheet. Now go to the Safari menu and choose Empty Cache... to clear out what Safari thinks it already knows about Web pages.

Note: Safari is truly terrible at refreshing Web pages; if you simply reload/refresh the Web page with your new stylesheet loaded you may not see any change. Emptying the cache usually forces Safari to really refresh.

Now visit some Web sites and see what happens. You *should* find that Web pages now use large, white text on a black background. Hover over some links, and you should find that a red outline appears around the link text.
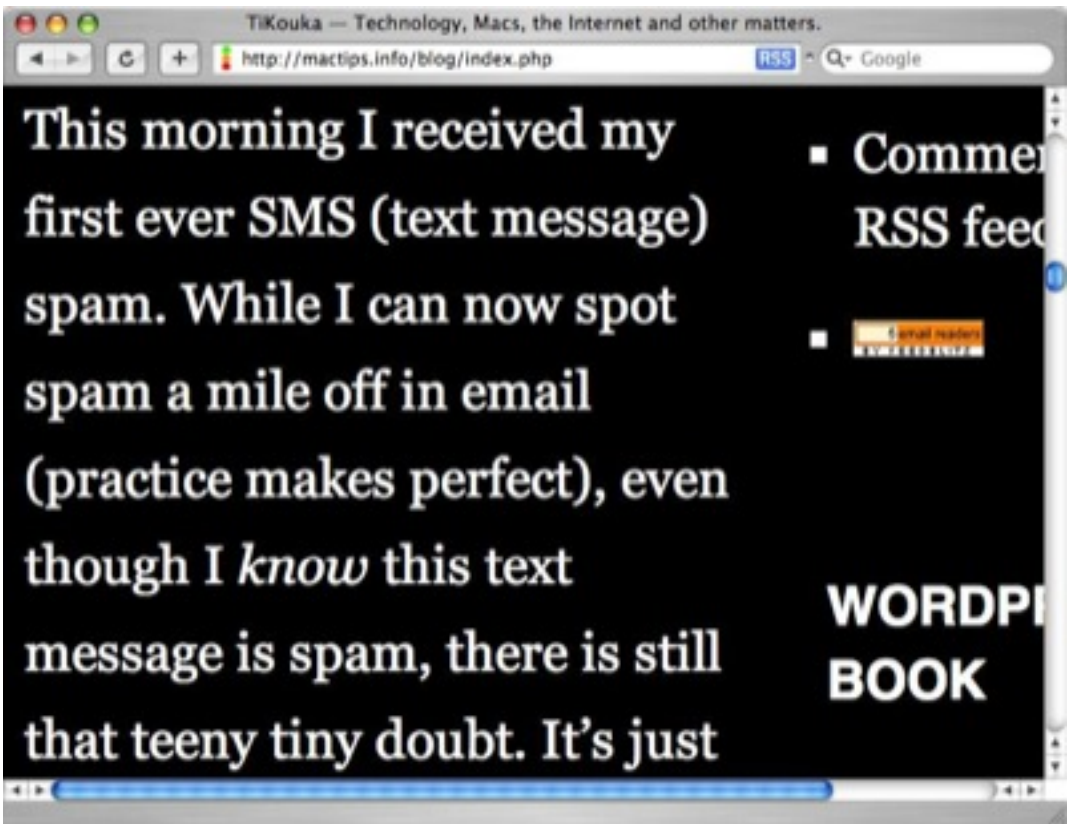
My custom style sheet causes the Web page to display large, white text on a black background.

This isn't a carefully crafted style sheet: it was simply cobbled together with a few rules pulled from information about accessibility. It should demonstrate, though, that the user has quite some power when visiting Web pages.

Disable Scripts and Plug-ins

Another area where you have power over a Web site is with scripts and plug-ins. Safari's Security tab lets you enable and disable Java, JavaScript, cookies, and plug-ins.

Safari's Security tab allows you to enable and disable Java, JavaScript, cookies, and plug-ins.

There is enormous power here, and as with most technologies, each can be used for good or evil. I have accidentally visited porn sites that pop open a million windows—every time you try to close the window to get away from the site, half a dozen new ones open. That kind of trick is done with scripts.

On the other hand, your bank may use scripts to log you out if you don't use a page for a while. This can help ensure your privacy and keep your financial information safer.

Cookies are commonly used to greet you by name when you next visit a shopping site, to remember your commenter ID on a blog, and for any number of other reasons.

If you disable items in this Security section, you may find that sites you want to use don't work correctly.

But still, it's up to you; you *can* take control.

Copyright © 2007 Miraz Jordan, http://mactips.info. Miraz is a co-author of the recently published book: WordPress 2: Visual Quickstart Guide, and member of the Webstock organizing team.

Takeaway Lessons From Billy Madison

In the movie Billy Madison, there is a classic (I can call it that now, right?) scene in which the title character, played by Adam Sandler, faces off against the weaselly Eric (Bradley Whitford) in a battle of wits: the victor will gain control of the Madison hotel empire. The contest is loosely styled after Jeopardy!, one of the categories being "Business Ethics," a subject in which Eric, to put it delicately, lacks expertise.

Though Eric is a fictional character, there are very real people on the Internet who have no sense of ethics whatsoever. I don't mean the ne'er-do-wells whose malicious intent is obvious: the smut peddlers, the spammers, the phishers, the Nigerian scammers, etc. I mean the people you would normally trust, the ones running the so-called news sites—blogs, even—that purport to uphold some semblance of integrity. At very least, they are expected not to lie to their readers. More than a traditional printed publication, which has an office and paid reporters, free Web publications rely on trust to build their brands.

I've been betrayed.

Several days ago, I came across a very disturbing post on *The Apple Blog*, a publication for which I have previously written: "Get your product reviewed on TAB". If the title didn't speak for itself, *TAB* writes, "[F]or the remainder of this week we'll be offering a discounted price to review your Mac/Apple related software or hardware. If you'd like to have us review your product, head over here and purchase a review and we'll get you rolling and get you a review on *TAB!*" Clicking through the link in the article takes you to a site called *ReviewMe.* By paying the "discounted price" of just $200, you can move to the head of the line and get your product reviewed on *TAB.*

TAB very wisely rescinded this offer within 12 hours of posting it, after wide and vociferous condemnation. (At press time, neither of these links to *TAB* was working, the original posts having been deleted.) *TAB* maintains that it has never accepted money to review a product and that it intended to flag these products as reviews that had been paid for, if they ever came to pass.

Sorry, guys. That's not good enough anymore.

This practice is unethical and indefensible, and it betrays the trust that your readers have in you. On the Web, as in print, your brand is only as strong as your readers' identification and trust. Can we still trust you?

A Thin Product Line
My freelance writing hobby has seen several different Internet-based outlets: at one time, I wrote for Low End Mac, and I was paid modestly for it. I moved on to writing for ATPM

and SchwarzTech, both volunteer positions, and eventually, my (brief) time at *TAB*, which was then and is still largely a volunteer position. (*TAB* now pays its most regular bloggers a monthly stipend.)

How is it that sites like these get product reviews without paying their writers? Well, you thread a very fine needle: it's fairly well-known in the industry that the review products are yours to keep, with few exceptions. This presents a modest conflict of interest, because the reviewer is getting something for free, and that may encourage him to write a positive review of it. That's why Consumer Reports, the most respected product reviewer in the English-speaking world, actually purchases every product they review off the shelf. They refuse to accept free review items, and won't sell advertising to companies whose products they review.

With these extreme measures, *Consumer Reports* has eliminated the conflict of interest; but they are the exception to the rule, and for a reason. Most Web sites don't make enough money to enjoy *Consumer Reports'* luxury of complete independence. Many print magazines don't, either; Car and Driver is kept afloat almost exclusively by advertising bought by the automotive industry, and their strict editorial independence has cost them ad campaigns in the past. So, like the rest of the world, like other big-name magazines like Macworld and *Car and Driver,* a strong dose of journalistic ethics should be enough to separate editorial from advertisement.

With this duty to the reader in mind, publications generally accept free products for review, although they may not—and often can't—review everything. So, rather than charge a fee to bump a product to the head of the line, they evaluate what's worth reviewing each issue. It's their job to be self-policing, because their readers take their honesty and ethics at face value.

The manufacturers are in on this game, too. They send out these products knowing that if they get a good review, it's well worth the cost of the unit the reviewer is going to keep, and even if they don't get a good review, the old PR axiom applies: there's no such thing as bad publicity.

I don't and can't condemn the practice of accepting free products for review, and I see no problem with it as long as the writer remembers his ethical duty and puts the reader before the product. I believe the staffs at ATPM and *SchwarzTech* do a fine job of keeping the faith with their readers, and my reviews for *The Apple Blog* were also written with that intention.

But any site that claims to do independent product reviews had damned well better be independent. Paying someone $200 to review your product makes it a review no longer; it is an advertisement, at best, it is "advertorial" content. One of the cardinal rules of journalism is that you never allow advertisements to appear as part of your content. You print the ads in a different typeface, you set them off in a special section, you put a different background behind them, you clearly mark them as "ADVERTISEMENT," and so on. *ReviewMe's* FAQ reads, "We do require that all reviews are. . .disclosed as being sponsored in some fashion."

It's not at all clear whether *ReviewMe* enforces this requirement, but it's irrelevant. Call this what it is: an advertising campaign on the part of hardware manufacturers and software publishers.

To allow readers to believe that a review bought and paid for through *ReviewMe* is an honest, unbiased test-drive does them a tremendous disservice. Even calling it a "review" is dishonest. They are to have it both ways, but at the end of the day, there's a difference between threading a sewing needle and using a knitting needle. *TAB's* latest proposal comes out on the wrong side of this equation. Are we really to expect that, after being paid $200 for the review, *TAB* would be willing to slam a bad product? Or that they would really adhere rigorously to the standard of flagging paid-for reviews?

I understand, probably better than most people, that earning a living by running a Web site is a difficult business, unless you're selling porn. The Web, like most marketplaces, can be a very cutthroat environment. But it is of the utmost importance that these sites maintain strong ethical principles and run their businesses in an upstanding manner. Insulting your readers' intelligence by thinly disguising advertisements as content is not only unethical, it's very likely to drive away the very people who are writing your meal ticket by visiting your site in the first place.

We've been down this road before. Newspapers were once no better than *TAB,* in the early days of the industry, intermingling their advertising and news content so they were all but indistinguishable, and often selling the most prominent editorial positions to advertisers. Search engines used to bump up the search results of companies that paid them; Google's grand innovation was to reject weighted results like this and to clearly label their advertising. Even now many magazines still offer a certain amount of editorial product placement for advertisers over non-advertisers.

TAB may have rescinded their offer to write "expedited" reviews for pay, but there's a valuable lesson in here for other sites.

Desktop Pictures

This Month's Desktop Pictures

In the autumn of 1997, Lee Bennett went on vacation in New England, armed with a Canon AE-1 and plenty of Kodak 35mm film. The prints were scanned, but only for a very low-resolution Web preview gallery. Recently, Lee finally found the negatives that he thought were lost and had them digitized to Kodak Picture CDs by a photo lab. Since they originated from film and not digital images, these picks received a significant amount of color adjustment in Adobe Photoshop CS2. It just so happens that Lee's Photoshop For the Curious column for this month covers some of the steps that were used on these photos.

Previous Months' Desktop Pictures

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

Downloading All the Pictures at Once

Some browsers can download an entire set of desktop pictures at once.

iCab Use the Download command to download "Get all files in same path."

OmniWeb Choose "Save Linked ▷ Images..." from the File menu.

Safari Use this Automator workflow.

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.
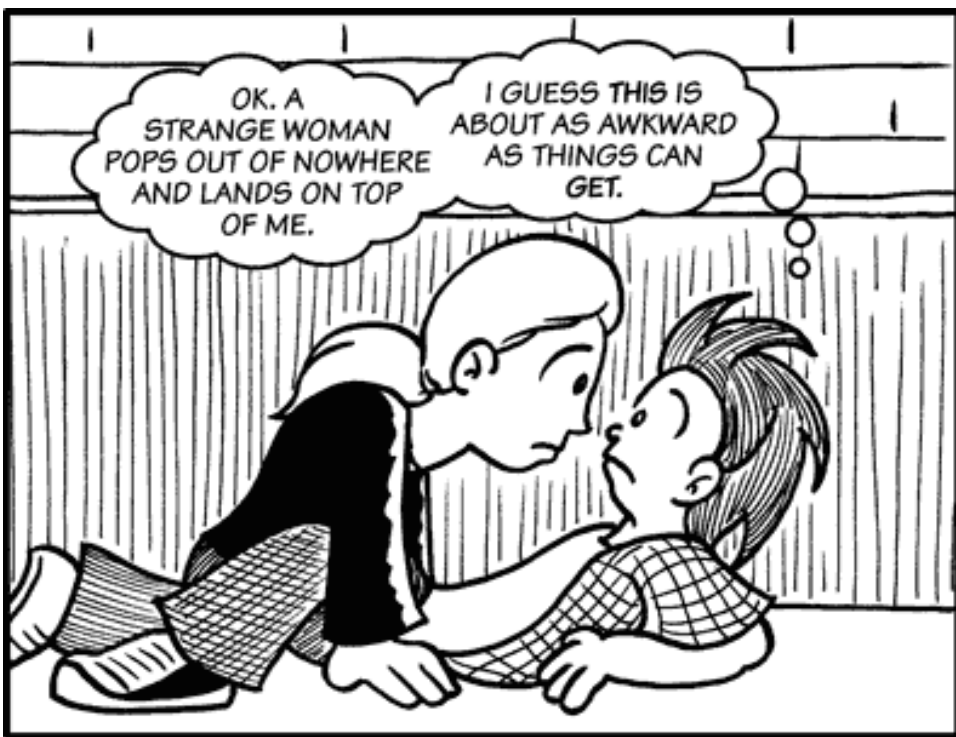
Cortland

by Matt Johnson, mjohnson@atpm.com

Cortland is involved in a series of Web comic crossovers this month, and fully understanding the story may require viewing multiple strips on other sites. The next panel in this story appears in *Cameo Comic*.
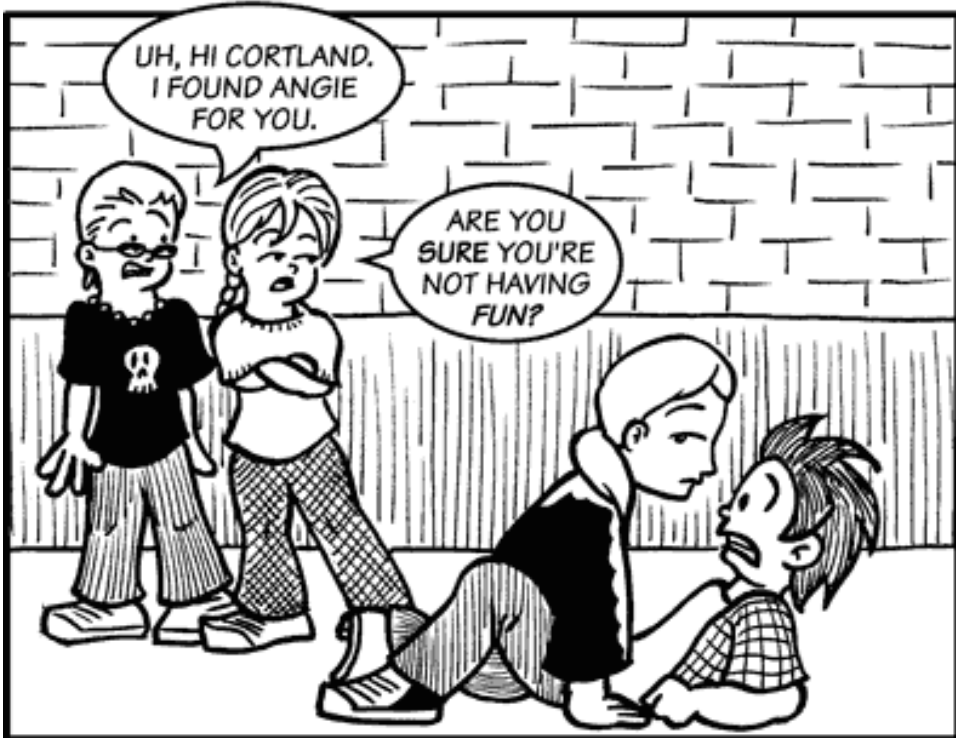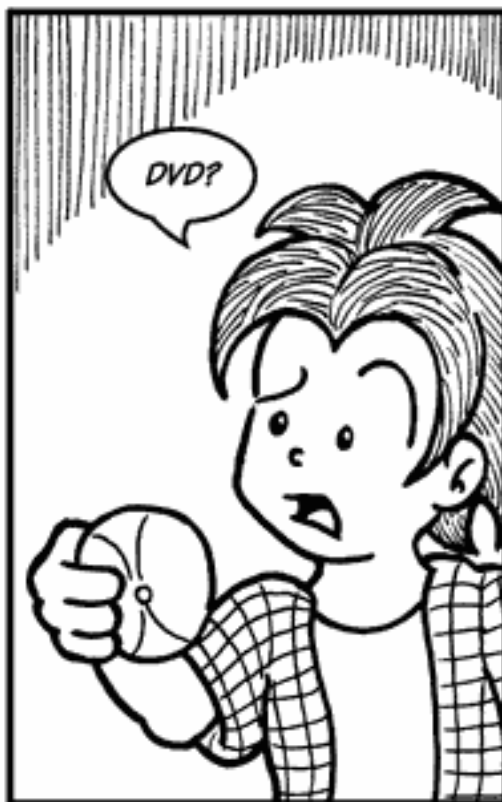
The next panel in this story appears in *Cameo Comic*.
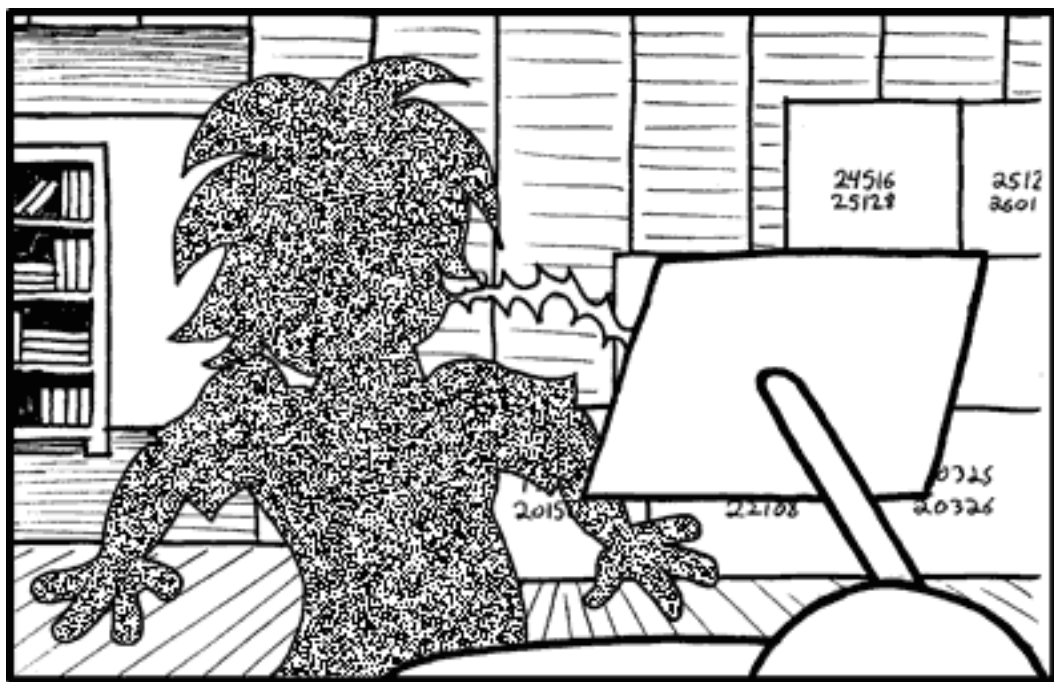
The next panel in this story appears in *the KAMics*.

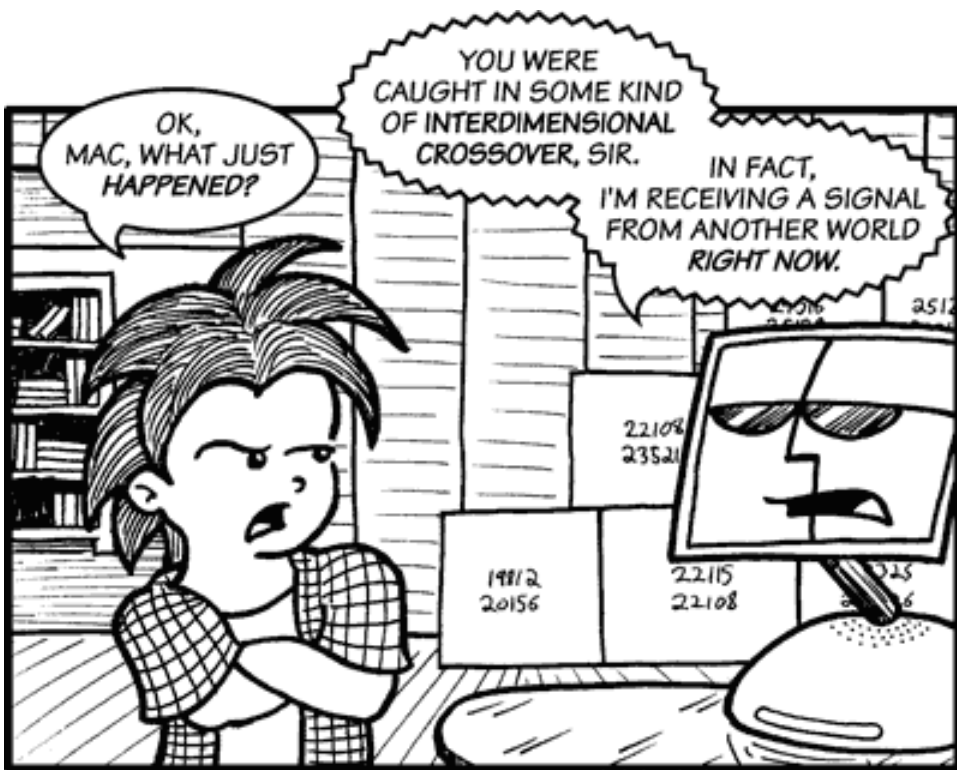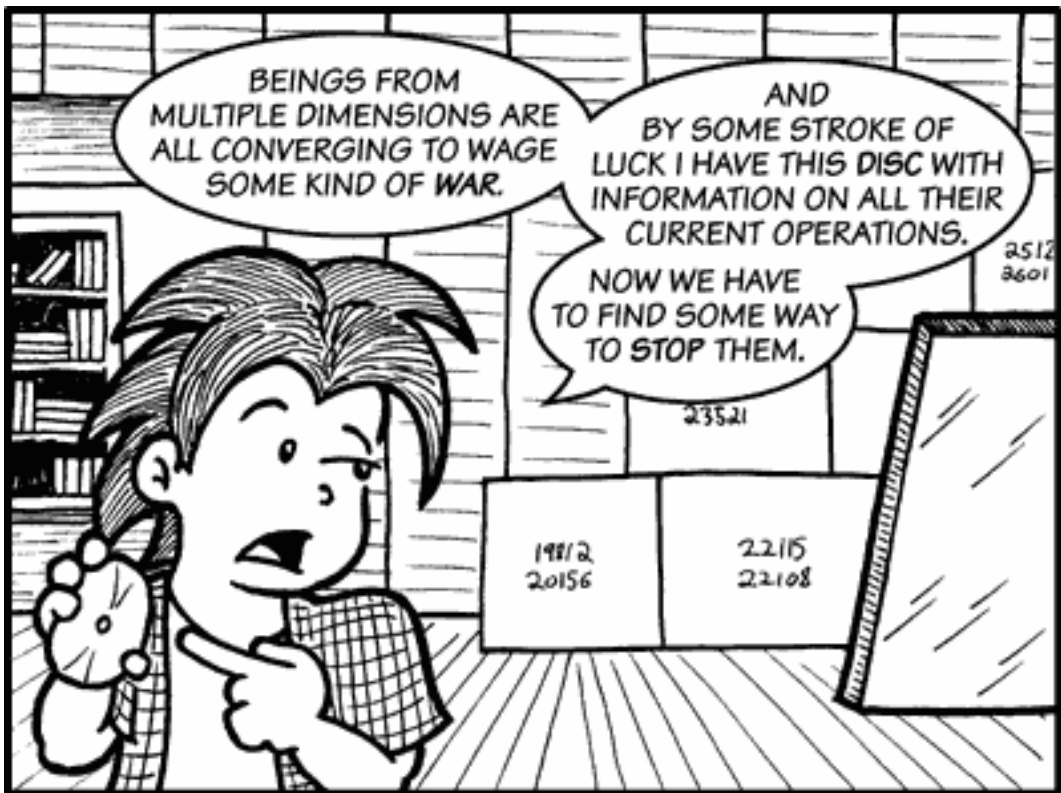The next panel in this story appears in *Evil Overlords United*.

The next panel in this story appears in *Rogues of Clwyd-Rahn*.

The next panel in this story appears in *Rogues of Clwyd-Rahn*.

The next panel in this story appears in *Legostar Galactica*.

Audacity 1.2.6

Developer: Dominic Mazzoni, et al.
Price: free (open source)
Requirements: Mac OS X 10.1. Not Universal (separate PowerPC and Intel versions).

In the world of sound editing, it's not hard to drop several hundred dollars on the application alone. Add recording gear, good headphones, a high-performance Mac to mix it on, and you're talking serious coin. Is it really worth all that for Hollywood or New York fame and fortune? (Hahahaha, yes.)

Hobbyists and smaller-budget professionals can save money with Audacity, a free editor from the open source community. It handles multi-track editing, a variety of audio effects, and exports to many audio formats: MP3, OGG, AIFF, and WAV to name a few.

Installation and Getting Started

Pick your CPU type, PPC or Intel, from the Audacity download page. Copy over the package to get the application and a set of audio effects. Download the manual if you need an offline reference.

Since you probably aren't a sound expert, a blank sound canvas may be more imposing than "thank you" cards to a ten-year-old. Fear not! See the Audacity tutorials to gain some experience and editing insight.

If you plan to record or import audio for your first project, just open Audacity to start a new project. Remember that each window is a multi-track project, not a single sound file. (You create the actual playback by exporting to a specific format, like MP3, OGG, or WAV.)
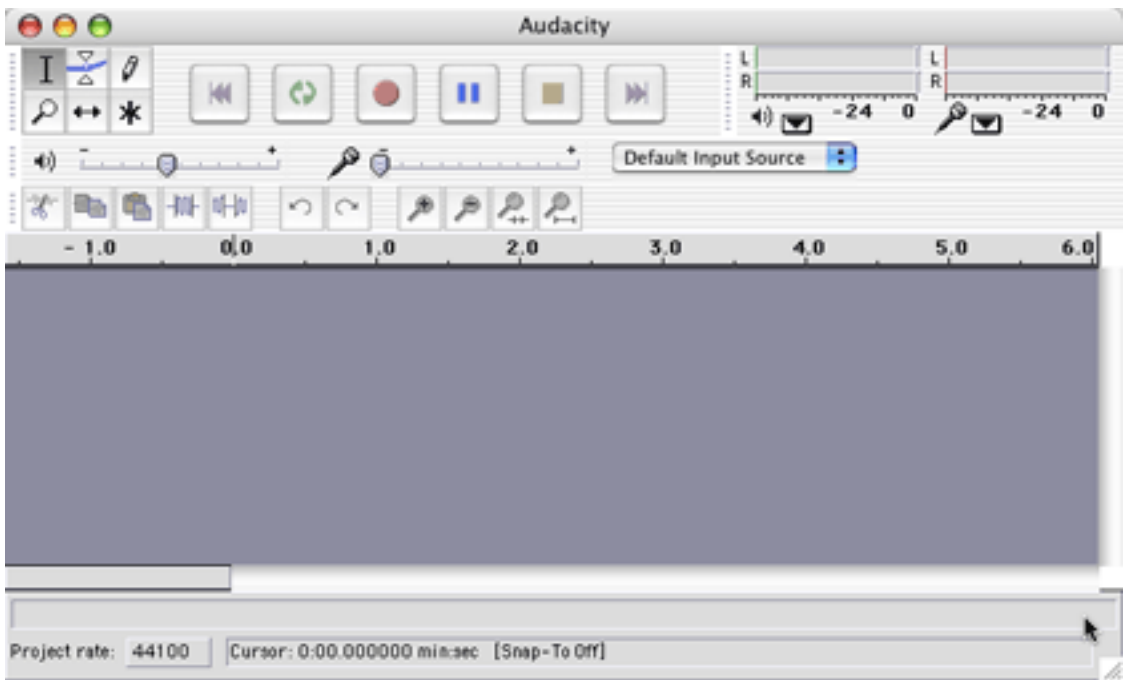
An empty Audacity project.

Push the big red record button to pick up a few seconds of any incoming audio. Each recording creates a new track, so you can quickly get things to work with, even if they're nothing at all.
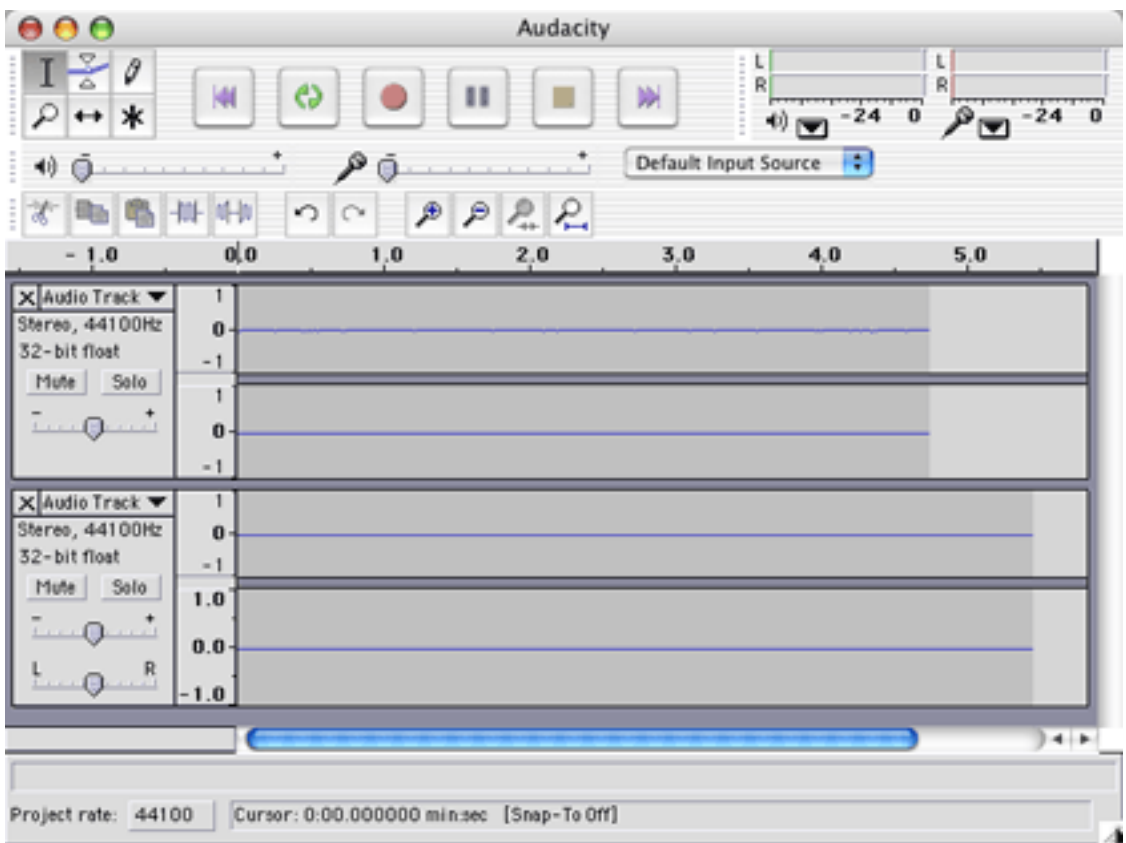
The sounds of silence.

Making Things Happen

Audacity's toolbars include basics like cut, paste, and zoom in or out. They also control your input source, show sound meter levels, and switch between track selection tools.
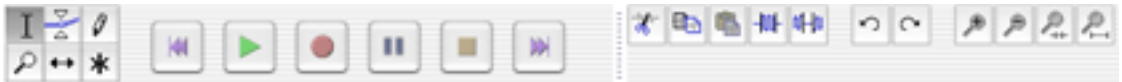
Cut-and-paste works the same here as anywhere. Click and drag across a section of audio and copy it. Paste it into the same track or a new track as needed.

The Effect menu lists more powerful controls, from the obvious (fade in) to the obscure (Nyquist Prompt). They function like plug-ins in Photoshop or other editing programs, tweaking this and prodding that. (See the Effects section below for more details.)

Is It Mac Yet?

Audio editing is a thought-heavy process. You mentally compose on an audio canvas, working through sound overlaps and effects. An effortless interface really helps, lest you

bog down in click-this-and-that-and-the-other-thing control details. Regrettably, you need to frequently mouse around Audacity's control toolbars, breaking your rhythm. (It could really use a "hold Option to grab-scroll" command!)

The interface doesn't look like a Mac, probably because of its cross- platform genesis. There are no brushed-steel windows, elegant icon-and-text buttons, or bird's eye view of the whole track. (See ATPM's review of Fission for a more visually pleasing editor.) I look forward to its evolution as a Mac application, not just as a sound editor.

Working With MP3 Files

A big plus: Audacity can import, edit, and export MP3 files. (You need LAME, a free library, to do so.)
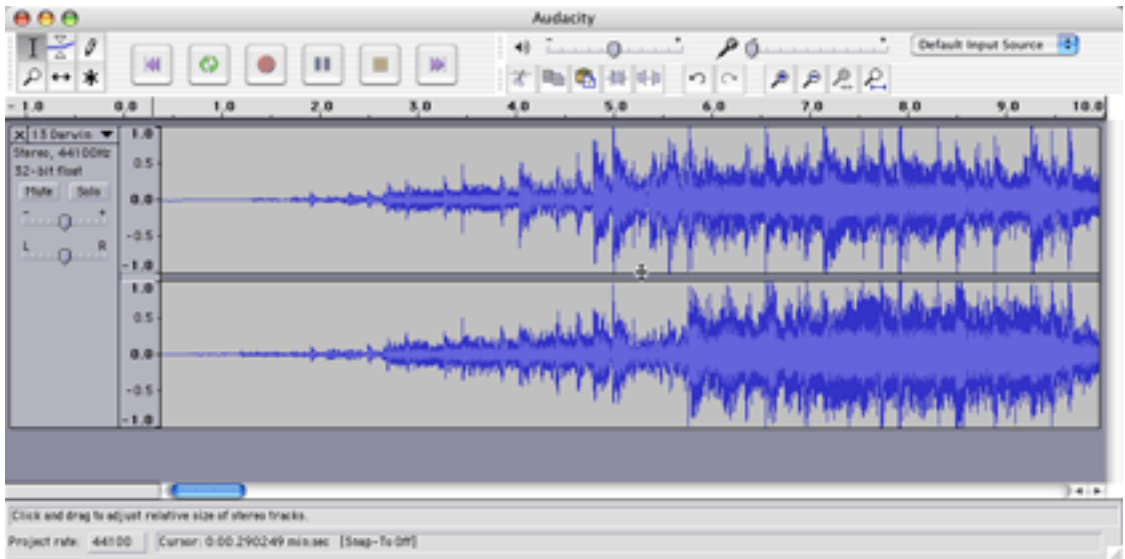
An imported song.

It's not a lossless editor, unfortunately. Each import and export requires de- and re-compression, which degrades the sound. (The aforementioned Fission handles MP3 losslessly—which does limit the available editing functionality somewhat.)

One re-compression doesn't hurt much, assuming you start with a high-quality file. Several surely will! If you have access to an uncompressed file like AIFF or WAV, it's better to edit that and export to MP3 only when you're done.

Effects

Most editing work needs effects (also known as filters). Look to them when you fade in from silence, add an echo, or clean up a crackly recording.

Powerful effects can reshape the sound significantly. Audacity includes a bunch at installation, with many listed below. See the links for Internet tutorials or examples. (The Audacity documentation includes a full list of effects.)

- Click Removal: Takes out pops or sharp sound artifacts, such as from an old record.

- Low pass filter: Constrain and loosen sound by changing the "size" of the area it plays in.

- High pass filter: Can isolate highs for de-essing vocals or synthesizing cymbals.

- Fade in/out: Come in from (or drop to) silence.

- Cross fade in/out: Mix across two tracks, one fading out as the other enters.

- DC bias removal: Helps remove noise from a track.

- Delay and Echo: wait, wait, wait, for, for, for, it, it, it.

- Tremelo: Rapid repetition of a sound, like a piano player who quickly repeats two alternating keys. It can give an accentuated or atmospheric effect.

- Normalize: Re-levels the audio to a specific target (say, just under maximum) across the recording to "pump" the sound without introducing distortion.

- Phaser: Adds a pulsing or wavering audio effect, as sometimes heard in guitar or keyboard music.

- FFT Filter: Raises or lowers specific sound frequencies, to help eliminate unwanted noise.

Programmers use the Nyquist programming language to create new effects. Audacity provides a list of Nyquist plug-ins and a Nyquist prompt to enter your own commands directly.

DJ You

Just using cross-fades and your free time, it's possible to assemble a seamless music set for your next party or cross-country drive. Audacity makes a good editing candidate, given its free price and range of supported formats. You can do a super-basic party mix from iTunes. Audacity lets you create a more advanced set that outputs to a single file.

See tutorials like The Perfect Mix for a start with computer-based music mixing. You won't be a club DJ with Audacity—it's just about seamlessly moving from one song to the next (and hopefully on the beat).

Technical Support

As an open source effort, Audacity development and support comes from community-fed forums and the programmers themselves.

If you have previous editing experience, poke around the program to glean the easy stuff, like creating multiple tracks and applying effects. New users should check out the listed tutorials for places to start.

The bargain-minded [How to Podcast site](#) includes an [Audacity section](#) for people with that in mind.

Summary

Audacity's range of supported formats makes it a good choice for basic editing. Its price makes the choice even better. You can manage sound inputs and recording levels from the main screen, lean on a no-cost development and support community, and grow into a new hobby or profession at only the cost of your personal time.

On the down side, the interface doesn't look or feel like a Mac, and many other reviews note its limitations for professionals. If you understand sound and how to play with it effectively, the tools won't move as easily as grander, more expensive applications. For the rest of us, free and capable probably fits the bill.

In October 2006, Audacity's development group published a 1.3.2 [beta version](#) that adds several new interface and feature enhancements. It crashes almost constantly on my Cube, unfortunately. You may find it interesting to try out—just remember that version 1.2.6's stability is leaps and bounds beyond.
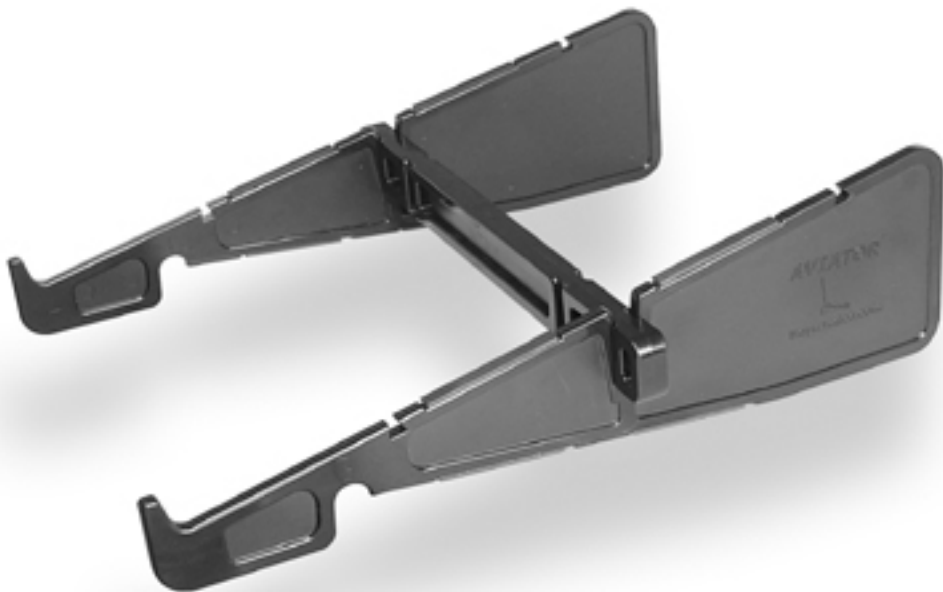
Aviator Laptop Stand

Developer: Keynamics
Price: $25 ($20 street)
Requirements: Laptop
Trial: None

Frequent travelers, especially those traveling for business, are almost certain to carry laptop computers with them these days. In fact, Keynamics claims that a staggering 92 percent of business travelers carry laptops on airline flights, and with recently approved plans to offer inflight broadband Internet service, there's even more incentive to get the laptop out and use it during the flight.

There's just one problem: airline seats and tray tables, especially in economy class, are awfully cramped and inhospitable to the laptop computer.

Enter the Keynamics Aviator Laptop Stand, the second product from the company that brought the laptop world the brilliant but awkwardly named Laptop Stand on Wheels.

The Aviator is a three-piece plastic and rubber affair that fits together in two configurations: flat for packing and locked upright as a stand for computing. Its ability to collapse into a flat package makes for easy transport: just slide it into a side pocket in your computer case and you're all set.

As a stand, the Aviator works fairly well. In fact, it might be the most versatile stand I've used, a jack of many trades and master of one in particular: nothing beats it for use on an airliner's tray table. Perhaps the closest overall competitor is the [CoolPad](#) line from RoadTools, but the Aviator beats both the CoolPads hands down when it comes to computing in a cramped airplane seat.

The Aviator really gets the laptop at a comfortable, elbows-in typing angle, which is important if you get stuck in a middle seat in coach with well-fed seatmates on either side, as seems to be the case so often these days. Even if you're in a window or aisle seat, or lucky enough to be in business or first class, the Aviator really improves the typing experience. The relative position of most airline tray tables really lends itself to the Aviator's overhanging stance, and about the only way airborne computing could get more comfortable is if you had an actual desk to use.

According to Keynamics, the angle and offset positioning offer protection from a sudden reclining of the seat in front of you. I can't attest to the severity of this perceived hazard, but the Aviator does seem to allow for less impact to the screen in such cases than might otherwise occur. Whether you're using a stand or not, however, if the passenger in front of you reclines his seat, you're pretty much done using your laptop unless your arms are disproportionately short, like a tyrannosaurus rex.

Keynamics also advertises the Aviator as a desk stand, a role in which it is competent, though not excellent. Like Keynamics' dedicated desk stand, the Laptop Stand on Wheels, the Aviator hangs the laptop off the front edge of the desk at a very comfortable typing angle. It can also be used entirely on the desk, though some of its ergonomic benefit is lost if you choose to do so.

The only major drawback of the Aviator on a tray table—or on a desk—is its front retaining hooks, which prevent the laptop from experiencing a gravitational fatal attraction to the floor. Like those on the ill-designed Contour [NoteRiser](#), they block the optical drive slot on many Mac laptops—the MacBook line, with its side-loading optical drive, is the major exception—but unlike the NoteRiser, the Aviator allows the laptop to be lifted easily to gain access. Most people don't swap optical media in and out very often during a single flight, so this probably won't bother you too much.

My final minor complaint is with the security of the assembly. The plastic seems robust and slides together easily, but it slides apart just as easily. This can cause the stand to fall apart if you pick it up from one side. This isn't a big deal as long as you remember to use both hands when moving the Aviator and computer as a unit, but it would be nice if the stand could lock into its configuration or fit together more tightly.

There isn't a lot of quality competition at the low end of the laptop-stand market, especially when it comes to portable or quasi-portable stands. The Aviator really, uh, "stands" out as an excellent value and a truly functional product with only minor flaws. It's more portable than its competition and much more suited to inflight use. Keynamics has done it again.

Dodge That Anvil! 1.0.4

Developer: Rabidlab
Price: $20
Requirements: Mac OS X 10.2, 500 MHz G3, 64 MB available RAM. Not Universal

Trial: Feature-limited (fully playable up to level 2-2).

In the game Dodge That Anvil!, you play a rabbit responsible for harvesting carrots while anvils fall from the sky. I first tried the online version, but even after I installed the latest Shockwave player all I got was a black rectangle in place of the game—both on a PowerBook G4 laptop and a Windows XP machine. I was able to play the offline demo version. Registering the game was a bit hairy, as more than two hours after I received the registration code, I still couldn't register the game. A few hours later, though, I was able to register the game and all was well after that.

The background story involves intelligent rabbits that have learned how to grow their own food. Alas, their happy lives were disrupted when anvils started to fall from the sky. Always resourceful, the scientist rabbits devised all kinds of gizmos to enable their lone volunteer rabbit to harvest in the safest way possible. You have beach ball cannons to interfere with the anvils. The beach balls are harmless, unless they malfunction and explode after falling. You also have crates with some pieces of equipment inside to help you with the harvest. The equipment consists of mostly defensive pieces such as helmets and armor vests, but every now and then you would get a stick of dynamite, useful for breaking boulders or blowing a whole patch of carrots out of the ground. If you have collected turnips, radishes, and beets, they can be used to buy equipment from the shop.

The graphics are cartoonish with enough details to distinguish the various objects. Boulders are perfect cubes that when smashed become blocky blobs. Vegetation, other than the vegetables to be picked, is mostly outlines. More details go into animating the rabbit when he's hit. If the rabbit is hit with an anvil or a crate, or run over by a charging "bull," he ends up lying on the ground with yellow birds chirping and circling his head. At first I thought the birds were just stars, but they are birds all right, with flapping wings and all. If an explosion affects the rabbit, such as those from faulty beach balls or from the rabbit's own dynamite, he also lies on the ground afterwards but is all blackened. But that's the most you get in terms of violence, if it can be called violence. There is no gore here, and that is welcomed. The audio effects in the game are nice. You have explosions' booms, the rabbit's grunts as he strains to pull out stubborn carrots, and the pounding of hoofs as the anvil bulls come to life, but there's also soothing music at the beginning of the game to help you relax before you start harvesting.

Two seconds to go before that anvil comes crashing down! Run, rabbit, run!

There are three play modes. The default mode is the story mode, in which you move from one level to another, with each level getting a tad more difficult. Solve a story level and you can play that level in speed mode. In speed mode, you race against the clock to collect as many points as possible. To unlock the third mode, you would have to play through the story mode. I am only less than half-way through the story mode, so I don't know if hidden gems lie behind the third, locked mode.

Play the game via keyboard, mouse, or joystick. Not having a joystick and being somewhat of a decent typist, I at first stuck to keyboard control. Although movements consist of just left, right, forward, and backward, because the game is played in a 3D area, left and right movements don't exactly match what I expected. Originally, I was hoping my six-year-old son, Justin, would help me evaluate the game. Perhaps because of the somewhat unmatched movements, he lost interest in the game quickly and I had to do all the testing. In the end, I found that using the mouse option was most natural. Mouse movements can be in the general direction of where the rabbit is supposed to head, so it was easier to get used to.

Ouch!

Dodge That Anvil! has four challenge levels: Toon, Easy, Normal, and Expert. The higher the level, the more work you need to do, such as collecting more carrots and paying more for equipment, all while facing more anvils. I am not a great gamer, so my favorite challenge level is Toon. The program's manual aptly describes the Toon level as "in which you cannot lose." It's supposed to be for little kids, but I think it's perfect for people who want to explore all the levels without spending too much time. After all, what's the use of a game boasting x number of beautifully-drawn levels if no one ever reaches them?

You can stand in one place and let anvils knock you out, but there's no limit on how much damage you can take. By default, even the other challenge levels have settings to make them easier. You have a fly-through of the entire field before the game level begins to give you a review of the terrain. There's also auto-hop, to enable you to go up automatically, or to jump into the rabbit hole when you are near it, assuming the quota of carrots has been met, of course.

If you feel the need to be challenged, you can turn off all these helpful features. Still, I think the game was made to be easy to play. For instance, the rabbit can jump off a cliff and will land perfectly unharmed, no matter which challenge level is in play.

Treading water doesn't seem to affect the rabbit's movement much, even though if the rabbit has flippers on, he is supposed to move better in water. Lastly, the rabbit can have a combination of equipment, such as having an umbrella while carrying a magnet that attracts veggies.

In other, more difficult, games, it may be possible that you can carry only one piece of equipment at a time. Personally, I prefer to have the option of playing an easy game and get my money's worth through playing all the levels, by whatever means necessary. If a game is so hard that you get stuck after a certain level, you'll probably feel as if you just wasted the money.

I think Dodge That Anvil! is a Very Nice game to have. It has support for many input devices, good graphics and sound, multiple challenge levels, many settings to make the game even easier or more difficult, and many power-ups. The registration process should be improved, too, as once people fork over money for the real version, they expect to be able to start playing shortly afterwards. Waiting a few hours can be a big letdown. Dodge That Anvil! is Rabidlab's first product ever, but it is a solid performer. I look forward to seeing more of its wares.

HomeDock Deluxe

Developer: Digital Lifestyle Outfitters (DLO)
Price: $150
Requirements: 4G or 5G iPod, 1G or 2G iPod nano, or iPod mini
Trial: None

Am I the only one who derives some amusement from the flurry of devices released in recent months in advance of the Apple TV? I'm talking about devices intended to provide access to your multimedia via your home theater—products as simple as the AirClick or as complex as the TuneView. Since I seem to have gotten on a little bit of a roll with reviews about such products, I'll continue with DLO's new HomeDock Deluxe. I say "new" because there was a prior version—non-upgradable—which did not have many of the current version's features, such as on-screen navigation, display of album art, improved remote control, etc.

The HomeDock Deluxe includes a space to caddy its remote control. The dock connector design is such that you should be able to attach your iPod without removing its case, as long as the docking port is completely accessible through the case.

Like the TuneView I previously reviewed, DLO's HomeDock Deluxe purposes to enable access to an iPod from a distance when it is attached to a television, and still be able to use all the iPod's features. Also like the TuneView, the price point is one that may not be worthwhile to some people—especially owners of iPods that cost less than these dock products.

Unlike the TuneView, however, the HomeDock Deluxe is simply a disappointment in nearly all respects. For all I know, DLO already knows about the troubles I found and possibly others I haven't found, and may be planning a firmware update. But this review is based on the product that was shipped to me, so on we go.

iPods are supported by an adjustable brace that slides forward and backward to accommodate various thicknesses of iPods and/or cases. The dock has standard RCA outputs instead of the single 3.5mm plug on Apple's dock. There's also an S-Video output and a standard B-type USB jack for connecting the dock to your computer.

First of all, I very much like the dock design. The choice to not sink the dock connector into an indentation and instead provide a brace to hold up iPods from the rear means that there are no dock adapters to klutz with. It also means many styles of cases don't have to be removed before connecting the iPod to the dock.

Another nice touch is that the dock includes a 3.5mm auxiliary audio input jack. So, if you used up your last audio input in your amplifier by attaching the HomeDock Deluxe, you'll still have an easy way to temporarily connect another audio device without reaching around to the back of your amp.

The one good thing the remote control has going for it is that it most definitely *does not* feel like the chintzy piece of junk, which is often the case with remotes this size. It's solid, and feels like it can easily survive some abuse. There's even a very nice pad of rubber on the bottom, presumably for anti-slip purposes.

Unfortunately, the remote's flat shape is not an easy fit to your hand, and the button layout is not one that lends itself to fast memorization.

Aside from the fact that the sound coming out of the HomeDock Deluxe into my amplifier was as good as anything I've tried, I'm afraid the rest of this review is pretty much downhill from here.

I'm not a typical geek. I do at least skim through user manuals. I found myself repeatedly puzzled over a few items in the manual, which didn't match what I was seeing with the HomeDock Deluxe. Turns out, the manual had to be printed before DLO had completely finished the firmware, and some last-minute changes were made. DLO does reveal this tidbit on the product's support FAQ page (note, I said support FAQ, not the general FAQ on the main product page) and provides an updated manual as a PDF download, but I imagine there'll be some customers who'll not figure this out. Aren't you glad you read about it here at ATPM?

Since I'm talking about the manual, I'll also point to one little nugget that is still written in the revised manual. Page 22 talks about connecting standalone powered speakers to the HomeDock Deluxe. Step two says to "Connect the included RCA-to-mini Audio Adapter..." The box I received—which did appear to be a standard off-the-shelf retail box—contained no such adapter.

Once I actually began playing some music files, I was reasonably impressed by the on-screen user interface.
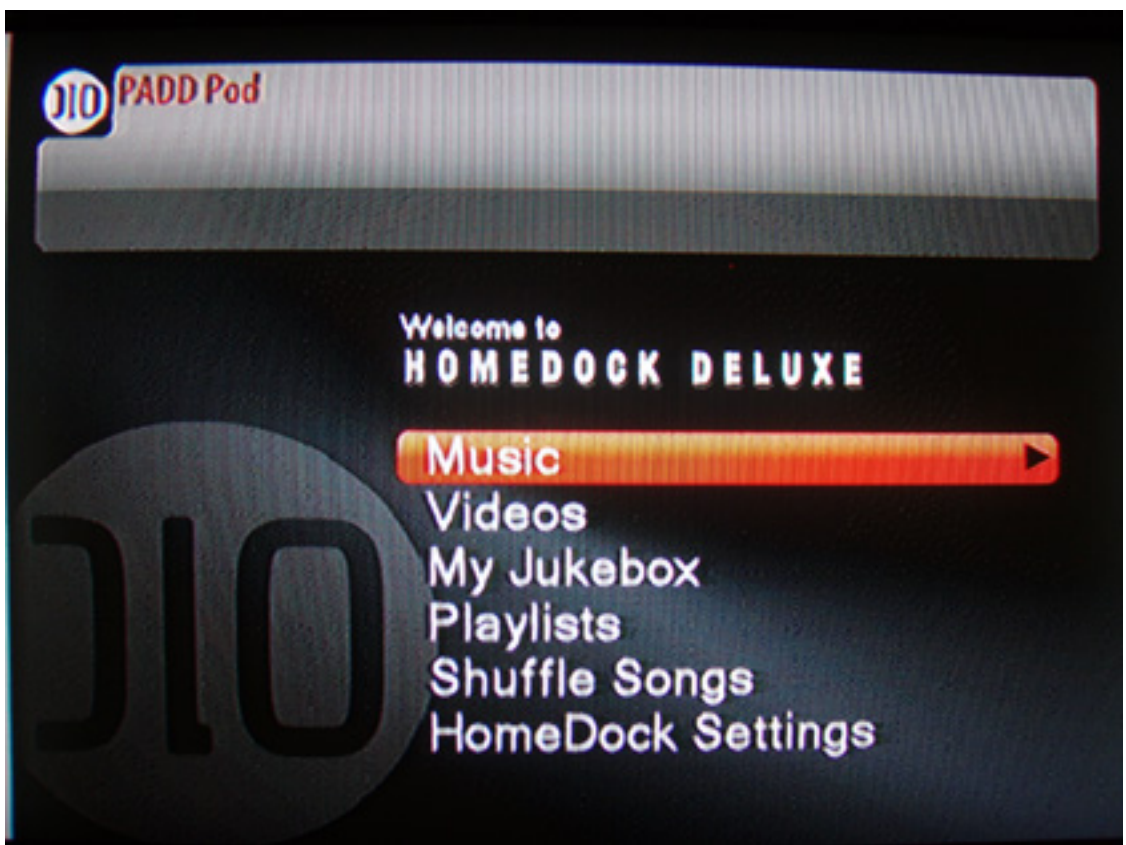
The HomeDock Deluxe's on-screen display is a color-customizable extension of your iPod's interface. The "My Jukebox" feature is essentially identical to the iPod's "On-the Go Playlist" feature.

Being the customization junkie that I am, I headed straight for the HomeDock Settings item to see what I could fool with. After very quickly selecting the black color scheme for the menus (seen above), I began looking at the screen saver visualizations that were available.

Yuck!

OK, that was quite blunt, but that word truly came out of my mouth—audibly—when I looked at the visualizations. They're absolutely pathetic and look as if they came straight out of the 8-bit gaming world of the 1980s. Consequently, the Now Playing display and the Status Bar display were the only two screen saver modes I feel are worth using. Please note that all of these modes—the various information displays as well as the visualizations—are all treated as screen savers. This tidbit will factor again later in this review—several times.

Once I gave up on the visualizations, I started skipping to different tracks. Correction, I started *trying* to skip to different tracks. The first skip went OK but, within the first second of playback, I knew I wanted to skip that song as well. I pressed the track forward button, and nothing happened. I pressed it again. Still nothing. Finally, on the fourth try, my ears were treated to the next random song. This is when I looked at the display on my television

and noticed something peculiar. Turns out, you'll have to wait for about 10 seconds, plus or minus a few, into a track before you can advance to a new track. The HomeDock Deluxe won't accept a skip command until after it's finished gathering data about the currently playing track—something it does at a snail's pace.
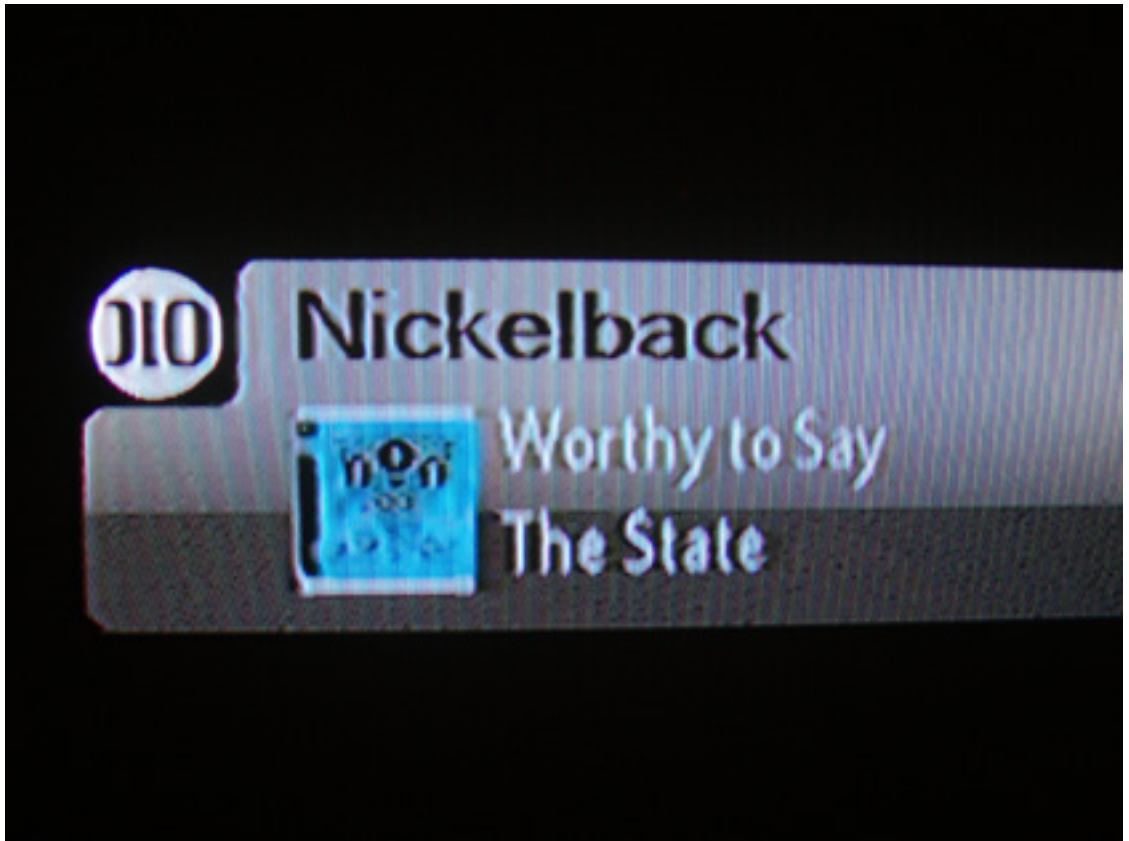
Since when does the WoW contemporary Christian music compilations include Nickelback?

Here's the scenario: as you see in the above photo of my television screen, a track from a music compilation series known as WoW had been playing when I skipped to the next track. The Status Bar display immediately updated with the artist name, song title, and album title of the next track (by Nickelback), but the album art from the previous track remained.

I should point out that this Status Bar screen saver (remember, I said earlier that all those display modes are screen savers) refreshes itself approximately every 4–6 seconds, appearing in a different location on the screen each time. When the Status Bar refreshes a few seconds after showing the prior track's album art with the current track's information, it shows nothing at all except for your iPod's name!
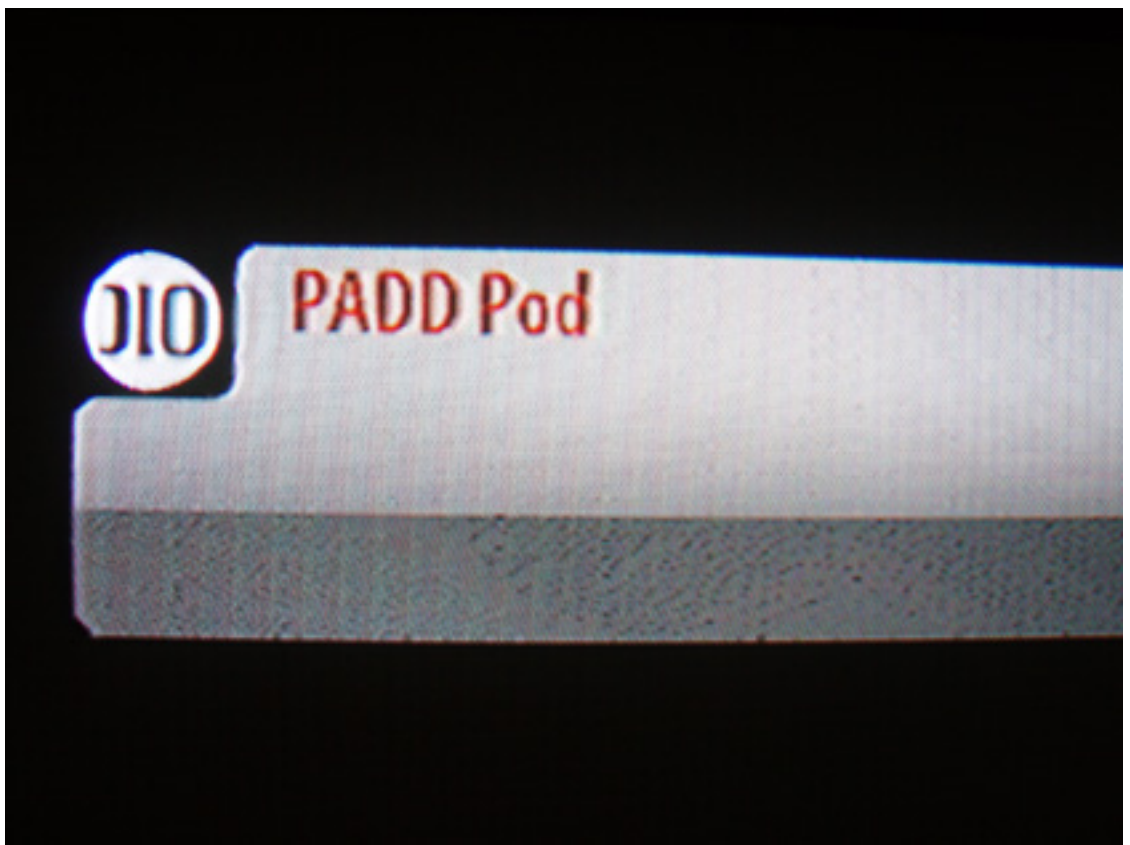
Stage two of the delay implies that no news is good news.

You're treated to this information-less box for another 4–6 seconds before the screen saver updates itself again with the album information and correct cover art.
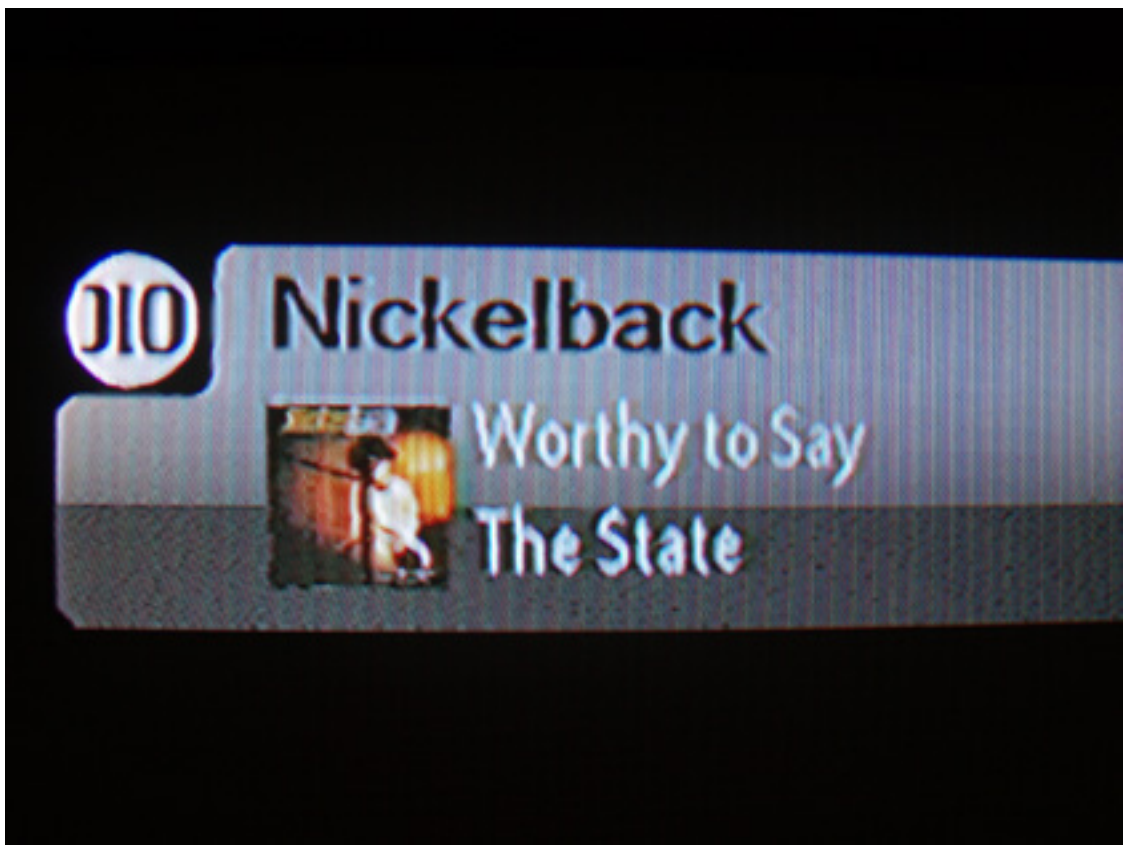
NASA talks to astronauts on the moon with less delay time than the HomeDock Deluxe's delay in retrieving track data.

The button to skip to the next track is completely unresponsive until this point. Once the proper album art is showing, you can then advance to the next track. As a comparison, I can skip through songs very quickly on the Keyspan TuneView—and it even has to perform communication over RF to the LCD display on the remote!

Another gripe about those screen savers—I would probably have rather used the Now Playing mode since it displays larger cover art and a playback progress indicator. But this display remains at a fixed point on the screen. What's the point of a screen saver if the visualization stays in the same spot instead of floating up and down? This is why I opted for the Status Bar screen saver since it does move the bar around every few seconds. You can opt to completely disable any screen saver choice, but then the main menu remains on the screen with song information and progress at the top.

Looking at the song/artist/album/etc. lists in the user interface, DLO really needs to improve the scrolling and incorporate the same jump-to-letter feature found on the 5.5G iPods and in the recently released firmware update to Keyspan's TuneView. It is extremely difficult to get to a specific spot in a long list without a lot of trial and error with holding down the scroll to pick up speed and simply (and slowly) clicking through two or three at

a time. I found myself blowing clean past a desired artist numerous times—forward and backward—before managing to time the scrolling well enough to reach the name I wanted.

One last item about song playback is a pretty serious bug. I wanted to see what the HomeDock Deluxe would do after playing the last song of an album with nothing else to play. So I chose an album, navigated to the last track, started playing it, then scanned forward to the last 30 seconds.

When the song was over, the Status Bar mode that I was using changed to the blank box with my iPod's name, as seen in the image above. I hit an arrow button on the remote and saw what looked like the background of the navigation menu, but the menu items were gone. Only an up arrow icon and a label pointing left to the album's name remained, and I could move nowhere within the menus. The upper portion, normally occupied by the track data and playback progress bar, was also empty.

With the user interface in this state, I saw no other choice but to simply unplug the power and plug it back in. Several times, I repeated the steps to cause this phenomenon which didn't occur 100% of the time, but definitely far more often than not. It seems like albums or playlists with only a couple tracks are less likely to crash the firmware when the end is reached. I tried testing this by invoking the crash at the end of a longer album, and then just leaving it for about 10 minutes. I came back and the controls were still unresponsive. I gave up on it.

There's continued abnormality in the video playback. Either I was sent a defective unit, or there's a serious glitch in the HomeDock Deluxe's code that takes an iPod's video signal and converts it for a television. The best way to describe this is to simply show you:

Playing videos from the HomeDock Deluxe result in a picture filled with horizontal bands.

What you're looking at in the shot above is a photo taken of my television while playing a video from my iPod, through the HomeDock Deluxe, and connected to my entertainment system. For those who care, the shot is a music video with scenes of a live concert— a brightly lit stage in the distance. The bright bars on either side are just the excess area from a 4:3 program being shown on my widescreen television. The horizontal bands, however, are a major problem and completely unacceptable.

I'm 100% positive my iPod is not to blame because, as soon as I saw this, I immediately connected my iPod to the TuneView that I previously reviewed and played the exact same video. It was perfectly clear. I went back to the HomeDock Deluxe, making sure to firmly seat the bottom of the iPod into the dock connector. I played the same video again, and the bands were still present.

Curiously, as positive as I am that my iPod is not to blame, I'm nearly as confident the video output circuitry (meaning the RCA and S-Video jacks) are also not faulty. Scroll up and look at the menu/user interface screenshots. No banding. Clearly, the problem lies within the portion of circuitry that acquires video from the iPod and not with the portion that outputs video to a television.

For the record, I'm not completely discounting that the dock I received may simply be defective and that a replacement will solve the issue. Even still, my Okay rating is only bolstered by this glitch and does not hinge on it, especially considering the aforementioned firmware lock-up.

The last concern I'll describe is less of a bug and more of just a poor programming choice about the screen savers. If you plan to watch a lot of videos through the HomeDock Deluxe, assuming DLO can eliminate the banding in the videos (or that my dock was defective), you're simply going to have to turn the screen saver function off entirely. It will actually still come on while playing a video at the time set in the preferences (you can choose 10 seconds, 2 minutes, 5 minutes, or 10 minutes). Yes, you're reading me correctly. The television will switch from your video to the chosen screen saver at the chosen time! I did discover a workaround that involves scanning the video playback forward and/or backward before the screen saver activates. You can then scan back to the beginning and watch the video without the screen saver interruption. But this is utterly unacceptable. DLO, you *must* temporarily block screen saver activation when a video is played.

In the interest of completeness, I'm told that Mac OS X also doesn't disable its screen saver or dimming feature when videos are playing, but I believe that's only if media is playing in a portion of the display. Full-screen videos from DVDs, as I understand it, do disable screen savers, and I believe things like full-screen mode from QuickTime Player (Pro version) do as well, but someone could demonstrate otherwise. Personally, I'm indifferent about it because I don't run a screen saver and the time before my screen dims is about 15 minutes—longer than typical videos I watch online.

I'm taking for granted that most of what I've mentioned about the HomeDock Deluxe can be corrected with a firmware update. Hopefully, it won't take a complete recall, hardware correction, and re-ship to fix the problems. I'll keep an ear open for news of a major firmware update from DLO. If changes are sufficient to help the HomeDock Deluxe crawl out of the Okay rating, I will both post a comment to this review and write about my findings in the E-Mail section of a future issue.

But, until that happens—if it happens—I must recommend looking elsewhere, such as the TuneView, for an iPod dock solution that interacts with your home entertainment system.

Take Control of Mac OS X Backups 2.0

Author: Joe Kissell
Publisher: Take Control Books
Price: $10 (eBook); $23 (printed book)
Requirements: Any PDF reader (eBook)
Trial: 33-page sample

Ever since my days using Windows 95 and 98, when I learned that I should expect to re-format my hard drive and re-install Windows (and everything else) once or twice a year, I have understood the value of backing up crucial documents. Yet, as Steve Jobs reminded the world when he introduced Mac OS X 10.5 "Leopard's" Time Machine backup application, very few people regularly back up their data (4% was the figure Jobs quoted).

A book like Joe Kissell's *Take Control of Mac OS X Backups* is therefore a much-needed guide. Kissell capitalizes on Jobs's statistic and the need for great improvement in backup plans everywhere to produce a helpful and comprehensive manual that offers help and insight for beginners and experts alike.

Kissell walks the reader through all they need to know about backing up: choosing a backup strategy, considering the particular needs of each system, selecting hardware and software, and setting everything up. You will find detailed guides to software and hardware, evaluated from every perspective: features, costs, ease of use, reputation, and reliability—and good recommendations about each part of a complete backup system.

He also includes some helpful appendices, including a quick and simple guide to setting up a backup system on "your uncle's Mac"—a great idea, as most experienced users end up offering some technical advice and support to a family member here and there. I was impressed that, throughout the book, questions of security and encryption were discussed thoroughly yet concisely, as were questions about specialized backup circumstances, such as photos and video. There are even coupons in the back of the book/eBook representing $60 of savings (if you buy all three products offered).

Pros

There is a lot to commend this book/eBook. Some of the more significant credits include:

- The book is incredibly thorough—I don't think there is any scenario or circumstance, short of large corporate or industrial networks, that isn't covered in the book. Everyone should be able to find their setup and help for how to back it up.

- The information provided regarding available options is helpful and comprehensive. All options for both hardware and software are examined, with the pros and cons of each explained and specific recommendations made for different circumstances. There is no "one size fits all" setup, and Kissell has done a great job of providing a lot of options based on cost, need, and preference.

- It is also surprisingly up-to-date; one of the advantages of the eBook format is that updates and new information can be included easily, and the version 2.0 deliniation obviously indicates that this advantage has been pressed into use. The latest options across the board, including Leopard's Time Machine, the new AirPort Extreme Base Station, and Amazon's recent S3 offering are all discussed intelligently.

- Finally, both theory and practice are discussed. Kissell rightly acknowledges that many people are not only failing to back up but actually know little or nothing about how to do it. He accommodates this well, giving clear and straightforward explanations about different philosophies and approaches to backing up. He also gives specific instructions for setting up different sorts of backup systems, thereby moving beyond mere theory and philosophy.

(Sort of) Cons

These critiques are not really "cons" but simply aspects that, while perhaps unavoidable, kept me from giving the book an "Excellent" rating:

- The book is very technical. Even though Kissell is clearly aiming for a broad and inclusive audience, there are many parts that were tediously detailed and probably more information than most will ever need. For those who want or need this, it is very helpful—for the rest, it could go.

- The very current and comprehensive quality of the content may work against it. Because Kissell mentions so many products by name and version, it will surely go out of date very soon. Fortunately, Take Control Books offers updates to their eBooks, so this solves the problem somewhat—but how often updates will be available is an important question.

- Kissell clearly favors Retrospect Desktop as his preferred backup software solution, and this is evident throughout the book. While this is understandable—Retrospect Desktop is a fine product—it is so dominant as to make me feel as though any other choice is insufficient.

All minor complaints and critique aside, I recommend *Take Control of Mac OS X Backups 2.0* to anyone who has questions about how to safely, securely, and fully set up a backup system for their computer and/or network.

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Wings3D 0.98.34

Developer: Björn Gustavsson et al.
Price: free
Requirements: Mac OS X 10.2. Universal.

This article is a continuation of a series on 3D computer graphics and animation for beginners. Like the previously reviewed Daz/Studio, Wings3D is donationware and open source. You may be wondering why I'm choosing lower-end, easy-to-learn programs that are also easy on your wallet. Well, I figure that if you're seriously considering spending big money for a full-featured program (and they can run in the hundreds or thousands of dollars), then perhaps you should be browsing forums and Web sites specific to the community and software you're considering. This little series is about enlightening people who may be interested in trying out 3D graphics, but do not have the resources or are uneasy with the jargon used in those sources.

Wings3D, or just *Wings* by most users, is a subdivision modeling and UV mapping program which highlights fast workflow for creating polygon meshes of virtual objects. If you already use a high-end 3D program, chances are you've heard of Wings because it has been an introduction to 3D modeling for many computer graphics designers and artists since 2001. In fact, it has been said that in the hands of a competent user, Wings can generate the same detailed model in a fraction of the time that it would take in a professional program like Maya or 3DS Max. While I certainly don't consider myself among the ranks of professional 3D artists, Wings was my first modeling program and I still maintain the icon in my dock for when I need to whip up a simple item.

Thus, I'm convinced (as are many others judging by the activity on the Wings forums) that this program will appeal to those of you looking to get a start in 3D modeling, and will continue to be of use once you've found its limits and perhaps decided to move on. Even if you're not interested in 3D graphics but want to keep your computer savvy kids busy and out of online trouble, install this simple program for them to explore. It is that easy to use. Also have them look at this inspirational gallery of images made with Wings, and you won't want to miss this time-lapse series on the construction of a ghoul's head.

Where to Go

The developers have a long history of providing Wings free to the Mac community from their Web site. Versions of the program are released regularly (four in 2006 alone!) and are categorized either as *Developmental* or *Stable*, with 0.98.36 being the latest release. It is often a good strategy to stay back from the *bleeding edge* when it comes to any new

release, and Wings 0.98.36 is no exception, as it has been reported to consistently crash on MacBooks and at least one Intel iMac, and it crashes on my Mac Pro.

However, a rather large inventory of previous versions is maintained for download, with compatibility ranging from Mac OS X 10.2 right up to 10.4. A recompiled Universal Binary version of an earlier release, 0.98.34, can be downloaded from the MacWeb3D site, and runs well on my Mac Pro. That said, 0.98.34 has a buggy UV mapping unfolding algorithm, which has been corrected in subsequent releases, and it will not be compatible with any of the UV Mapping tutorials you review. I imagine this situation will be resolved in the next developmental release.

As already mentioned, there is a large and active online community of Wings users, with several Web sites and forums available to browse for tutorials and get solutions to your problems. While you may be tempted to lurk around at first, it is important to familiarize yourself with this friendly community as the developers do not offer support via e-mail. Just a few of the sites include the Wings3D official development forum, the Wings forum at the CG Society, and also at Renderosity to name only a few. You may have to register at some of the community sites.

The Official tutorial center has numerous tutorials, and PuzzledPaul has one of the best third-party sites going. Most of the subdivision modeling strategies and advice available at the Digital Sculpting Forum and in this Digital Sculpture Techniques article are not software specific, and can be implemented with any program.

The Wings Interface

Like most 3D modeling programs, Wings provides the user with a variety of primitive forms to start their creations, and most of these are seen in the image below. Anything can be created from these basic virtual building blocks; all you have to do is open the program, right-click the empty workspace area to get the primitives menu, and then make your selection.
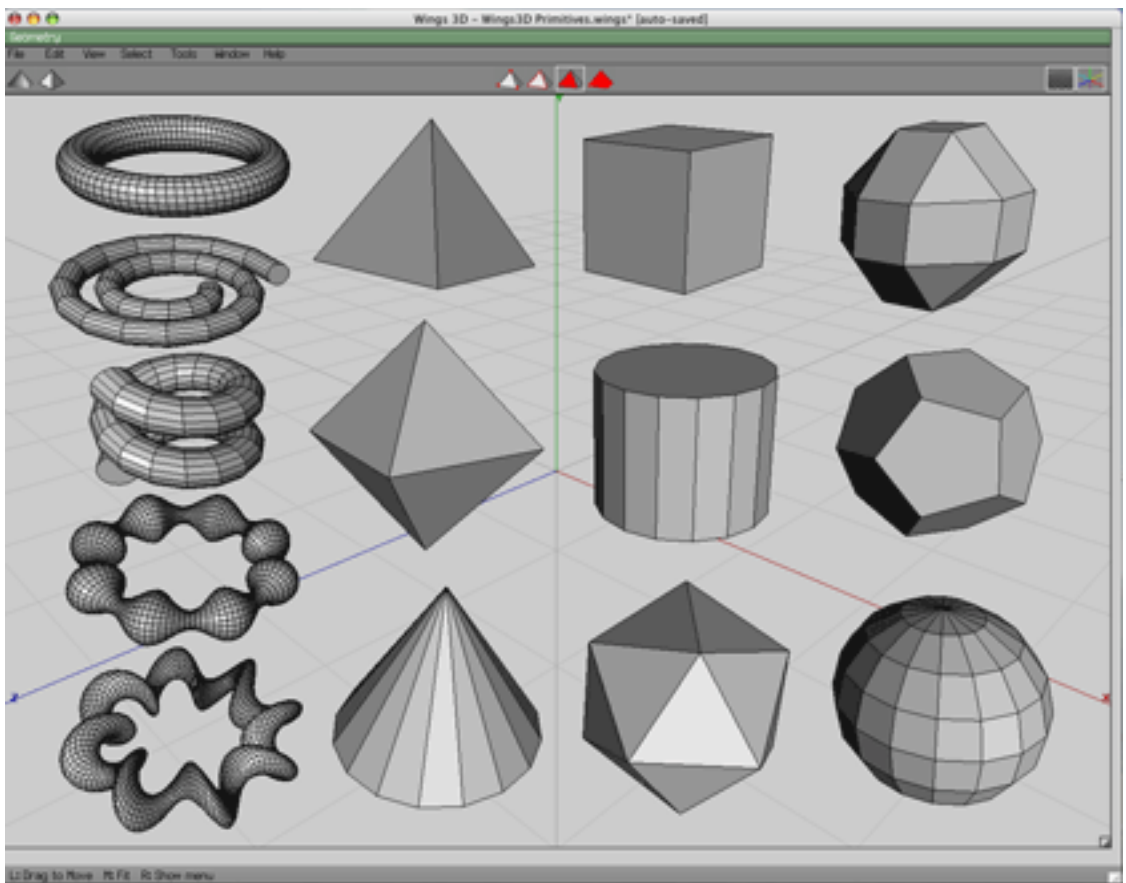
The available primitive forms to start modeling your creations in Wings3D.

This is probably a good time to discuss the mouse you will use. While Wings supports all varieties of mouse/button configurations (go to Edit ▷ Preferences), do yourself a favor, avoid the headaches, and get a three-button mouse since the manual and all the tutorials I've seen will assume you have one. As seen in the composite screen shot below, contextual menus drive the Wings user interface most of the time. One of the most helpful pieces of advice for the new user is to always keep an eye on the information line at the bottom of the screen, since it will tell you what the mouse buttons will do at any given moment.

In general, the left mouse button is used for click-selecting workspace elements, such as the object body, a face on the object, an edge between two faces, or a vertex (point) where edges meet. Once selected, elements turn a different color (red by default) and can be deselected by clicking on them again, or by pressing the Spacebar to clear all selections. The right mouse button is used to access contextual menus. The center mouse button/wheel is used to activate and quickly control the camera position anywhere around the object.
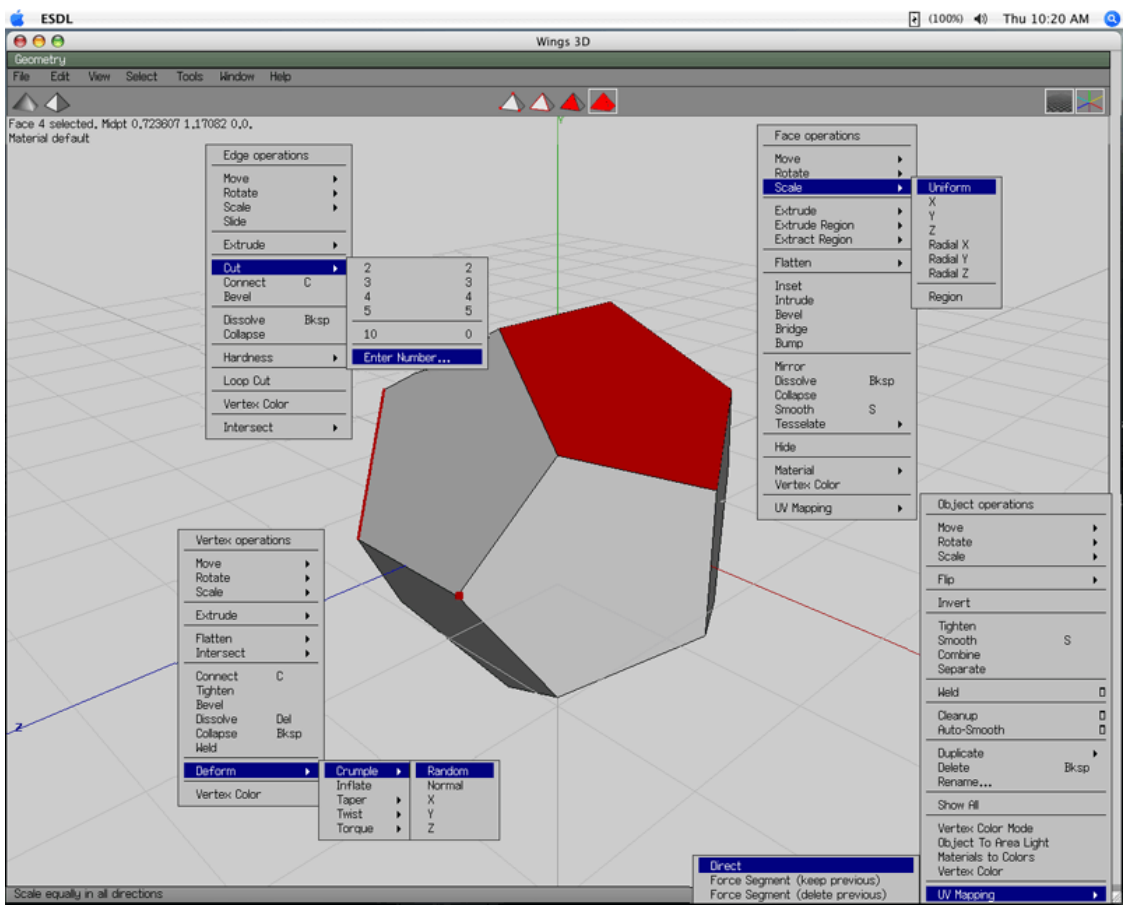
A composite screen shot of the contextual menus accessed through mouse click selection.

Don't worry: your Wings workspace can *never* look like this screen shot with all of these pop-up menus because you can only be in one selection mode at a time. In order to cut down on the number of images for this article, yet display the flexibility of choices and tools that can be made with only two mouse clicks, I therefore compiled the four contextual pop-up menus in one figure (clockwise from bottom right: object, vertex, edge, face). You can only be in one selection mode at a time, yet can make as many selections within that element type as you want. The selection mode is determined by clicking on one of the four pyramids that you see just above the workspace center.

Once you've made an alteration to the object, such as in scale or position of the selection, you can either left-click on the empty workspace area to accept it, or right-click to undo. Once you get the hang of its simplicity, you just might find it as elegant as I do; however Wings's workflow doesn't appeal to everyone's tastes.

The two pyramids you see at the top left of the workspace toggle between different visual modes: smooth shaded (sort of a render preview), and an orthogonal view that lacks perspective when you need to be accurate with the various dimensions of the object. The two icons at the top right toggle the workspace grid "floor" and the X, Y, Z axes on and off.

The menu bar at the top is composed of the usual choices: File, Edit, View, Select, Tools, Window, and of course Help. Many of the choices in these menus also appear in the contextual menus. A full and concise description of the rest of the Wings environment is located at this Wiki site.

Wings3D and UV Mapping

UV mapping of a 3D mesh allows you to cut your 3D model into connected 2D slices, called charts, which are laid out flat to facilitate the application of color and texture with any paint program to generate a texture map. Applying good texture maps can make or break the appearance of any rendered model. The UV Mapping/Segmentation mode of Wings is relatively powerful, and can automatically generate the cuts and chart layout for the UV map. Once again, the Wings tutorial center has good links to auto UV mapping tutorials, but you'll have to dig around to find them.

While Wings can automatically generate a UV map, it also has the capability for you to do it by hand to avoid seams on certain parts of the model by hiding them in less conspicuous places. YCarry has some great introductory tutorials on both modeling and UV mapping common but challenging objects in Wings. However, many people decide to use specialty UV mapping software for their efficiency and flexibility to make and move charts. UV Mapper is a popular choice, which has both a shareware *Classic* version as well as a *Pro* version in Universal Binary.
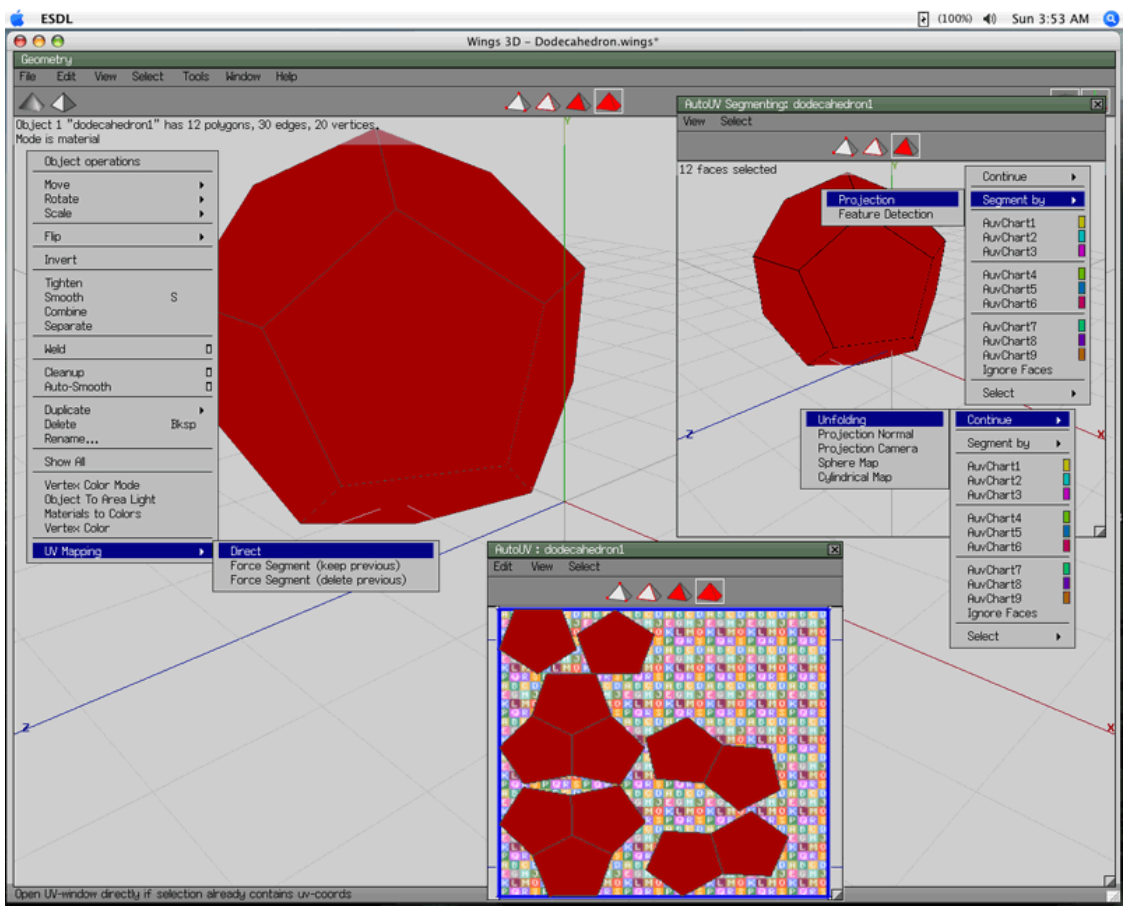
A compilation of steps and menus involved in the automatic UV mapping of an object in Wings.

This simple screen shot of the automatic UV mapping mode (AUV) is a compilation of three separate steps and their menus. In the upper left side of the workspace is the first step. The object to map is a simple dodecahedron, which is body selected, and the direct UV mapping mode is entered from the contextual menu. A separate UV mapping window will open (here resized and pushed to the upper right side) where you must again select the object(s) or face(s) to map by clicking surfaces or by dragging a bounding box around them, thus highlighting the selection in red.

Once the selection is made, chose the method to "Segment by" (direct, or by feature detection for more complex models), and then go to "Continue" to chose your method of projection depending on the characteristics of your model. A new window will open containing your UV map (resized at the bottom center in the screen shot), which will be saved as a separate but linked mtl file. If you export the model into another format—and you likely will need to—make sure they "travel" together in a folder.

Experiment with the different mapping choices to see how they slice and dice your model. With a simple object, such as the dodecahedron, there really isn't any difference in the UV map produced and this example was only meant to illustrate the menus available. Your

UV mapping choices and overall workflow will vary from model to model. More complex objects may require separate maps for the different materials, or cuts to avoid 2D mesh and subsequent texture distortion when rendered. Any image file can subsequently be used with the map.
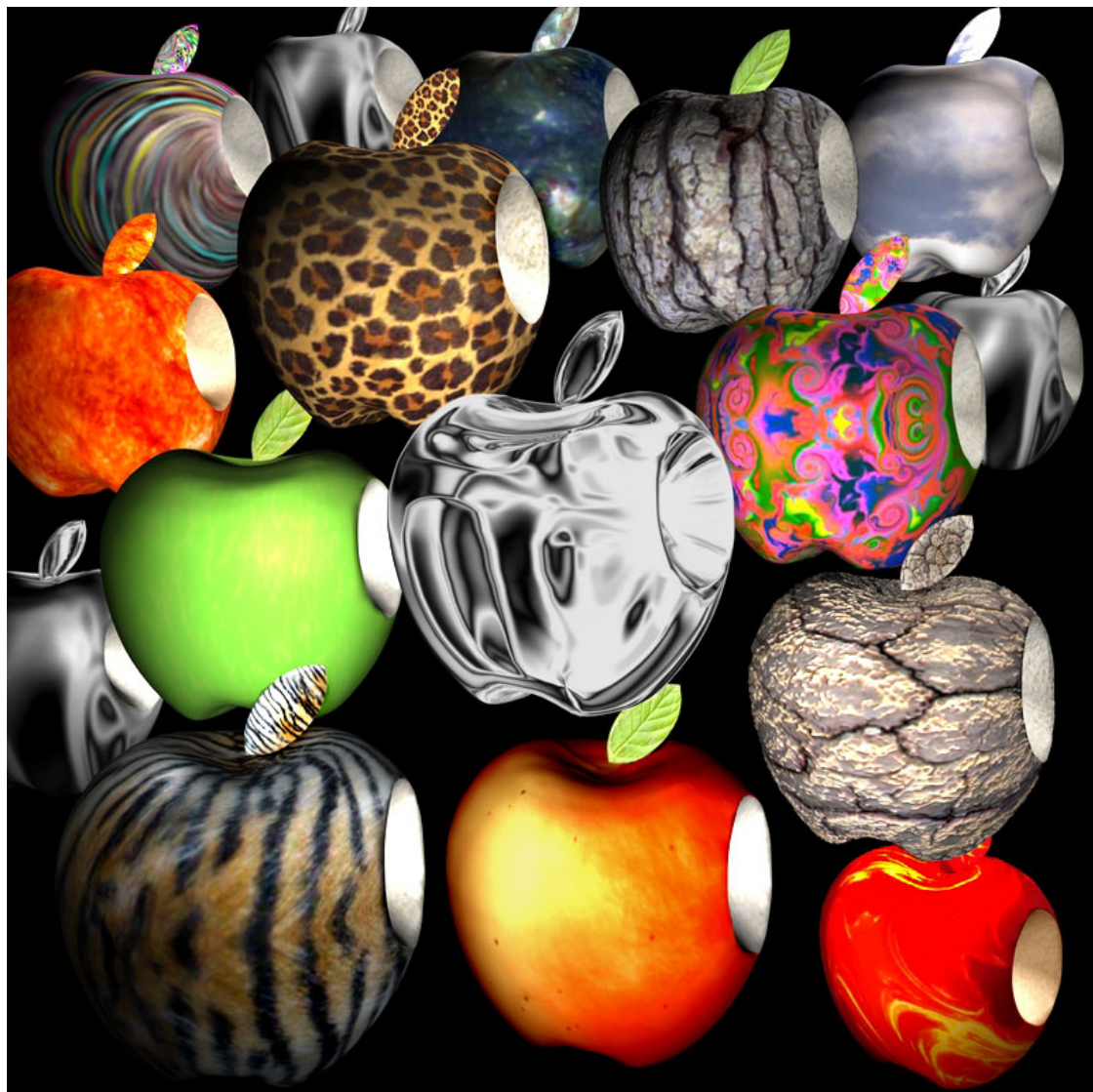
Any digital image can be used as a texture map; here is a bunch of apples modeled and UV mapped in Wings3D, rendered in DAZ/Studio.

Drawbacks to Wings

Once you've completed modeling and UV mapping, it's time to render your creation to an image file for distribution. Here you'll run into a major but not insurmountable drawback to the program: *Wings does not have any rendering capabilities.* You must export your model from Wings to another rendering program like the shareware Daz/Studio, Art of Illusion,

or POV-Ray. Fortunately a variety of popular export/import formats are available in Wings, such as 3ds, obj, and fbx, and each of these rendering programs has a Mac version available for free download. Wings supposedly has issues converting texture references between formats, but I have used obj format with Daz/Studio in the past and have had no problems.

Having to use multiple programs is not unusual in the industry. Many professionals maintain an entire arsenal of 3D modeling, animation, rendering, and other effects plugins and software, using each of them at different stages of production when their strengths are required. Some plug-ins for Wings have been created and are continuously improving or being incorporated into the core program, but like most things in this majority PC world, availability for the Mac can be an issue.

Wings Alternatives

The main shareware competitors to Wings are Art of Illusion and Blender. While both have their pros and cons, they can see a project through from initial conception, to UV mapping and final render, and even animation. Blender has been reviewed earlier in ATPM and has a reputation for being hard to learn, though the latest versions have more inclusive GUI menus. I don't know much about Art of Illusion, but hope to check it out soon and report back. The Society of Digital Artists (or CGSociety) has put together a relatively comprehensive list of the various 3D programs comparing what they can and cannot do, though it appears to be a work in progress as some entries are incomplete. Check out this list and the features available, but don't choke when you see some of the prices of the pro packages!

Conclusion

Out of necessity I have left out descriptions of the complex 3D manipulations that are available in Wings, such as edge loop, mirror, tweak, and the advanced menus, simply because there are so many of them and there is only so much space for this article. You are better off downloading the Wings PDF manual from the home page, as well as some of PuzzledPaul's and YCarry's excellent tutorials, in order to familiarize yourself with the actions, tools, and capabilities.

One thing to keep in mind is that there can be several ways to achieve the desired result in 3D modeling. For instance, a very simple example would involve making a rectangle; one could select one face on a cube and either move its position along the perpendicular axis, or instead use the extrude command on that face, or even select all four edges of the face and similarly shift their position along the axis. Some paths will involve fewer steps but the end result is the same. Working with Wings or any other 3D modeling program is very much like that, and until you get some modeling experience prepare to make mistakes and be less than efficient.

I was tempted to give Wings a "Very Nice" review based on its easy-to-learn merits, open source availability with good documentation, and a healthy online community of users who support newcomers. Since these are the types of people who are really attracted to Wings,

it hits the target. That said, these users are only a sample of who might be willing to commit to learning a 3D program, such as students or soon-to-be students of computer graphics, and for those people I would say this software deserves a "Good" rating. This is based on the fact that you are faced with learning the ins-and-outs and potential interface issues between a number of smaller programs all at once, just to see a final rendered image.

Like any other program, you have to know what you want to do with it now, and ultimately where you hope to go, in order to determine whether the time investment to learn it is worth the effort. Wings certainly has one aspect in its favor though, since it is free, budget doesn't factor into the equation! Download Wings in an appropriate version for your system, and just give it a try—you'll soon be hooked.

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