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

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Welcome

by Robert Paul Leitao, rleitao@atpm.com

Welcome to the March issue of *About This Particular Macintosh!* We're here again to celebrate the personal computing experience in the uniquely Macintosh kind of way. Please join us this month, and every month, as we explore the world of Macintosh computing and bring you the latest news and very interesting views in a special monthly format.

Up the Price, Split the Stock!

At the end of February, Apple Computer began trading post-split. That means the trading price of the shares has been halved as the number of shares outstanding has doubled. Finishing February at \$44.86 per share, Apple's share price has maintained its two years of impressive gains.

Déjà vu All Over Again!

We like quoting Yogi Berra. The baseball legend has a way of reshaping the American lexicon as much as he epitomized competitive play on the field. Taking a look back at the [Welcome for last March](#), we mentioned what were then the new iPod mini and a new Pepsi song giveaway campaign.

This March we mention new iPod minis and iPod minis at a lower price. Obviously responding to seemingly endless complaints about product prices, Apple has made a concerted effort to reduce product prices in order to gain a more competitive edge in the marketplace. The Mac mini and iPod shuffle are two other examples of Apple's more competitive approach to product prices. iPod minis now start at \$199 and new 6-GB iPod minis debut at the mini's original price of \$249.

Pepsi has revamped its original iTunes song give-away campaign for 2005. Learning from last year's mistakes, the 2005 free-song blitz should provide for ample supplies of promotional soda bottles and a better-organized advertising effort.

The Cat Is Back?

Made infamous for providing an easy way for millions of people to pirate music, the Napster music service has been reinvented as a legal way for music fans to rent songs. In an effort to compete with Apple's market-dominating digital music solution, the folks at Napster released what many consider to be the worst Super Bowl advertisement in recent history. Time will tell whether or not the cat is back or has reached the end of its proverbial nine lives.

The PowerBook G4 Once More

Apple has updated its PowerBook series of portable computers by offering faster processors and a 128 MB video card at the top of the line. While many Mac fans had hoped for a G5 PowerBook by now, the new portables provide an incremental increase in performance while Apple works through the engineering issues involved in placing the G5 chip in Apple's thin PowerBook form factor.

Time for Tiger?

Apple's next upgrade to OS X, also known as Tiger, will be released soon. The latest best-in-breed operating system will host a number of new features and performance enhancements. The editors of ATPM are following this Tiger's path as winter slowly turns to spring.

Our March Issue

The editors of ATPM would like to extend a special welcome to our many new readers. We would also like to thank the many thousands of readers who have been with us throughout the years. Each issue of ATPM is designed to offer useful and informative content that all Mac users will find easy to read and enjoy.

Our March issue includes:

The Candy Apple: When Your Life Is In Jeopardy...

Ellyn discusses life strategies than can be used any time, anywhere, when you may find yourself in—or on—*Jeopardy!*

Bloggable: Let Them Speak With Their Pocketbooks

Napster's doozy of a commercial during the Super Bowl is just a sign of how they're calling out Apple and the iTunes Music Store, and it has the Web abuzz. Wes Meltzer's all over it in this month's *Bloggable*, along with the return of the Mac community's prodigal son and more on the iPod shuffle and Mac mini.

Pod People

Lee Bennett steps up to the plate with the second installment of our new *Pod People* column.

Segments: Switched Over and Turned On

What makes somebody wake up on a day, different from no other, and switch operating system allegiances? It is all about timing, life-changing events, and that final straw.

About This Particular Outliner: Outlining Task Managers, Part 3

This month, Ted Goranson's *ATPO* finishes a look at outlining task managers.

How To: Faster Computing: Mac OS X Hints and Tips

Impress your friends and coworkers with these hints and tips to keep you speeding through Mac OS X!

Cartoon: Cortland

Cortland's Mudrix experience comes to a close, and we embark upon a new journey to learn the truth behind forums.

Desktop Pictures: Clouds

Lee Bennett offers photos of an amazing-looking thunderhead looming in the skies.

Frisky Freeware

Frisky the Freeware Guinea Pig checks out Conversation.

Review: Apeiron X 1.0.1

Apeiron X doesn't have the sophisticated 3D graphics and online competition many modern gamers demand, but it offers simple and satisfying gameplay that can rapidly become addictive.

Review: Cobra.XM Laptop Case

Booq knows the market very well, and their Cobra.XM may indeed be "the ultimate professional laptop case."

Review: PolyRingtone Converter 1.0.1

A good idea ruined by a horrible interface and poor features.

Review: LaunchBar 4.0.1

Michael Tsai reviews the new version of LaunchBar, a productivity utility that makes it easy to launch applications, access files, and find information on your Mac and on the Internet.

Review: WireTap Pro 1.0.1

Eric Blair takes WireTap Pro for a spin to find out if getting sound into a Mac can ever be as easy as getting sound out of a Mac.



E-Mail

[ATPO Task Management](#)

This series at AT^PM on task management just rocks.

It truly has the kind of insight and context (as well as hands-on real-world details) that most Mac product reviews are missing (except at *Ars Technica*)!

Ted says he's not getting enough feedback—I'm surprised that this series isn't popping up on lots of blogs!

Tell your friends, folks.

—Zahadum

[Renaming Picture Files](#)

After reading the e-mail section in the February issue of AT^PM, I would like to suggest Al MacDiarmid to try [ExifRenamer](#). The main purpose of this donationware is to “rename digital photos according to their embedded dates.” But you can also create custom naming styles with prefixes and suffixes. It works via drag-and-drop and also as a service.

I would also advise your reader to use [Renamer4Mac](#), a freeware which lets you search/replace within the name of any file, insert characters or take some out from anywhere in the name, add numbers, capitalize names, etc.

Both of these tools are worth trying and with them your reader should be able to quickly and painlessly rename his pictures.

Keep up the good work.

—Stéphane Lelaure

What to Do With Older Macs

In my school district, teachers scavenge old Macs. They use them to run old reliable programs like Fraction Munchers and Micro Type, and games for free time. We have a children's museum in town and a nature center where they also have several old Macs for student use. Seems that I saw some being used at the Exploratorium in San Francisco, too.

—*John Hinds*

PhotoReviewer Review

I wanted to like PhotoReviewer, but I found problems after vetoing images: when I would then use iPhoto to import the remaining/approved images into my library of photos, iPhoto would encounter temp files left behind by PhotoReviewer after moving/deleting vetoed images and give me errors. That's clumsy programming for a utility that should ideally play very nice with iPhoto.

More subjectively speaking, I found that PhotoReviewer, while basic, is also pretty ugly. The buttons on the button bar are an eyesore. All in all, the program is insufficiently polished to warrant my \$10. Too bad, because when I first read about in *Macworld*, I had my ten-dollar bill ready to hand over.

—*Khoi Vinh*

Customizing the Mac OS X User Interface

Thanks for this icon stuff. One of my concerns moving to OS X is that I will lose all the customized icons that I have had so much fun with. I haven't even upgraded to OS 9, so I have had about 10 years of icons!

—*Catherine Wiles*

Task Management and Outlining

Since this article is about organizing tasks, I think it is also important to think about how easy it is to access the data in the outline "on the road" when you are far from an Internet connection. This consideration becomes vital the moment you work in two places or start mixing "life" and "work" to-do's (as *GTD* encourages).

For easy “on the road” access, I really want to use a PDA/mobile phone—items I am far more likely to carry with me than a laptop. Life Balance really shines in this area, with full two-way synchronization with Palm datebooks and to-do lists, and a quick, clean, and simple user interface. I am a keen Tinderbox user, and use it for planning, but using it for task management and scheduling would weld me to my laptop—something I want to get away from.

—Paul Kent

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When Your Life Is In Jeopardy...

I have pondered over this and struggled with it, and I just cannot come up with a Mac or computing angle. This e-zine is about the personal computing experience, and all I have is a personal experience to relate. It has no computing angle. But it is a good story, I hope.

A week or so after this issue goes to press, I will be taping an episode of the TV quiz show *Jeopardy!* Probably. Maybe more than one. It depends on how it goes. I'll include a note in a few months when we get closer to the airdate. In the meantime, I thought maybe a few of the strategies I've used to prepare for this would be helpful for you, in some part of your life.

- You get to decide who you want to be. You are not required to live up to the expectations of everyone around you. You can pick and choose which ones fit. You can set your own.
- Learning is a daily endeavor. If we just soak up a little bit each day, some of it will stick. It will make us more well rounded and better able to see things from other angles.
- Fear of failure is seldom a good enough reason not to try. If it is skydiving, I'll give you that. If it is meeting someone new or trying a new sport, not good enough.
- Fear of success is more insidious than fear of failure. If you try something and do it well, people will think you are always going to do it well. Drat them. Why'd they have to set you up so high, anyway? It ends up being a fear of failure anyway, so see the previous rule about only skydiving and such.
- Goodwill toward your fellow human beings makes you feel better. I'd like to say your goodness toward others will come back to you, but then you might be doing it for the wrong reason. But it does. A lot.

- Stuff is only important if we attach meaning to it. Give yourself permission to relax and not make everything so crushingly important.
- Pitchers and catchers are reporting. Every baseball team has the same record. Fans of all the teams have hope. It is good to give ourselves a fresh start now and then.
- Once a year, go somewhere.
- Every day, a little at a time, you can become the person you want to be. If you are already that person, congratulations! Well done. If you are still a work in progress, so are most of us. Keep plugging away, and eventually you will get what you deserve.

For me, getting on *Jeopardy!* is the result of some of these ideas. I may not have articulated them to myself all along, or to others, but they have been there. I have one chance in three of winning a game. I like those odds. If I don't win a game, I know I will learn something I can tell one of my other game-show friends that will help them if they get on. That's how it works. We help each other with lists of things to study, suggestions about what to wear, and encouragement. Then one day all the goodwill you've shown to others comes back and bites you on the rear. In a good way.

Something to look forward to, maybe.

Onward.

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Let Them Speak With Their Pocketbooks

It's amazing how much difference a commercial can make during the Super Bowl—for instance, Ridley Scott's brilliant ["1984" Apple ad](#), or the truly awe-inspiring ["Office Linebacker" spot](#) (near the bottom of the page) in 2003. Sometimes.

Then, there's this year's gigantic, Apple-related flop: the [Napster ad](#).

If somehow you missed the ad—or the big game—let me put it to you this way: you didn't miss very much at all. This extra-exciting waste of \$2.4 million was a masked figure holding up a sign (falsely) demonstrating that it cost \$10,000 to fill an iPod, and only \$14.95 per month to use Napster To Go. Never mind that your average Super Bowl viewer, much less the average football fan, doesn't want to read anything except the scoreboard. *USA Today* ranked the ad 54th out of 54 ads, i.e., [dead last](#). Behind even an ad for *contact lenses*.

I had a teacher once, when I was an impressionable freshman in high school, who said, "You know, everything is related to everything else. Nothing stands in isolation." Napster's lame, expensive dig at Apple is just another demonstration of the futility of trying to sell music online in a market where [more than three quarters of disk-based MP3 players are iPods](#). Apple is sitting pretty on top of the pile of Internet brands, having outdone even Google for [most global impact](#), and it doesn't look like Napster is taking that away any time soon.

Now the real question is, I suppose, "Will people use Napster, and by extension Napster To Go, instead of the iTunes Music Store? Is it more cost-effective?"

We've [had this debate before](#), in this very same space, and I still disagree. Gary Robinson is back, [with more math this time](#), and he sticks with Napster's argument: it costs \$10,000, give or take a few pennies, to fill up an iPod, and you would need to subscribe to Napster for 55 years to spend that much money on music, in the meantime listening to far more

than 10,000 songs. Of course, he thinks Apple is using iTunes to keep customers from switching away from their brand, which seems a tad far-fetched for a product with as commanding a mind share as the iPod, but the numbers are worth considering.

John Gruber, naturally, [disagrees](#). He thinks that even *bothering* to compare a subscription model service without any bundled hardware to a piece of hardware with an optional music store shows how desperate Napster, and Real before them, are for product recognition. He adds, and here I concur whole-heartedly, that he thinks most iPod owners spend much less than \$100 per year at iTunes, which puts them under the \$180 mark for a year of Napster service as well. I don't often acquire new music, because I'm without extensive disposable income, but when I do, I have been known to buy CDs. With Napster, it would be highly cost-ineffective to acquire CDs, except in the event that I rejected the possibility of giving up some music.

At *The Register*, Ashlee Vance agrees that someone at Napster is [sipping the crazy Kool-Aid](#). She writes:

[Y]ou still don't own the music. You rent it. Stop paying the Napster tax man, and all your music disappears... This forces you to make a choice between quantity and permanence. Pay Napster every month and gain access to an almost limitless supply of music or buy select CDs, as you have in the past, and own them for years.

Vance does a little math, too, and suggests that a three-year total cost of ownership for a Napster-compatible device is much higher. Here's how it goes:

Let's take a look at consumer A. This consumer goes to Amazon.com and does a search for Creative—one of the Napster supported music device makers—and picks up a 20GB player for \$249.99. Let's assume he keeps the device for three years, paying Napster all the time. That's \$538 for the Napster service, bringing the three-year total to \$788.19.

Consumer B types iPod into the Amazon.com search engine and finds a 20GB device for \$299. Apple doesn't offer a subscription service, so this customer has to buy songs at the 99 cent rate or at \$9.99 per album. Subtracting the price of the iPod from the \$788, consumer B would have \$489 left over for music. That's roughly worth 489 songs or 49 albums.

[...]

Customers do not, as Napster suggests, pay \$10,000 to fill their iPods with 10,000 songs just because the capacity is there. They take their existing music, CDs and MP3s, and put that onto the device first, then later add iTunes songs as they go along. A Napster customer would have a similar mix of old music and new downloads.

Even *if* it turns out consumers prefer the subscription model, Charles Arthur at *NetImperative* thinks Steve Jobs will just [co-opt it](#)... like he just did with the flash MP3 player market. This sounds so solid, I will not even make my customary offer to eat crow if I'm wrong about subscription services.

I don't think I am, though. And the measure of desperation I smell from Napster these days just confirms that.

In Other News From the Mac blogosphere

- We're still getting news in about the iPod shuffle, it seems. Julio Ojeda-Zapata, one of my favorite tech columnists, [doesn't like](#) the iPod shuffle. Pity, that. *iPodLounge*, on the other hand, likes the shuffle—they call it a [“gateway drug for iPod users”](#). How fun! In the meantime Robert Scoble has to get in his obligatory dig at Apple, who is [giving every employee a shuffle](#), because *clearly* that's an anti-competitive practice.
- Everybody loves the Mac mini! That's a nice contrast to the iPod shuffle. [David Pogue likes it](#), and somebody at *AppleTalk Australia* likes it so much he modded it for more hard drive space [to make it into a server](#). Not to mention the guy who figured out how to mount his mini to [the back of a plasma TV](#). Very impressive, guys. Now, if only you could remember to send me my complimentary model...
- In case you like Apple accolades, James Duncan Davidson [really likes Pages](#), and likens it to a consumer-level InDesign, not a direct Word competitor. But it still has the traditional Apple flair, he notes.

- He'll have to change his domain name to MacAndBackAndBack.org now! Evan DiBiase of *MacAndBack* is, well, switching back. He remarked, early in February, about minor peeves [marring his Windows experience](#), and then, well, something just gave up in his Dell laptop, and [it was all over](#) for Evan and Windows. He's now sold most of his PC stuff, to raise money for a new PowerBook. (As of the time of this writing, Evan's auctions were still pending. But this will run after they close.) Welcome back, Evan!
- Do PC manufacturers want OS X bundled on their desktops? Steve Jobs intimated that, [in an interview](#) with *Fortune*, when he also fingers Adobe for blowing their grip on the video editing market. Well, well. Really.

And that's about it for this month's whirl through the blogosphere's news. Come back next month, with Napster still floundering and the very real possibility of Tiger leaks, and upcoming product chatter. And stay tuned, folks!

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Pod People

by Lee Bennett, lbennett@atpm.com

Delayed Reaction

Contrary to friends' assumptions, I was not an early adopter. Carrying a small hard drive on my belt wasn't a thrilling idea. Several hard drives have previously failed on me, each permanently mounted in desktop computers and laptops. (Indeed, one of the drives in my home server bit the dust only days before I started this article!) I certainly didn't wish to extend that track record to include something the size of a deck of cards.

Besides my hard drive failure phobia, there was the capacity to think about. "A thousand songs in your pocket" sounded impressive yet, assuming 10 songs per album, that's only 100 albums. I own hundreds of CDs. Prior to owning an iPod, I used to pass many of them through my changer on a regular basis. I also have many albums with 12, 15, 20, or more songs on them—all of which chip away at that 100 albums figure.

Thus, when the third-generation iPods were released in 2003—by which time I'd not heard of any outcries about complete iPod hard drive failures—and a 30-gigabyte model boasted 7,500 songs in my pocket, I decided it was finally time for me to join the ranks of iPod lovers.

And love it, I do.

Quantity or Quality?

The 7,500 songs moniker seemed to be adequate. I've just recently passed the 5,000-track mark and have ripped more than two-thirds of my CD collection.

What's scary, however, is how much music I've purchased from the iTunes Music Store. I'm reluctant to admit an exact dollar amount or even exactly how many tracks. Put it this way: if I include several full-album purchases (which are generally a better bargain than a buck a song), several free songs from the original iTunes/Pepsi promotion, and many (not all) of the weekly freebies, my iTMS purchases are just shy of five gigabytes and could play continuously for about 3.5 days! But some of my purchases kind of skew that tidbit—such as an album that only has three tracks but is still more than an hour long.

Pod Praxis

Admittedly, my iPod doesn't follow me everywhere I go. As I said, my CDs used to zip through my changer at home on a regular basis. My iPod now carries the burden of piping tunes through my home stereo.

Since I don't have the need to sync my iPod frequently, I've instead chosen to put my dock near my entertainment system, connected via the line-out jack. I simply set the iPod in the dock and fire it up whenever I want to listen to my music. I once tried running a long cable from my computer to the receiver to just play the music directly from iTunes, but doing this creates an audible hum and I haven't yet solved the problem.

Apple's [AirPort Express](#) definitely interests me, but \$130 for something that doesn't have a remote or a display is a little too rich for my blood. Besides, I already have two perfectly good wireless routers—one for home, one for travel.

What I'd really love to have is a [Slim Devices Squeezebox](#) or a [Roku SoundBridge](#). At a \$200 to \$500 range, they're not cheap, either, but just look at those beautiful things! So why don't I pony up the money? Because they don't work with the 4.9 gigabytes worth of protected AAC files I've purchased from the iTunes Music Store.

So, when my iPod is not sitting in its home on top of my entertainment center, you'll usually find it either feeding tunes to a pair of cheap speakers at work, resting in an [Arkon](#) gooseneck mount in my car attached to the power port and my head unit's line-in jack by way of a [Belkin](#) Auto Kit, or laying atop a bedside table playing music that helps me fall asleep.



An Arkon gooseneck is attached to a bolt under my passenger seat. A cell phone/iPod mount sits atop the gooseneck. Belkin's Auto Kit plugs directly into the iPod's dock connector, draws power from the cigarette lighter, and sends line level audio to my head unit's auxiliary input.

Pod Portable

Even before owning an iPod, I never was much for just strolling around town with a pair of earphones and a portable tape or CD player. I guess I prefer to hear the sounds in the world around me. When the iPod does come with me on an extended trip, it usually lives inside of a [Marware SportSuit Convertible](#). For shorter trips, it's content to ride in the original case.



The Marware SportSuit Convertible offers my iPod a well-padded home, complete with an earbud-carrying pocket in the detachable lid and access to the dock connector without having to remove the iPod from the case.

As for the original Apple earbuds, I only use them occasionally. Here comes the part where I defend against [Chris' noodle-lashing last month!](#) (Smirk)

Yes, I certainly do use a pair of [Bose QuietComfort 2 headphones](#). All it took was a [half-hour session in Apple's booth](#) at the 2003 National Association of Broadcasters Convention to get me hooked. They're not cheap, but they work. I'm perpetually annoyed by small drone noises. Hiding behind a pair of these cans is about as close to bliss as I'll

ever get. My apartment's rather loud A/C unit is completely masked out and, while it doesn't totally drown out the roar of a commercial airliner, it doesn't take very long for me to mentally tune out what remains of jet engine noise.

Those who rant that Bose's "sound" isn't what the real sound should be won't get an argument from me. You may be right, but I don't care. I'm completely happy with the sound. I also much prefer headphones that encompass my ears rather than rest on or in them.

Musical Chairs

There's no way to tersely describe what type of music lives in my collection, just as there's no single genre which, alone, commands my uninterrupted attention. While I could certainly name some styles I loathe, it's a bit more challenging to name all the styles I like. It may be Top 40 or contemporary Christian; smooth jazz or 80s hits (which I totally missed out on when I was growing up); new wave or acoustic guitar, the latter probably being about as close to earning the "my favorite" label than any other. Artists such as [Peter White](#), [Craig Chaquico](#), [Acoustic Alchemy](#), [Pat Metheny](#), [Michael Hedges](#), and [Kaki King](#) are among those I've been listening to a lot.

Pod Extras

Early on, I intended to keep my OS X Address Book synced to my iPod. It didn't take terribly long for me to abandon that practice for two reasons. First, I sync my contacts to my phone. It doesn't pick up physical addresses, but most of my address book only contains telephone numbers and e-mail addresses anyway—all of which are accessible on my phone. Second, after I moved my iTunes library off my laptop (to free up space) and over to my home server, I simply had little interest in trying to sync two different computers with my iPod—one for iTunes and the other for Address Book.

I'm quite proud that I have officially hacked my iPod. While Apple improved the battery life icon to be more descriptive than three bars, I prefer numerical indicators. I found a [tip on iPod Hacks](#) that reveals how to change the battery status indicator to numeric view.

Another hack that I considered—though only for a few seconds—came from a segment on [The Screen Savers](#) that revealed how to give the back of your iPod a brushed steel look. The process also diminished the appearance of smudges and scratches. It's a cool effect, but I think I'll leave the shiny mirrored surface as it is—scratches and all.

I'll close with a pointer to a recent [IEEE Spectrum Online article](#) that I wish I were witty enough to have brought to you myself. Please drop a note or post a comment if you suffer from technolust, are afraid of blobjects, have ever been podjacked, are part of a podience, or simply have a case of iPod envy!

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Switched Over and Turned On

The first computer I ever laid my hands on was a Digital PDP-11, and that was back in the mid-70s. It was not until mid-2004, almost 30 years later, that I became the proud owner of an Apple PowerBook. Even then it still took more than a few months to get acclimated to the operating system and customize an environment in which I could be productive.

A good portion of my life has been spent managing enterprises running Microsoft Windows and Unix networks, and while the latter never ceases to amaze the former has proven to be an endless parade of mind-numbing and costly annoyances. The amount of time spent fighting worms and viruses, combatting spyware and malware, and applying countless security and system updates finally took its toll on me.

Up until May of 2004, I was the Chief Technology Officer of a global advertising agency. The week after I left, I went in for a series of much needed surgeries, which kept me off of my feet for the balance of the year. Rather than read titles off the bestseller list, I picked up a PowerBook and started teaching myself as much as I could about the operating system, software applications, and hardware. A number of my close Mac-savvy friends assisted me with suggestions of what to install, and which keyboard shortcuts would make life easier.

I was attracted to the Macintosh platform because I became so intensely jaded by and cynical of the computer industry. Two decades on IBM compatible/Wintel computers and 10+ years in the user group community had robbed me of my passion for technology. There just had to be a more appealing platform without all the stifling restrictions and anal adherence to a registry file. The emergence of Mac OS X, with its BSD/Mach underpinnings and a solid graphical environment, offers up the best of two worlds. I now have a workspace in which to run applications, and a Unix-based subsystem in which programs can be written and compiled. The peace of mind that my PowerBook affords me is invaluable, and at the end of the day that is what counts.

I came to realize that in order for me to make the most of my PowerBook I was going to have develop a desktop that would work for and not against me. This involved combing the world of third-party vendors and shareware applications and finally tweaking the hell out of my Unix shell environment. My penchant for Unix systems and the keyboard have made [Codetek's Virtual Desktop Pro](#) and [Quicksilver's contextual launcher](#) indispensable. I am confident that without these programs operating my PowerBook would be far less enjoyable.

Having walked around New York City with a Dell PC under my arm and now an Apple PowerBook, I have discovered the existence of an intangible Macintosh mystique, which is both hard to put into words and even harder to explain to someone who is not a computer user. I sat in my favorite coffeehouse at my table in the back, chugging away at my mocha and PowerBook, when a woman from France asked me out of the blue if she could share my table and power up her PowerBook with my adapter. She had run out of power, forgotten her power adapter at the hotel, and desperately needed to finish her work. Would she have been so bold if we both had PCs? What would the odds be, that being the case, that both of our computers were the same make and model so that the adapter would be compatible?

There is a kinship among Apple PowerBook and iBook users that cuts across gender, age, class, and experience. Perhaps this is part of Apple's master plan to make both users and hardware interact and integrate with each other. It is working. I feel like I'm part of a community. As I weave in and out of neighborhoods that are new to me, fellow users will start up conversations, exchange tips and tricks they have learned along the way, and in one instance I actually ended up helping someone with their computer.

I am now a Mac-head. Somehow it crept up on me. Now I cannot envision myself latching on to a x86 machine running Microsoft Windows. It is the look and feel of Mac OS X, the drop shadows, the ethereal floating windows continually drawing me in. It doesn't hurt matters either that the absence of a registry makes it so much easier to install and uninstall software and in general manage applications on the hard drive. Am I ready to love my PowerBook unconditionally? Stay tuned.

Copyright © 2005 David Blumenstein, [apple@david.com](mailto:apple@ david.com). When technology ceases to be a passion, David will hang up hang up his keyboard, but not before. Until then it is enterprise and telecom engagements across the globe. The Segments section is open to anyone. If you have something interesting to say about life with your Mac, write us.



About This Particular Outliner

by Ted Goranson, tgoranson@atpm.com

Outlining Task Managers, Part 3

In our previous columns we looked at to-do list managers that use outlining and mentioned a few things about the process. We wrap up the topic this month with a look at the “heavy duty” task managers available. For those new to *ATPO*, we aren’t doing reviews here. Instead, we look at the products’ underlying philosophies through the lens of how they use outlining.

If you adopt one of these programs, you’d better like the way it feels, because you are going to be spending a lot of time with it. It’ll be an anchor application, like your mail, browser, and writing applications. That underlying philosophy will likely be important. For example, in past columns we discovered that [Tinderbox](#) focuses on note containers and relationships among sets of them; that’s in contrast to [OmniOutliner](#), which bends toward allowing one to see the entire “document.” When we looked at the superficially similar [NoteBook](#) and [NoteTaker](#) in [one column](#), we discovered fundamental differences. NoteBook is more of an outliner focused on user interface elegance, while NoteTaker is more of an information manager focused on power and features.

In the case of [to-do list managers](#), we left out lots of good ones because we only looked at those that employed outlining. We don’t have that problem this month because essentially all full featured task managers use outlining in their core presentation, that of task and subtask listings.

I’ll admit to getting a great deal out of these columns myself, dear reader. In a way, *ATPO* helps me sort out my own thoughts on these applications, work I likely wouldn’t do if there weren’t an eager readership. In this case, I discovered one of these newer task managers that has stuck to me. It shouldn’t matter to you which one because your world will differ. Check them all out, then see what the Windows world has to offer and congratulate yourself once again for choosing the Mac. I’ll say it again: the Mac is *the* platform for advances in outlining—think of it as iTunes for the music of your life.

As before, we'll focus on these in turn from the least to most expensive. Unlike the last column, we won't display the same task in different applications, because these things differ quite a bit.

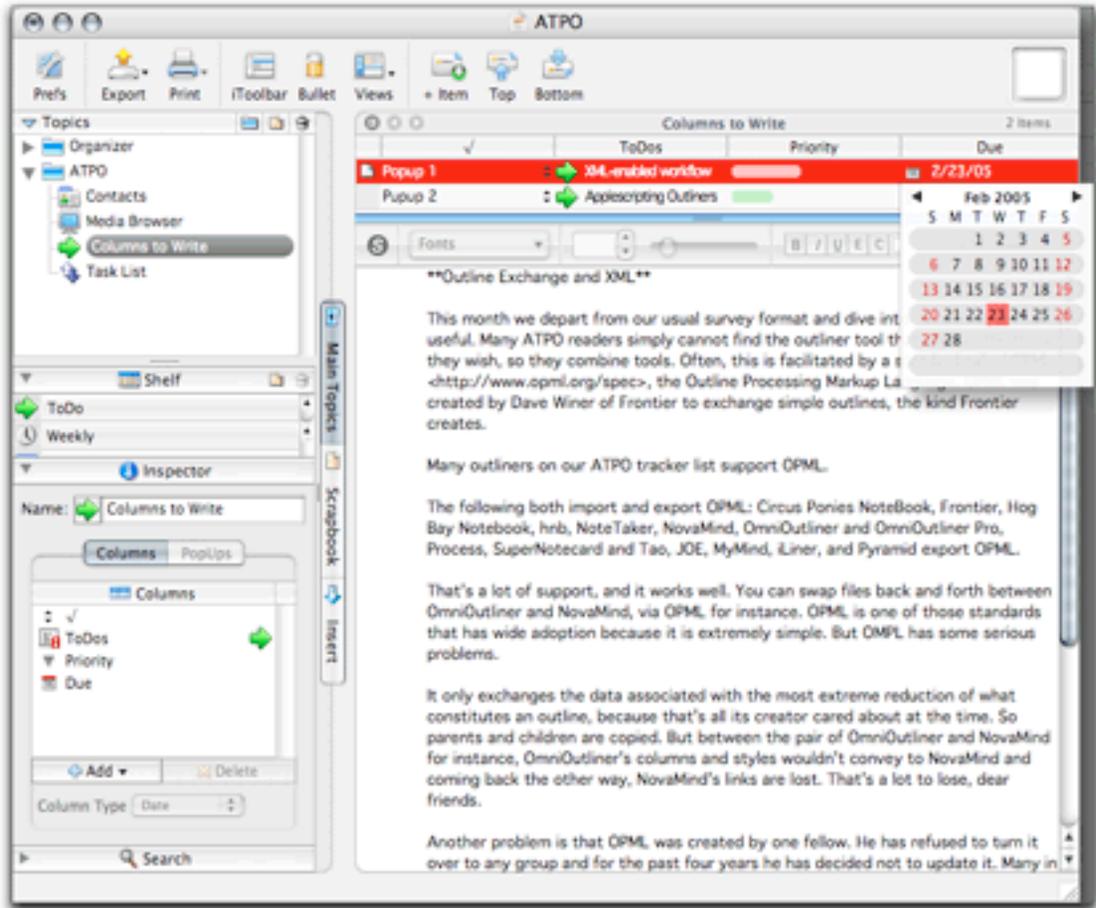
Formation (\$29)

Wow, what a great value.

Formation uses outlining in a more fundamental way than just as a means to display a task hierarchy. It uses the outline to shift among various types of information: contacts, calendar, and so on. It clearly copies the user interface of the much admired and under appreciated outliner Arrange (also called WebArranger), which we discussed in our column on [legacy outliners](#).

It has a "shelf" in the middle left that contains information types that you select when building an outline of various tasks. Each information type has a different template for how the display on the right is laid out. You enter "items" in the upper right. Contents of the items where appropriate appear in the lower right, for instance notes for items or contact details for the contact list. An inspector in the lower left displays and sets preferences for the items, greatly improving the original Arrange layout.

The contact list draws from and syncs to the system Address Book; you can message directly from Formation. There's a freeform "scrapbook" and a rather nice "media browser" that you can use to link to task-relevant folders.



Formation

Types of items link primarily through columns in items, for instance the due date shown in the screenshot also will show in various calendar-oriented views. The outlining function (as with Arrange) only goes one topic deep and will frustrate those familiar with writing outliners.

If you liked Arrange, you'll like this too, as it is adopting and extending a pretty sophisticated user interface model. But it is clearly a 1.0 product and it is missing some of the things that made Arrange special. We are missing the ability to have items in an

outline (ouch!), and Arrange's complex and powerful type recursion isn't there (see the *ATPO* column for an example). That means that though you can have a lot of relevant stuff under topics, they aren't linked as closely as other paradigms allow.

iTask (65 Euros, About \$80)

Here's a completely different approach, just now coming out of beta. It still has some things that aren't quite right in terms of refresh and display. iTask (formerly known as eTask) is based on a familiar interface convention. The outline in this case is an outline of tasks and subtasks, and it is related at the primary level to a Gantt chart.

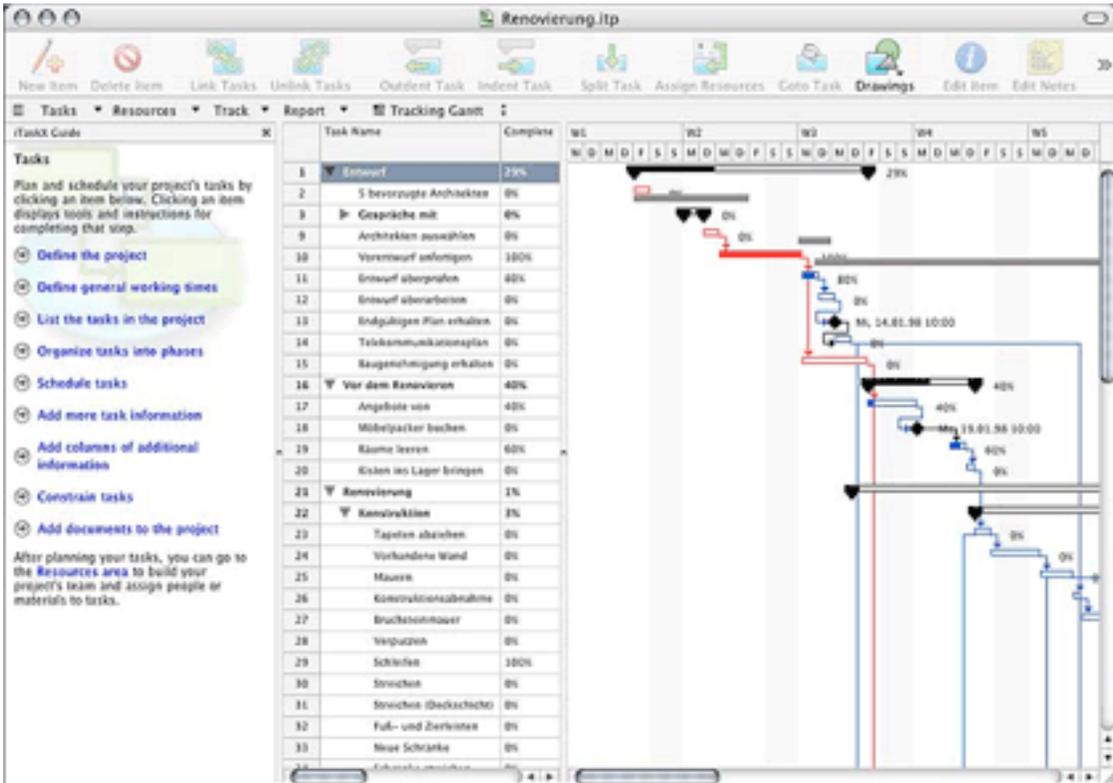
This notion has been around for years with the Windows-only [Microsoft Project](#), which seems to be in the process of retooling (and combining with Visio) as an enterprise tool rather than a desktop tool as part of Office. Schedule and LeadingProject, described below, are in this same class. Unlike those, iTask has a very complete setup guide that walks you through all the steps you take in defining your project.

The notion is to anchor everything to a task breakdown, like many of our to-do lists. From that base, you add information that is primarily to track and manage tasks rather than actually do them.

These types of programs have well-established feature sets, something that follows from Microsoft dominance. I'm not qualified to compare all the nits of these features, but it seems that more than all the basics are supported: different Gantt formats, calendar, network and resource views, and a huge number of information fields and columns.

I'm going to steal a screenshot from their Web site for the example because a bogus one wouldn't be nearly as complex. We'll just have to live with the German. But you can see the Gantt part over to the right: the length and location of bars on the timeline shows when tasks start and stop. The vertical lines show when a task is linked to or dependent

on another. The percent completed is shown in the coloring of the bar and the column on the left. That column sums completions among subtasks using rather sophisticated means based on subtask difficulty and importance.



iTask

As with many of the applications listed here, iTask features integration with the system Address Book. In this case, you can select an existing entries as human resources for tasks. But you cannot edit or add to Address Book from iTask.

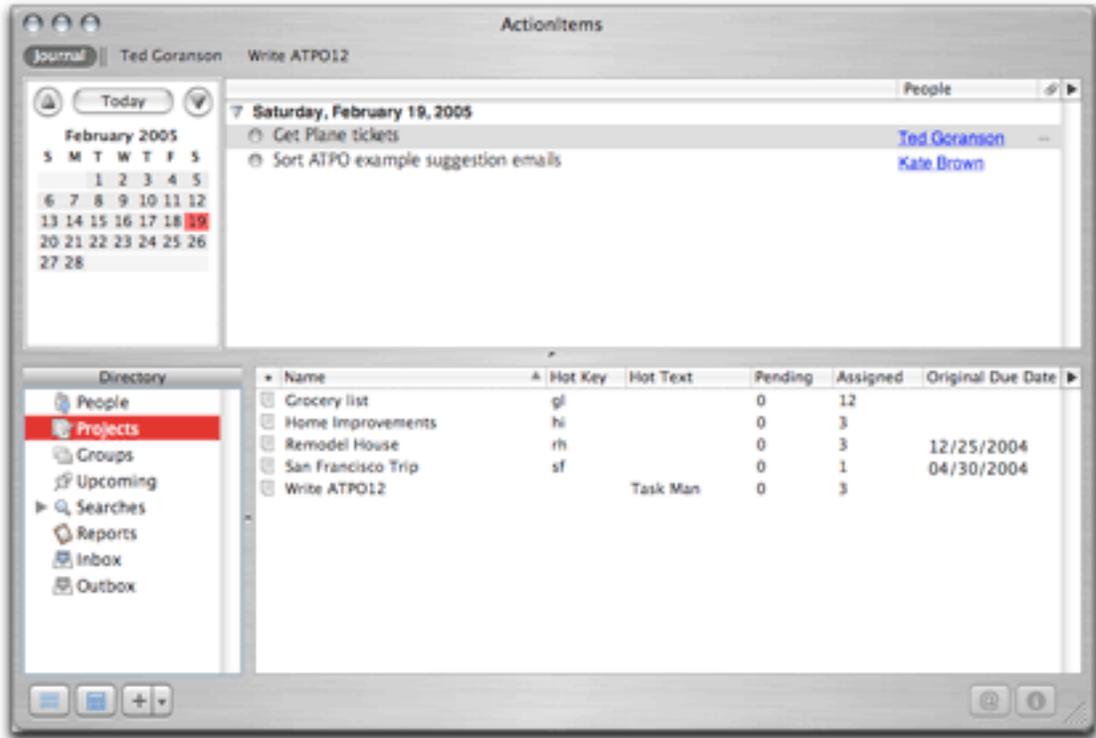
This is a strictly Aqua application and compares well in usability (and cost) to the old guys. But note: this is task tracking only, albeit complete. I think the fact that we have these appearing for OS X is an indicator that the market is betting on Macs entering the business enterprise in a big way.

ActionItems (\$99)

I have to admit that although I'm a Mac enthusiast, I think Apple's supplied productivity suite is sort of bland. I have alternatives to Mail, Safari, Address Book, and iCal that are each better in their own space. The fact that Apple's stuff works together would mean something if there were some power features included.

That's what ActionItems supplies. It splices onto those (plus iChat) existing, already integrated applications, and gives us something we can actually use to manage work. It has features for managing distributed collaborative workforces, like [Near-Time Flow](#). But where Flow is oriented toward collaborative publishing, ActionItems is about supporting coordinated work. We'll have to gloss over the collaboration features here as that's not our focus. You'll just have to imagine the instant messaging and e-mail integration.

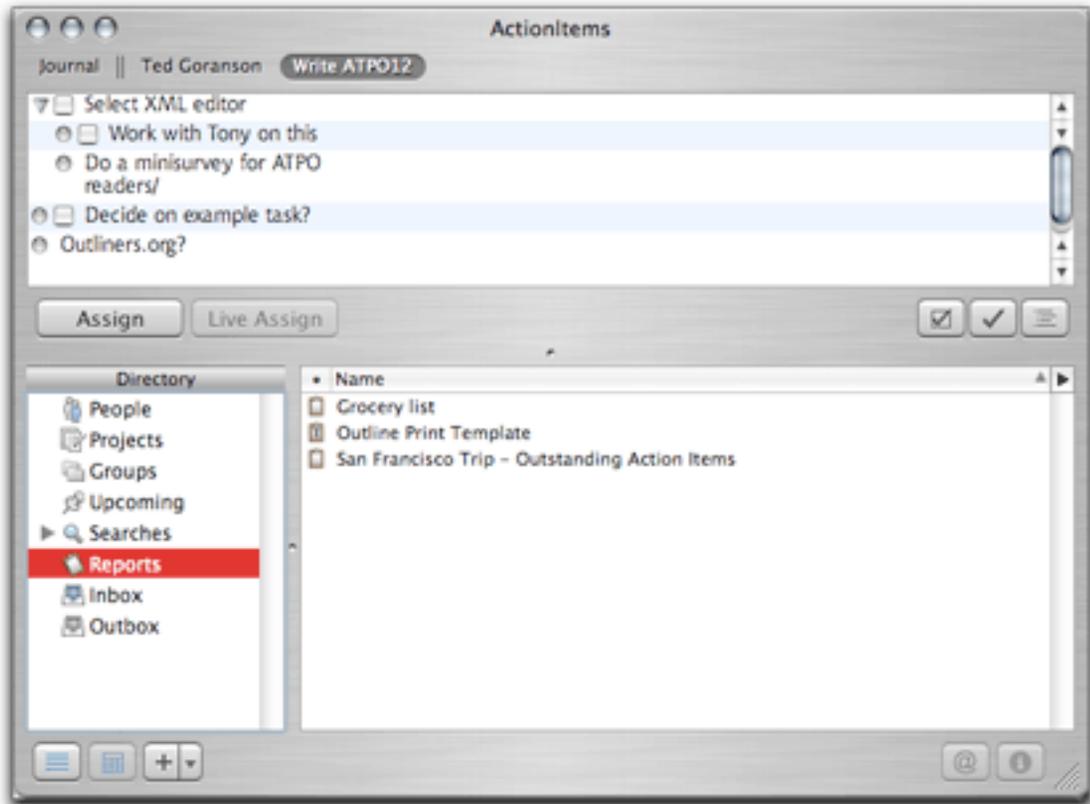
ActionItems presents a multi-pane window. The top section can be toggled between a task outline like all the task outlines mentioned here, and a “journal” which is a different outline associated with a day. Journal outlines can usefully be more freeform.



ActionItems Journal Outline

Down in the bottom half are lots of different items, called a directory. Here are listed certain items and resources associated with a project and which may be related to a task. The “people” category is closely tied to Address Book, and has an indicator for on-line status. The in- and outboxes are tied to Mail.

This is quite different than anything we have seen yet. All the “source” data is in applications elsewhere on your disk: what ActionItems provides are the two, interwoven outline views. In a sense, it is a task-oriented Finder outline.



ActionItems Task Outline

Daylight (\$149)

And yet again we have a completely different approach.

This might seem a bit odd, inserting this application into a survey of task managers. It is a “contact manager,” which is a mature class of application. Contact managers are for salespeople and the utility is obvious: keeping track of sales and potential sales. In this context, “tasks” have a very limited meaning, namely tasks associated with making a sale. I’d rather set myself on fire than do sales: the tasks I manage have to do with building my

house, writing documents (like *ATPO*, but books as well), improving my infrastructure (which you might call “metatasks”) and running fairly complex research and prototyping projects with small teams.

So just for a moment, I’m asking you to forget that this is targeted as a contact manager. It is built on a robust database product, [OpenBase](#), and is intended to keep *all* your contact, calendar, to-do lists, and notes in one database. ([StickyBrain](#) also uses OpenBase.)

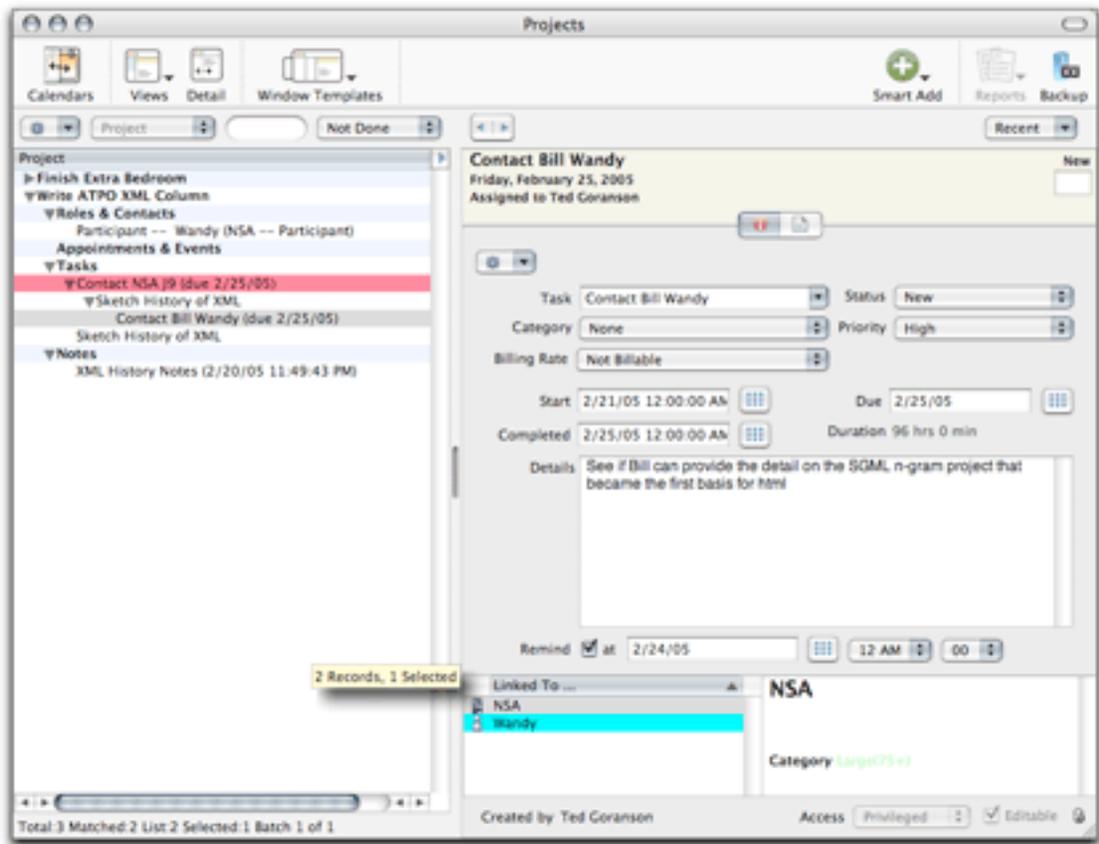
Just as there are advantages to ActionItem’s approach, so too are there advantages to having everything in a heavy-duty database. One of these is that you can build all sorts of custom relationships. Another is that you can rely on the database mechanisms for sharing and harmonizing things with distributed collaborators.

Daylight’s user interface is very Mac-like in appearance, but you simply cannot fathom it without referring to the very complete (300-page) PDF manual. (There are tutorial movies and a user forum as well.) That’s good, because it has the toughest learning curve of the applications we survey here.

It’s difficult to give an illustrative screenshot because there are so many possible panes. You set “window view” templates with different combinations of panes. The one I’ve chosen to show has the project outline on the left and an information pane on the right. It is the most natural view for an outline-savvy user.

Several projects can be listed. Each has the fixed four main categories. The task category can have nested tasks, as usual in task managers. Contacts are selected from Daylight’s built-in contact manager, and events from its calendar, but both sync with their system counterparts. A project is built of many components: tasks, roles, notes, events, and such which are “linked” to one another. The complexity and power come from the fact that nearly anything can be linked to anything else. That’s why you potentially need so many displays.

You'll note that I linked one task in two locations in the outline.



DayLight's Task Outline

It has a mail-merge with [OmniGraffle!](#) (as well as Word/Excel).

I've listed Daylight as an outlining task manager, which is the way I see it. But if you are considering contact managers apart from outlining, it competes with [OD4Contact](#), [CRM4Mac](#), and [Entourage](#).

[Merlin \(145 Euros, About \\$195\)](#)

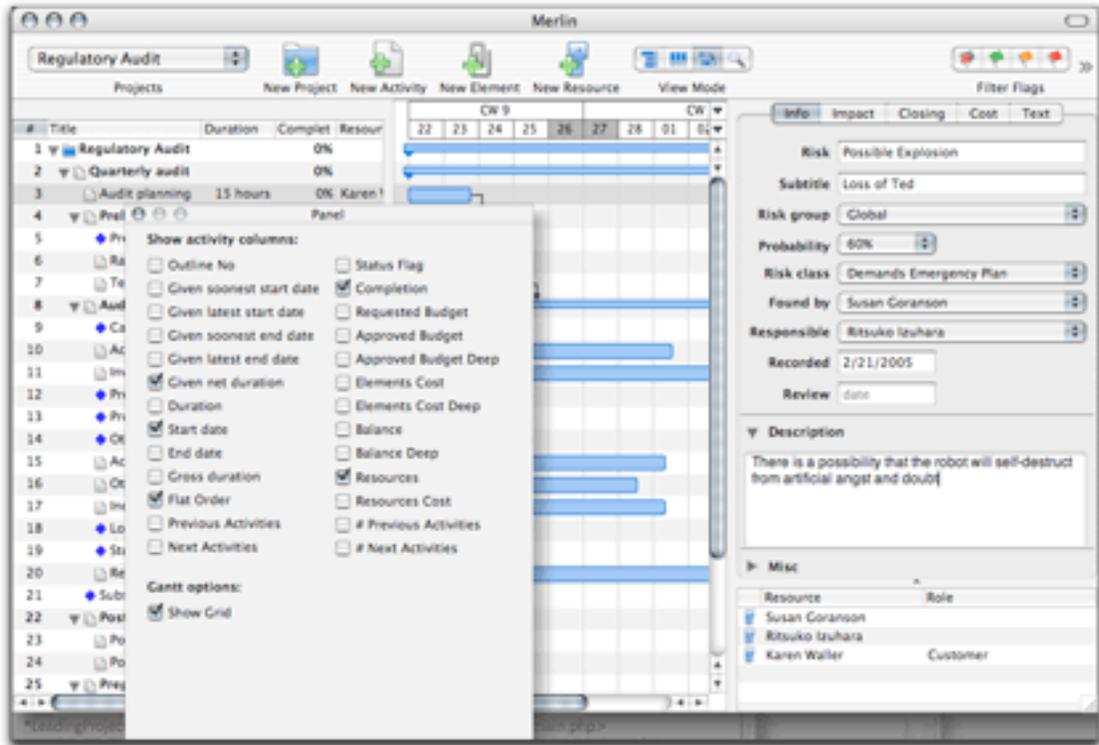
So far, we've seen four outlining task managers with four radically different approaches. Merlin combines two of these approaches. Its main view is an outline of tasks and subtasks with an attached Gantt chart like iTask and the applications that follow below. But it also has the annotations and linkages among elements like Daylight.

Merlin will sync to iCal, send messages from Mail, and work directly with the Address Book (it does not maintain its own address book). And it also imports OmniOutliner outlines and [NovaMind](#) mindmaps. Merlin produces a very impressive “Web site” project report. It supports all the same linkages among elements as Daylight, at least so far as the normal linkages that I need. I get the impression that Daylight might allow more in this regard.

Where Merlin excels is in the many types of element variables you can specify, especially in the area of risk management. For example, if you are a subcontractor on the new high-altitude spy plane (and who isn't?) you will need to maintain and report on a risk management scheme that is unique to that one project. In theory this is no problem; you should be able to specify your own methods. Tools for radical tailoring are not yet included.

Merlin includes tons of examples, but the idea is that for many projects—not just the facetious example—your competitive advantage is in the business practices you have developed. Rather than neuter those practices to fit your program management software (which Microsoft's product forces), it is better to adapt the project management software to suit your own practices.

The screenshot in this case has in the background an illustrative outline and chart, taken from the “audit project” template. Over on the right is an information/inspector pane showing one of the risk specification panels.



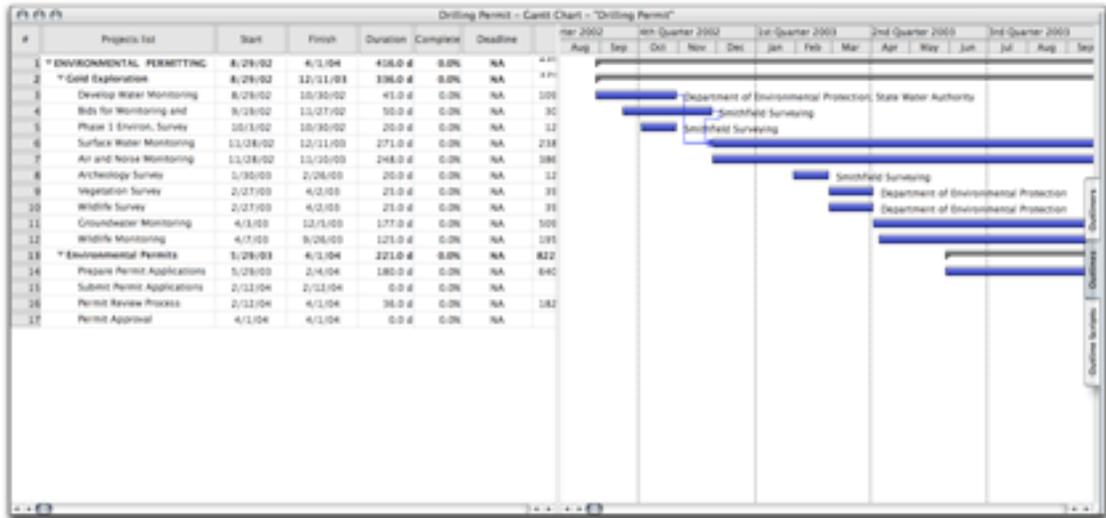
Merlin

LeadingProject (\$249 download; \$299 boxed)

The *ATPO Tracker* has mentioned this before as *ConceptDraw Project*. I’ve remarked on the ambition of the Ukrainian developer to create a complete cross-platform suite of enterprise tools, from mindmapping to project management to PowerPoint-type presentation. Since they compete with Microsoft on their home turf, they interact with Microsoft Office and Project applications well.

They’ve rebranded *ConceptDraw Project* as *LeadingProject*, but it retains its position in their suite: you can brainstorm in their rather good mindmapping application and present in their slideshow/report application. This cross-platform flexibility means that no OS X application is tapped; no Address Book, iCal, or Mail.

iTask, Merlin, LeadingProject, and Schedule (below) all use the same outlining paradigm: the outline is an outline of tasks and subtasks to which a Gantt chart is attached. In the latter three cases, a column view is possible as well.



LeadingProject

Schedule (\$290)

I used this baby fifteen years ago when it was a Mac-only application from a small shop. I think it has changed hands a couple times since then, and development has slowed to nearly nothing. But there's no question that it is the oldest application displayed here. As with LeadingProject, this is essentially a Gantt chart program, without the extra "element inspectors" that some of the others have, supporting factors like risk management.

As with LeadingProject, it ignores the OS X Address Book and iCal. It syncs to a Palm version and supports handy links to documents that are associated with the task. (But file linking and embedding is much better in the Windows edition.)

Naturally, anything from the dim past that hasn't had a radical user interface update will just feel old. And that's annoying as can be, especially in the outlining controls, which are clunky.

But maturity has a couple advantages I'd like to highlight. The first is that this is the only task manager we've mentioned that is AppleScriptable. It also has its own internal macros and element-to-element rules.

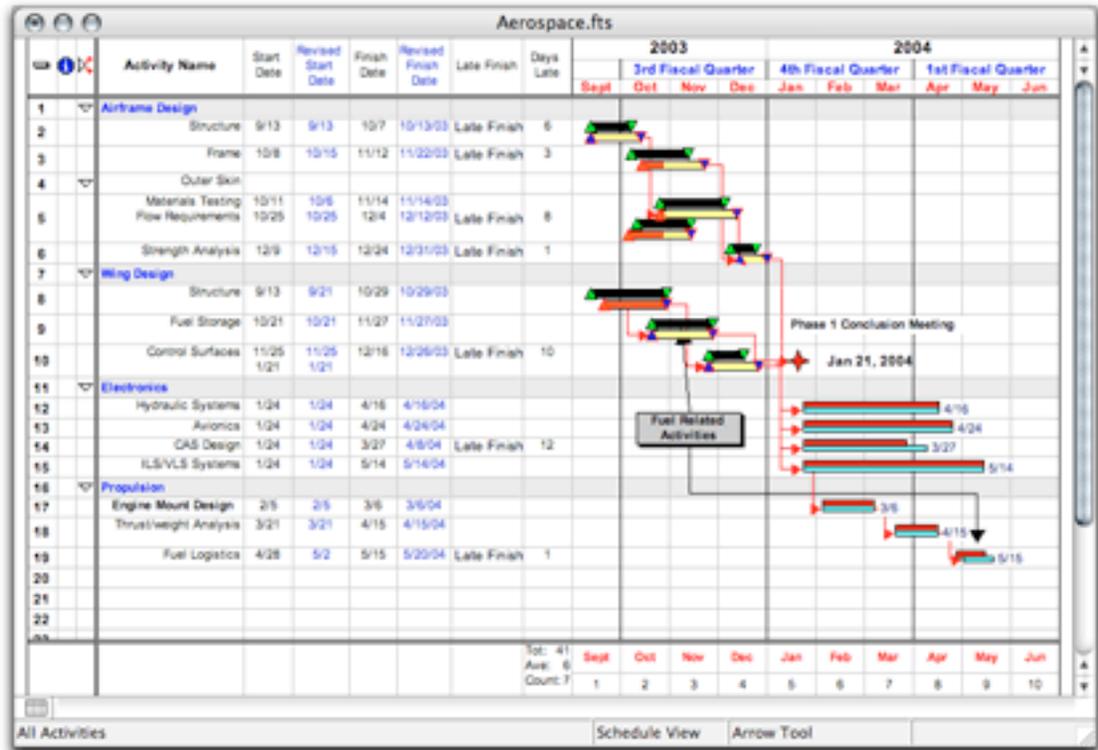
The second unique feature is the variety of styles you can use in designing all of the elements of the chart. It is remarkable how much information you can graphically display with subtle nuances in color, shape, font, and so on. In this, Schedule is far superior to any of the others in the information in the chart itself. You can pretty much create any pre-Aqua style or marker, meaning transparency and shadows are out.

To a non-trivial degree, you can combine these: scripting and styles. A project preference also sets font styles by level.

In *ATPO*, we celebrate outlining because you can get a lot of structural bang for the interface buck. But we need to be on the lookout for graphical means to extend the paradigm. We already have mindmaps, which don't add much structurally. And we have Tinderbox's novel map view, which at least displays links (crudely) and has cool zooming.

This notion of packing huge amounts of information in scriptable Gantt chart styles (possibly with rules) has lots of promise. In fact it is something our little research group is working on as a hook for virtual enterprise collaboration.

Maybe with a little user pull, the new Gantt charters iTask and Merlin can develop in this direction.



Schedule

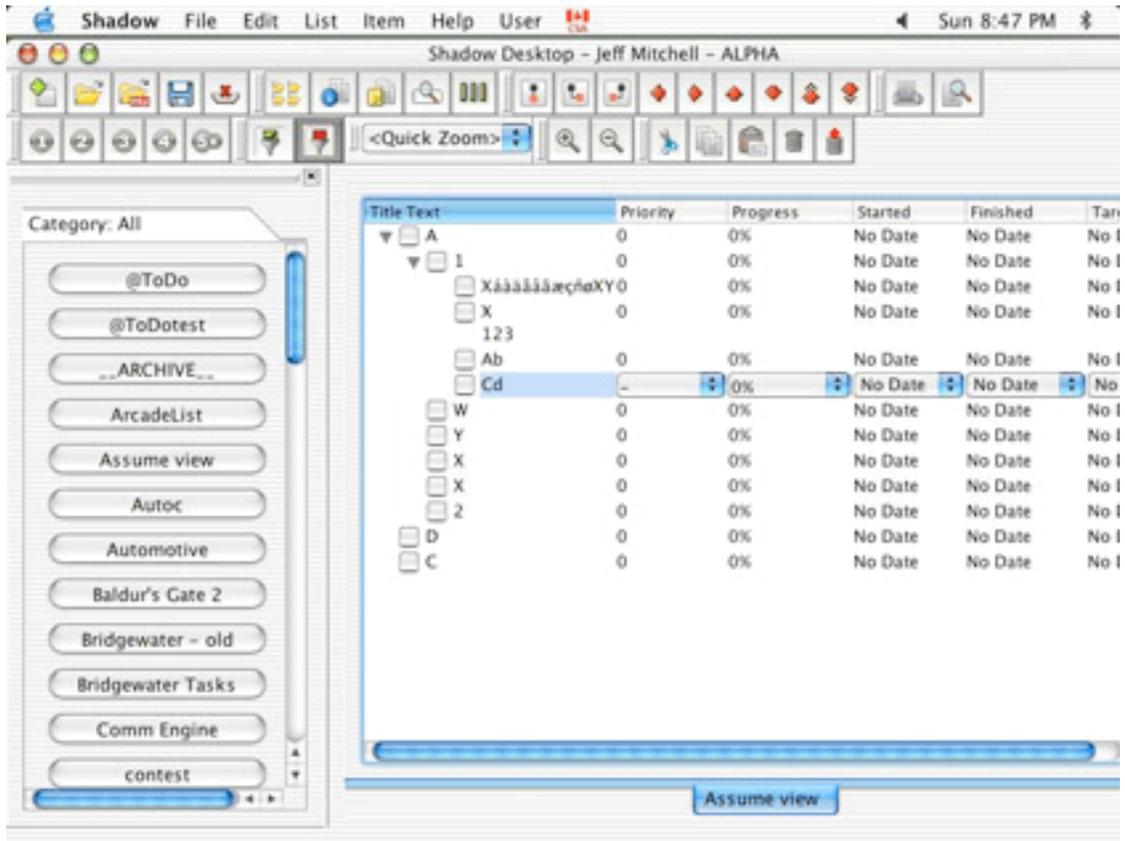
The ATPO Tracker

SuperNotecard

The cross-platform Java outliner formerly known as Miss Lonelynotes has been updated and renamed as SuperNotecard. You'll recall that it has some predetermined attributes, which it leverages to provide support to writers, primarily fiction writers. This update enhances some character profiling, adds a few much needed interface improvements (though it still takes getting used to and otherwise needs work), and now supports OPML import and export. If you are an author—especially of fiction—and think you may resonate to the index card metaphor, check it out. It links attributes by color coding.

ShadowPlan

I've been advised that I used a screenshot of an obsolete beta for the upcoming Mac version of this popular Palm outliner. Sorry about that. Below is a later screenshot from the developer in which a whole lot of improvement is apparent.



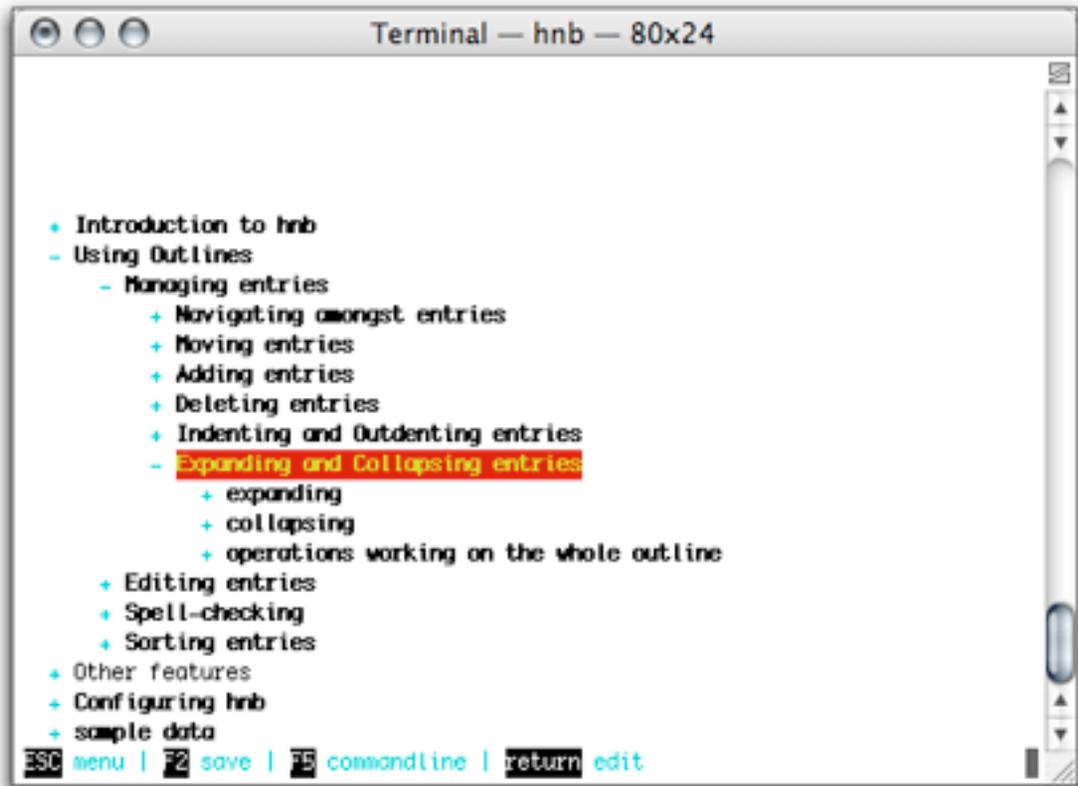
LeadingProject

hnb

A reader beat me to the punch by mentioning hnb in a letter last month. hnb stands for "hierarchical notebook," and is an open-source project. This will be unlike any outliner you have used because it is command-line-based; you access it through Terminal (usually in your Utilities folder).

But first you have to “make” it. Download and install the free Apple Xcode tools, which install conventionally. Then download the hnb source package and uncompress it. In the terminal, navigate to the folder and type “make”.

Once that’s done, you simply type “hnb” in the terminal. The first time you do so, a tutorial which looks like this, appears:



hnb

You’ll have no menus and no graphical user interface. But it has terrific and logical keyboard controls and spell checking.

Why would you consider such a thing with all the cool stuff on the *ATPO* Tracker? Because it can be used on any platform (except OS 9) and because it is the smallest, fastest outliner you’re likely to encounter. But mostly because it saves natively as XML that is based on a clean Document Type Definition (DTD). (It also imports/exports OPML.)

It means that for free, you can maintain an outline that is accessible and manipulatable in all sorts of ways using the XML tricks we'll discuss in the next column. That column, by the way, will tell you what a "DTD" is, how we got stuck with them, and why they are useful.



Next up on *ATPO* is a column on XML exchange in an outliner workflow. I can use all the help on this I can get, so if you have some insights or suggestions, please send them.

Copyright © 2005 Ted Goranson, tgoranson@atpm.com. Ted Goranson has been thirty years in the visualization and model abstraction field. He is slowly beginning a [new user interface project](#).



Mac OS X Hints and Tips

No matter how fast computers get, we, the users, will always want to work faster. One of the best ways to do this is to streamline your way of working, by learning the tips and tricks of getting things done faster in your applications.

Let's take a look at some hints and tips for the OS X system itself, and its most visible application, the Finder.

Keep it Running

Many people don't think of the Finder as an application, but it is. You will see it in the Dock, just like all other applications, and if you open up the "Force Quit Applications" window by pressing Command-Option-Escape, you will see it listed with all of the other applications that are currently running. This is important to remember in case the Finder stops responding.

If you select the non-responsive Finder in the "Force Quit Applications" window, the Force Quit button at the bottom will change to Relaunch. Once clicked, the system will attempt to quit the Finder and relaunch it. This will often clear up any difficulties.

If you continue to run into seemingly random problems with your system, ask yourself when the last time was that you repaired your system's permissions. This is a tip that I keep in my back pocket constantly, and it is something that I think you should do by default after installing major updates to the system. (Others [disagree](#).) Open up the Utilities folder inside the Applications folder, and launch the Disk Utility. Select your boot drive, and click "Repair Disk Permissions" under the "First Aid" section. This can take a while, depending on how many files you have on your drive, and how many permissions need to be repaired, but let it run. It'll be worth it.

Once your system is in tip-top condition again, you'll want to keep yourself moving briskly through the Finder. The best way to do this is to master keyboard shortcuts.

To Click, or Not to Click

You probably know that Command-W will close the front-most window in the Finder. Constantly pressing Command-W will eventually close all of the windows that you have open. But, if you press Command-Option-W, you will be able to close all of the open windows in one fell swoop. Likewise, if you hold down the Option key while clicking on the red close button on a window, all of the windows will close behind it.

In fact, holding Option down when doing many normal operations will often create a different or somehow extended effect.

Normally, pressing Command-I when you have an item in the Finder highlighted will open up an Info window for the object. But, pressing Command-Option-I will open an Inspector window. The window will show the info on the object that is currently selected, and that info will change to reflect other objects that you select. This is a great way to check info on multiple files without having to constantly open and close Info windows.

If you select Restart, Shutdown, or Log Out from the Apple menu, you will be presented with a dialog asking if you really want to continue with the action. Holding down Option while selecting one of these actions will bypass the dialog, causing an immediate log out, restart, or shutdown.

Holding down the Shift key will also change the effects of some commands in the Finder.

As we discussed above, pressing Command-Option-Escape will bring up the “Force Quit Applications” dialog. Here, you can relaunch a non-responsive Finder. If you want to bypass the window, you can press Shift-Command-Option-Escape to immediately relaunch the Finder.

Pressing Command-Tab allows you to switch between open applications. Holding Command and pressing Tab afterwards will allow you to cycle through all open applications. This you probably knew, but did you know that by holding the Shift key down, you can cycle backwards through the applications? Command-Tab also allows you to quit or hide applications. Release the Tab key, while keeping Command pressed, and then press Q or H to quit or hide the selected application without switching to it.

Some other useful keyboard shortcuts to keep in mind:

- Press Command-Up Arrow and Command-Down Arrow to navigate up and down the folder hierarchy in a Finder window.
- Press Command-Left Arrow and Command-Right Arrow to navigate forward and backward through the history of a Finder window, much like a Web browser.
- Pressing Command-Shift-H will go directly to your Home folder.
- Pressing Command-Shift-A opens the Applications folder.
- Pressing Command-Shift-G brings up the Go To dialog, allowing you to type in the path of a folder to open in the Finder.

Windows to the World

Have you ever opened a window with hundreds of files in it, and wanted to quickly jump to a particular file or group of files? Typing the first few letters or numbers of the filename will scroll the window to that location.

OS X version 10.3 (Panther) added a nice feature to the Finder, called the sidebar. This is an area on the left side of all Finder windows that allows for the storage of aliases to various locations, files, and applications. This makes it very easy to organize files, by adding aliases to common folder locations that can be used from any Finder window to drop files on.

If you click on the clear button in the upper right-hand corner of a Finder window, the window will revert to an OS 9–style window, without the toolbar, sidebar, or brushed-metal style.

A completely useless, but nonetheless neat, feature is to hold the Shift key while clicking the yellow minimize button. This will slow down the minimization effect as the window minimizes to the Dock.

Parting Shots

If you choose “About This Mac” from the Apple menu and click on the OS version number, it will change to the OS build number. Clicking again will change it to your computer’s serial number.

Hold Option and click on an open application in the Dock, and the application's windows come to the front while hiding all other open windows.

Hold Command and click on a Dock item, and the Finder displays the folder that contains that item.

Hold Command-Option and click on a document to launch the program that's associated with that file and hide all other windows.

Hold Command-Option and click on an application in the Dock, and it hides all the open programs and displays only that application's folder.

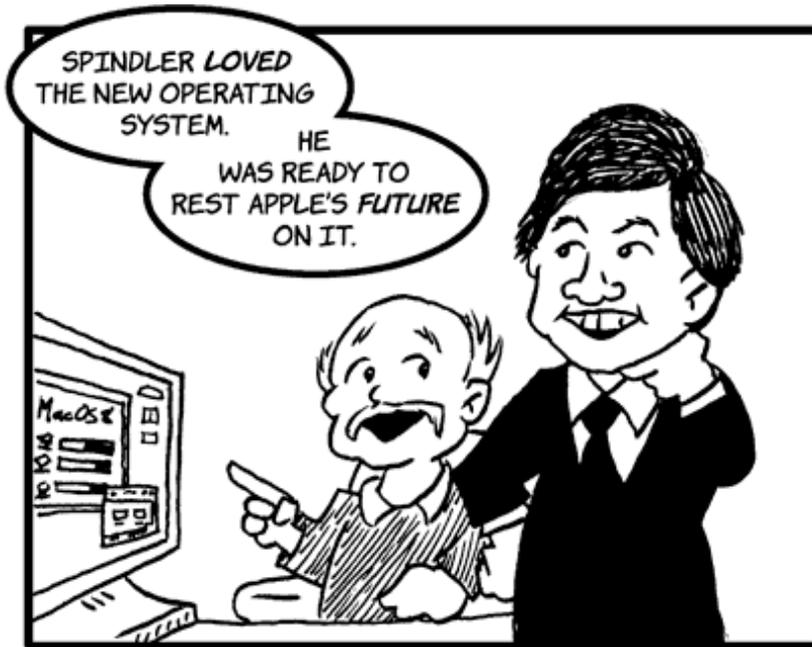
Hopefully you will find some of these tips and tricks informative and helpful. "Now you know, and knowing is half the battle."

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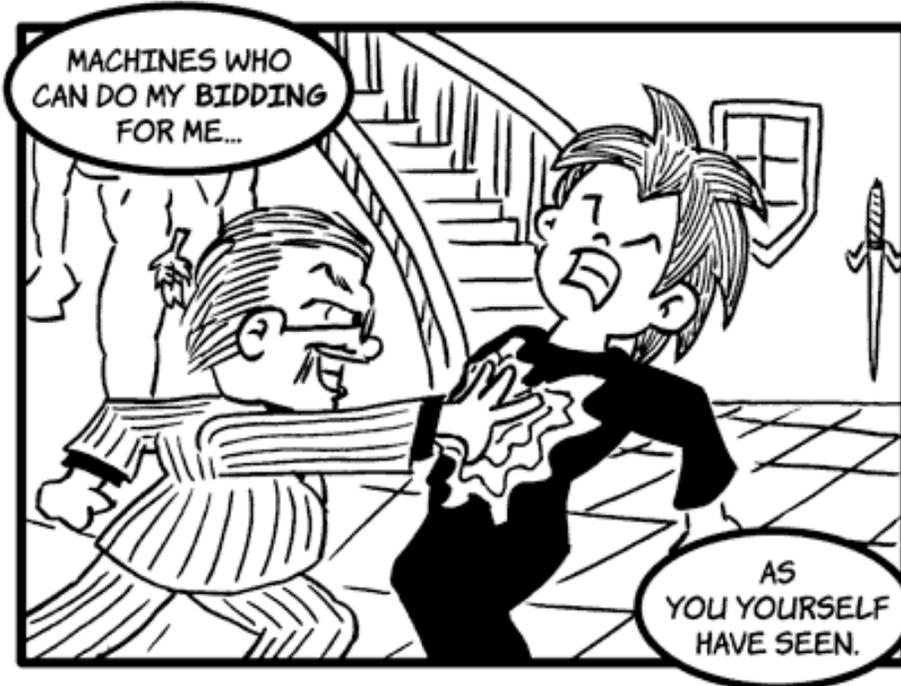
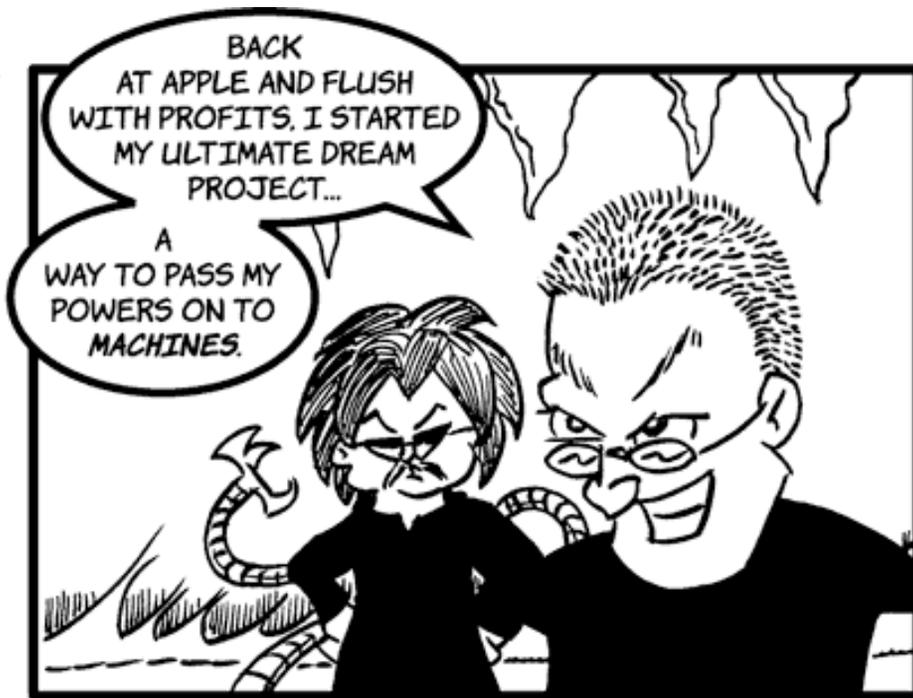
Cartoon: Cortland

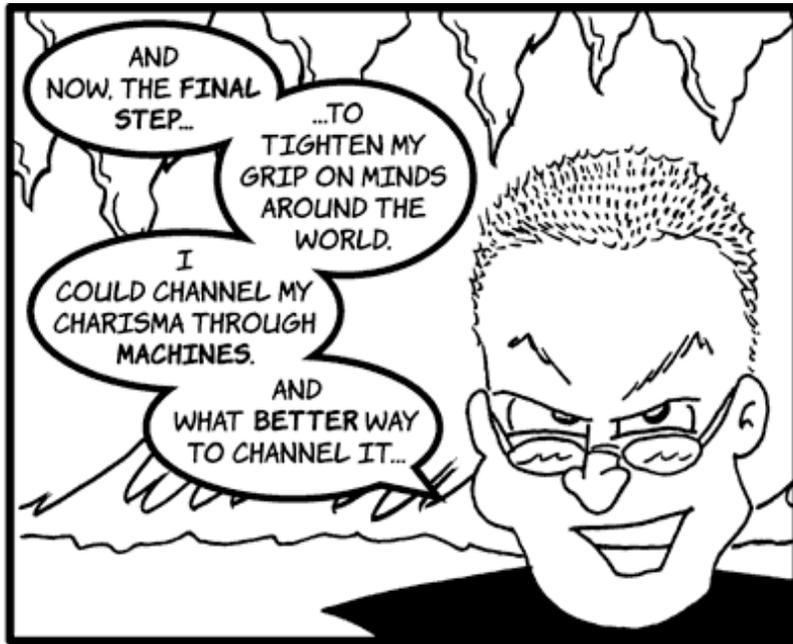
by Matt Johnson, mjohnson@atpm.com







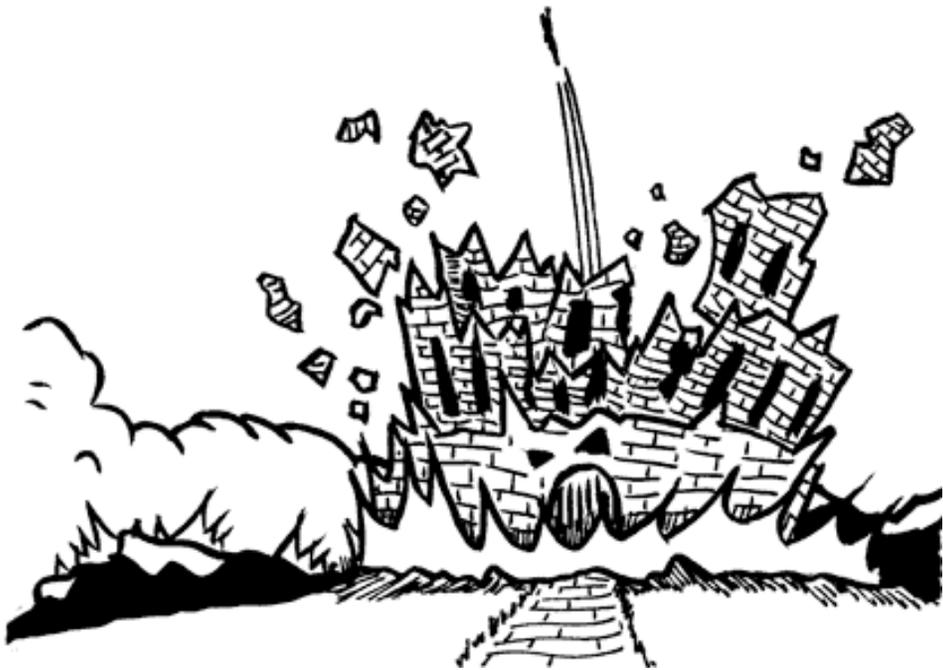


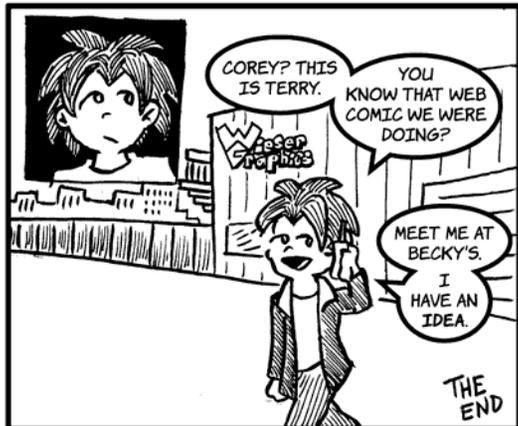


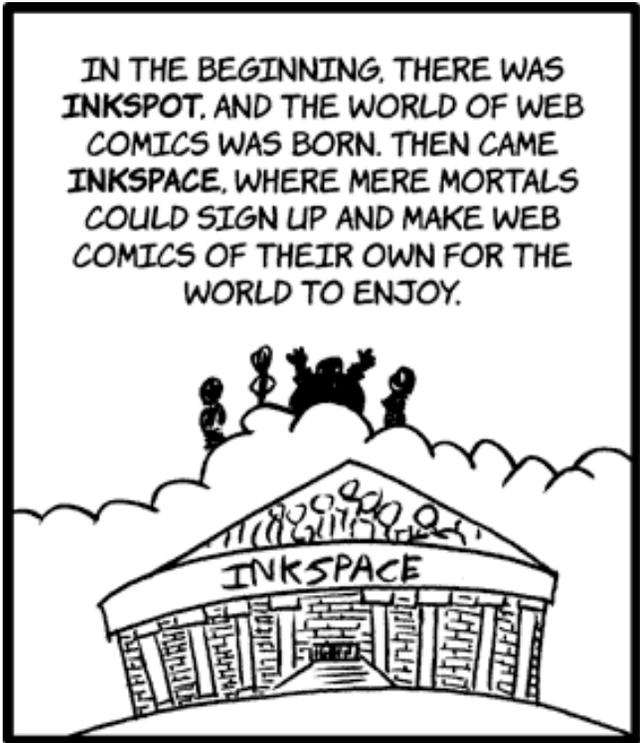












BUT... THIS IS NOT THEIR STORY.

THIS IS THE STORY OF...





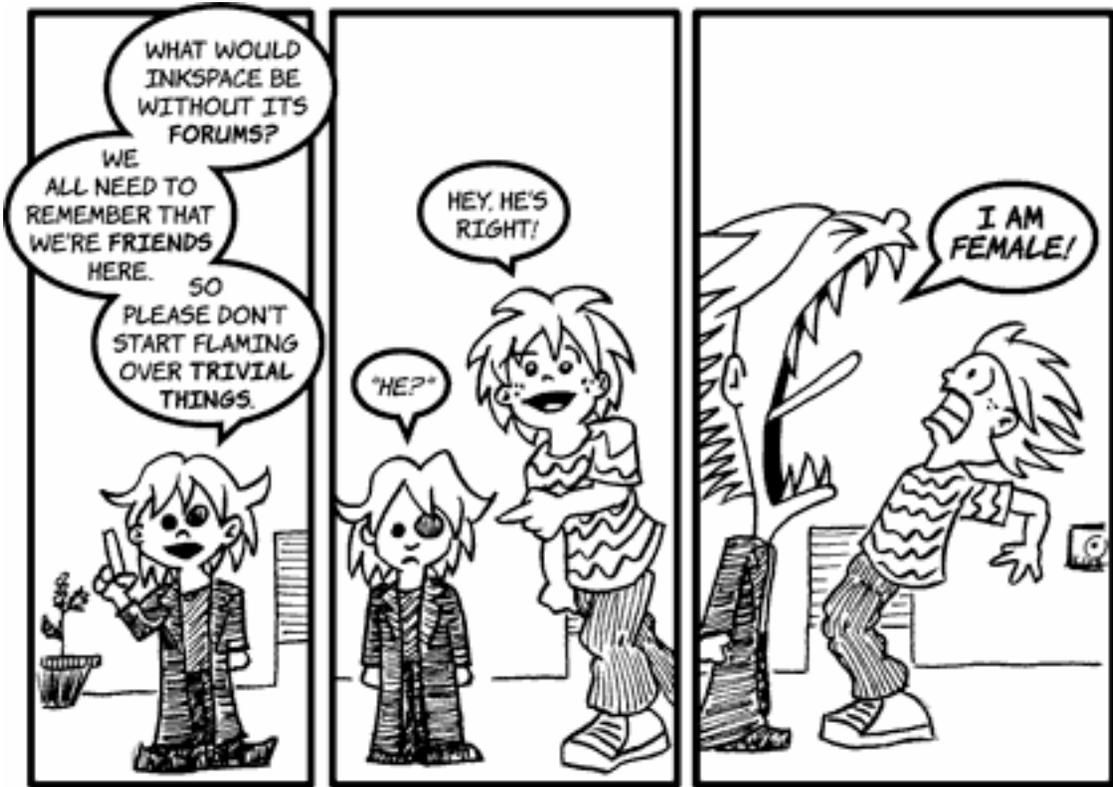
















Clouds

Clouds

ATPM Web Editor Lee Bennett was on his way to a party in June 2004 and noticed an amazing-looking thunderhead building in the skies ahead of him. His Nikon D100 happened to be along for the ride, and [these images](#) are the result. Many of the images have been color enhanced in Adobe Photoshop CS, but a few are unaltered.

Previous Months' Desktop Pictures

Pictures from previous months are listed in the [desktop pictures archives](#).

Downloading all the Pictures at Once

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

Contributing Your Own Desktop Pictures

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

Placing Desktop Pictures

Mac OS X 10.3.x

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 popup 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.

Mac OS 8.5–9.x

Go to the Appearance control panel. Click on the "Desktop" tab at the top of the window. Press the "Place Picture..." button in the bottom right corner, then select the desired image. By default, it will show you the images in the "Desktop Pictures" subfolder of your "Appearance" folder in the System Folder, however you can select images from anywhere on your hard disk.

After you select the desired image file and press "Choose," a preview will appear in the Appearance window. The "Position Automatically" selection is usually fine. You can play with the settings to see if you like the others better. You will see the result in the little preview screen.

Once you are satisfied with the selection, click on "Set Desktop" in the lower right corner of the window. That's it! Should you ever want to get rid of it, just go to the desktop settings again and press "Remove Picture."

Mac OS 8.0 and 8.1

Go to the “Desktop Patterns” control panel. Click on “Desktop Pictures” in the list on the left of the window, and follow steps similar to the ones above.

Random Desktop Pictures

If you drag a folder of pictures onto the miniature desktop in the Appearance or Desktop Pictures control panel, your Mac will choose one from the folder at random when it starts up.

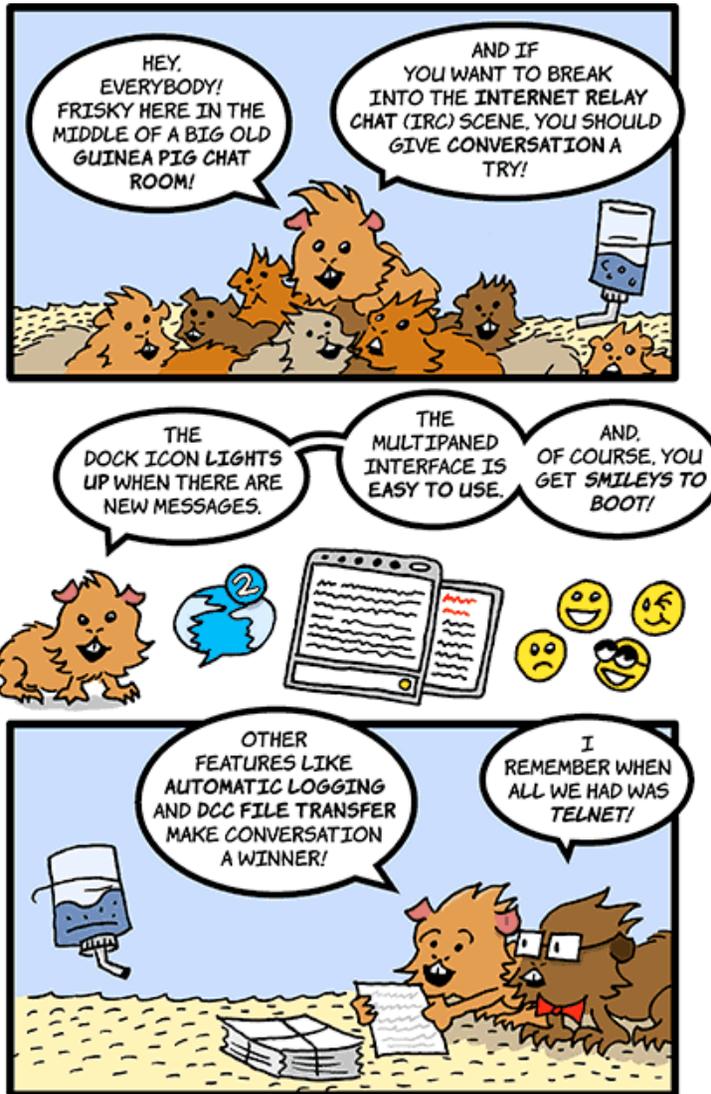
DeskPicture

An alternative to Mac OS’s Appearance control panel is Pierce Software’s DeskPicture, [reviewed](#) in issue 5.10 and available for [download](#).



Frisky Freeware

by Matt Johnson, mjohnson@atpm.com



[Conversation](#)

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Review: Apeiron X 1.0.1

by Andrew Kator, akator@atpm.com

Developer: [Ambrosia Software](#)

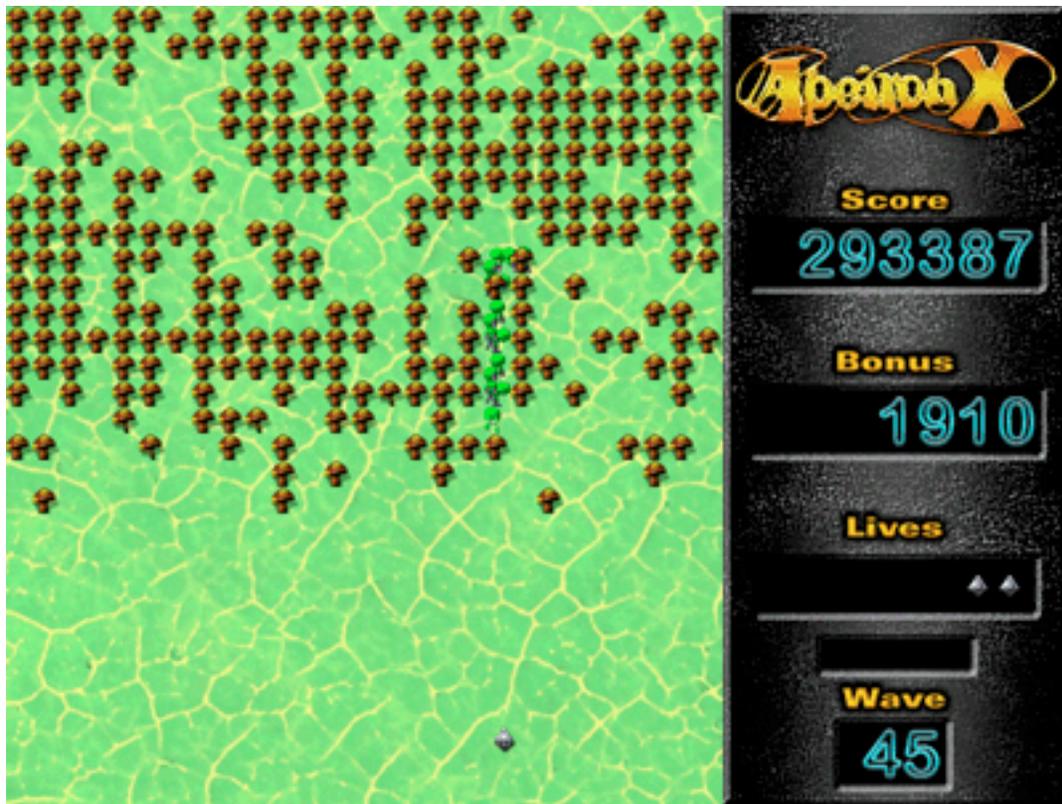
Price: \$15; \$5 (upgrade)

Requirements: G3, Mac OS 8 or Mac OS X 10.2

Trial: Feature-limited (first 15 levels)



Many long-term Mac users have fond memories of Ambrosia Software's gaming adaptations of 1980s arcade classics. Apeiron was an interpretation of Atari's successful Centipede and Millipede, but with fancier graphics, sound effects, and slightly more varied game features. With the release of Apeiron X, Ambrosia brings this gaming classic to OS X.



Apeiron X, much like its namesake, takes the Centipede/Millipede concept to new levels. Unlike the arcade versions, which demanded repeated quarters, Apeiron X doesn't kill the player after only a few minutes of gameplay. Extra lives and other bonuses are much easier to obtain, and Apeiron X's gameplay is generally less-frantic and slightly slower than its arcade ancestors. Clearing the first few-dozen waves is relatively simple, but it rapidly become more challenging as the game progresses.

For the few who may not be familiar with the classic non-scrolling 2-D shooters, Apeiron X is a deceptively simple game. You start with three lives. Bad guys usually appear at the top of the screen and must be shot before they reach the bottom, while your weapon is limited to the bottom 20% of the screen. If an enemy touches you, you're dead. Kill all of the required enemies and you advance to the next, more difficult level. To make things more challenging, there are mushrooms randomly interspersed throughout the gaming screen that block movement and prevent clear shots at the baddies.

The main enemies on each level are the Pentipedes, a regenerating segmented bug. Every time a segment of the Pentipede is shot, it leaves behind another mushroom to interfere with your mission of carnage. If the Pentipede is shot in the middle, the insect splits in half and multiple bugs moving separately continue their path down the screen. When a Pentipede segment reaches the bottom of the screen, new individual segments rapidly appear from the sides of the screen until all are killed. All Pentipedes must be killed to advance.



The enemies and obstacles in Apeiron X are cuter than their arcade counterparts.

Other enemies include: Groucho, a flea-tick creature that poisons mushrooms; Larry, a scorpion-lobster that eats mushrooms and tries to run into your shooter; Gordon, a gecko that creates red mushrooms that hasten the Pentipedes' paths to the bottom of the screen; and a one-eyed alien in a spaceship that flies through blowing up mushrooms.

Bonuses are gathered to add points, extra lives, or new features to help kill bugs. These are obtained by shooting a bonus multiplier, shooting a flashing psychedelic mushroom, and gathering coins. Each is only available for a limited time and will disappear with a resounding raspberry sound effect if not collected.

While Apeiron X offers the same overall graphics as the 90s version, they have been improved to offer more depth and generally appear smoother than the original. The enemies and bonus items are recognizable to both users of the original Apeiron and those only familiar with the arcade classics.

The mouse is a perfect game controller for this 2-D shooter format, seamlessly replacing its cousin the trackball. The game responds perfectly to mouse movements and offers "auto-repeated" shots when the mouse button is held down.

A new feature in Apeiron X is optional high score interaction with the Ambrosia Web site. When a new high score is created, users have the option of reporting their high score for comparison with other players'.

Apeiron X doesn't have the sophisticated 3D graphics and online competition many modern gamers demand, but it offers simple and satisfying gameplay that can rapidly become addictive. Many arcade adaptations simply "dress up" the arcade original with fancier graphics and sound effects, but Apeiron actually goes one step further to improve over the originals. Some of the simple gameplay additions in Apeiron are so obvious (such as coin-collecting bonus frenzies that often distract the player and get them killed, reflected bullets, and mushrooms that dislodge and fall when shot) that it is surprising they were not included in the arcade originals.

An axiom of game design is that great games are easy to learn but hard to master, and prove challenging without being frustrating. Apeiron X meets these classic requirements.

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Review: Cobra.XM Laptop Case

by Chris Lawson, clawson@atpm.com

Developer: [Booq](#)

Price: \$150

Requirements: 14- or 15-inch laptop

Trial: None



Those of you who have been reading ATPM for a while may remember the [Tom Bihn ID Messenger Bag review](#) from a couple years back, in which I said of the ID, "If you're upper management, this bag is probably too 'hip' for you, with its range of stylish colors and suit-wrinkling one-shoulder design. Besides, you wanted black leather, right?" If the standard black leather case is just too stuffy for you, but you still have to fit in at the office, Booq's ballistic nylon Cobra.XM is your bag. Its understated style is subtle enough to blend in, but different enough to give you a sense of individuality in a sea of suits, ties, and [PHBs](#) that would make [Dilbert](#) cry. As a bonus, it comes with a nice shoulder strap should you find yourself wanting some extra support for your workload on Casual Fridays.





This is really two bags in one. The outer bag is very much a standard take-everything-but-the-kitchen-sink-with-you laptop bag, while the inner bag is essentially a lightly padded, lined sleeve with handles and D-rings for a shoulder strap.



The shoulder strap, by the way, deserves a mention on its own. It's removable, adjustable, and comes with a shoulder pad and rotating clips to prevent twisting, as most quality laptop bag shoulder straps do. However, the hardware seems to be powdercoated cast aluminum, and the strap itself looks like a car seatbelt, which is unassailably cool.

Double-bagging provides a safety margin at the grocery store, and so it does here as well. I wouldn't bet my 'Book on it, but with a 15" PowerBook safely tucked away in the inner bag, and the inner bag slipped into the main compartment and zipped up, the setup seems like it would easily survive a tumble down the stairs at the office without allowing the precious contents to be damaged.



Pockets and little sub-compartments are hidden away everywhere, as you can see above. I have no doubt in my mind that this bag could be zipped up with everything in that photograph inside and still have room for a cell phone, iSight, and possibly a bag lunch. This bag is truly cavernous. Unfortunately, its weight reflects that. The empty bag weighs six pounds, which is a lot for a bag with no significant metal and very little hard plastic in its construction. The size is a double-edged sword in another respect, too—it's easy to forget where you've put something in one of the five main pockets, especially if you really pack the bag full of accessories. If you run out of room—an occurrence I'm having a difficult time imagining—the bag will expand by one-and-one-half inches simply by unzipping a circumferential zipper. If you run out of room in *that*, perhaps you need [something a little bigger](#).

Other than the weight, there's very little not to like about this bag. Getting the sleeve in and out of the bag is a bit tricky, and getting the computer out without removing the sleeve is downright impossible, so packing up or removing your machine is always a two-step process. Getting the computer in and out of the sleeve is also marginally more difficult than it could be had the zipper gone down the sleeve's sides a little further.



Were this not such a cavernous bag, I would also take issue with the design of the computer compartment. There's a divider and pocket in there to keep some files in the same pocket as the computer, but the computer and sleeve take up almost all the room in the compartment, so the pocket is pretty useless. These small complaints, though, are mostly offset by the feature that justifies Booq's claim of "the ultimate professional laptop case": the back of the bag has a panel that allows it to be attached to the collapsible handle of most common suitcases. This is a godsend to frequent travelers.

Messenger bags not big enough, or too hip for the senior partners to tolerate? Need a new carry-on to accompany you in accumulating another free trip to Hawaii? If you place a higher priority on a subtle look and ultimate capacity than über-portability, the Cobra.XM is your bag, baby.

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Review: LaunchBar 4.0.1

by Michael Tsai, mtsai@atpm.com

Developer: [Objective Development](#)

Price: \$20 (home user); \$39 (business); \$10 (home upgrade); \$19 (business upgrade)

Requirements: Mac OS X 10.1

Trial: Feature-limited (can only access seven different items per session)



LaunchBar 4 is the long-awaited update to the interface utility that I praised in [ATPM 8.01](#), saying that I wasn't happy using Mac OS X without it. That was three years ago. In the interim, LaunchBar's ingenious method of providing quick access to nearly every file on your hard disk has appeared in other applications. [Butler](#) and [Quicksilver](#) are both free, and both contain features that were not available in LaunchBar 3. Now, Objective Development has responded with a strong update that polishes the rough edges of earlier versions of LaunchBar and adds new features of its own.

Scanning

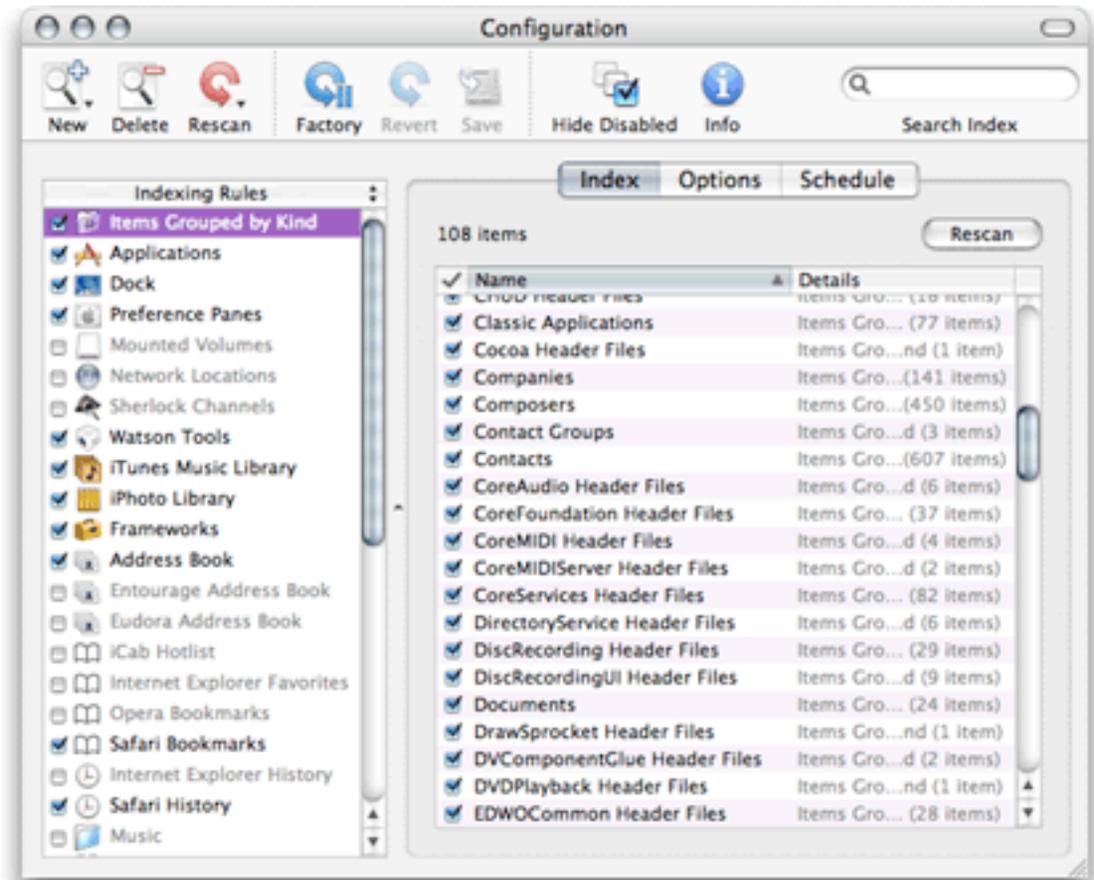
The only significant annoyance to LaunchBar 3 was the periodic scan that it would do to catalog the files on your disk. You couldn't use LaunchBar while it was scanning, it slowed down other applications, and it just took a long time. If you went too long between scans, LaunchBar wouldn't know about the files that you'd added since the last scan. So scanning was a pain, but you had to do it.

LaunchBar 4 improves on this in several ways. Scans now happen in the background and they're much faster. LaunchBar can also detect when it needs to do a scan. For example, if you drag an application into your Applications folder, LaunchBar will notice this immediately and scan the new application. Finally, LaunchBar saves its scanning data between sessions, so that it's available for use right after you launch it.

Sub-searches

LaunchBar is so useful that it's tempting to use it to access everything: applications, documents, folders, bookmarks, browser history items, songs, iPhoto albums, etc. But this can be overwhelming. At any given moment, I'm looking for a particular kind of file. If I want to launch an application, and I start typing, I want to see only *applications* whose names match what I'm typing. I never want to see "BBEdit" and "B.B. King" in the same

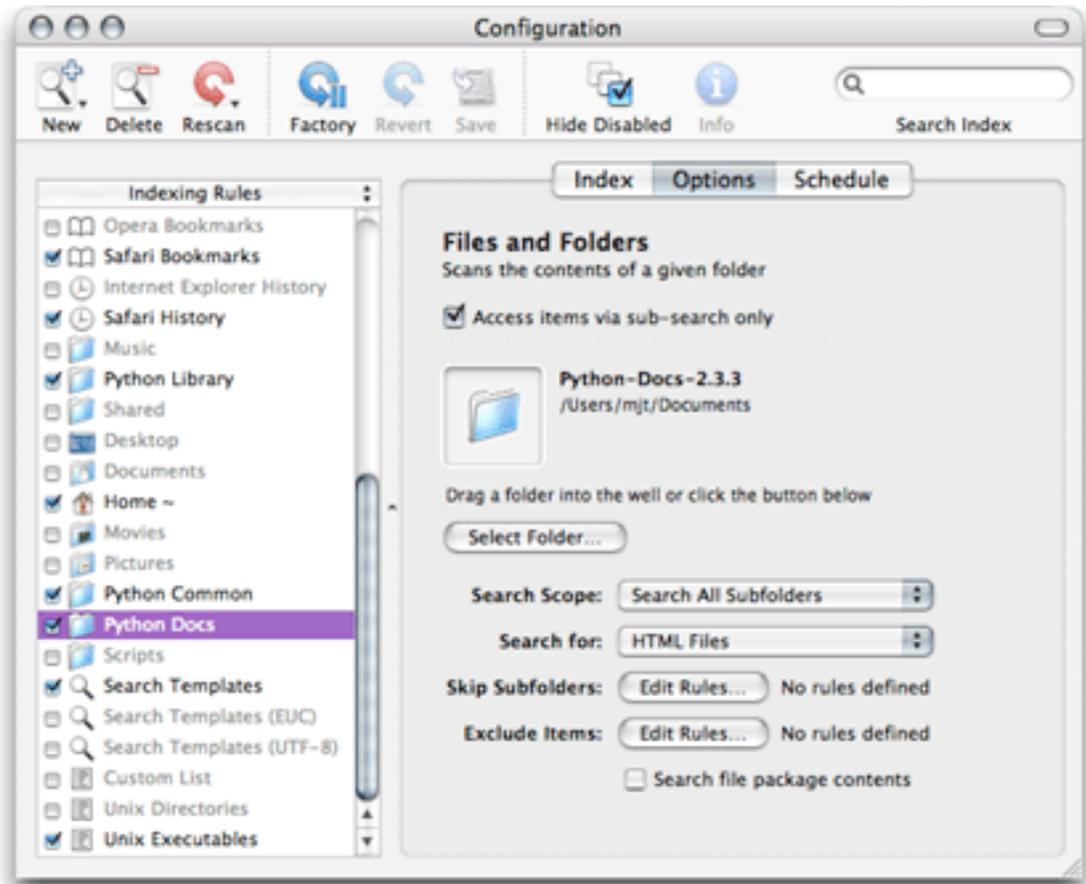
list of search results. LaunchBar's abbreviation system is most effective when it isn't searching *too* large a set of items at once, so with LaunchBar 3 I would prioritize. I mostly used it to access applications and Apple's developer documentation, so I told it not to scan most other types of files. This kept the number of items manageable and the search results relevant.



LaunchBar Indexing Rules

LaunchBar 4 addresses this problem with sub-searching, a simple idea with far-reaching consequences. Different types of items are partitioned into indexing rules, such as Applications, Address Book, and iTunes Library. The items from some indexing rules—

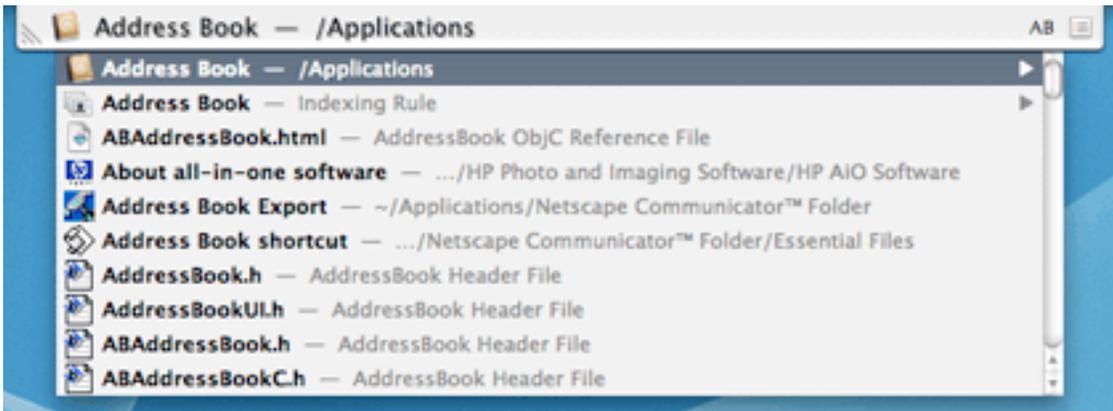
chase Applications and Frameworks (developer documentation)—are available at the top level. That is, they'll be searched when you activate LaunchBar and start typing. This is just like what happens in LaunchBar 3.



Indexing Rule Options

What's new is that you can designate the items from some indexing rules as only accessible from sub-searches. For example, if I want to search for a person, I type "AB." This brings up a list of applications and documentation files that match "AB," and it also includes an indexing rule item called "Address Book," which has a right-facing triangle next to it. This means that I can press the spacebar when it's selected. When I do, the list changes to show the contents of the address book. I can browse them using the arrow

keys, or start typing to search *just the Address Book items*. This is known as a sub-search. The general pattern with sub-searches is that you type two search strings: the first selects the indexing rule, and the second searches within that indexing rule.



Typing “AB” brings up a list of files, applications, and the Address Book indexing rule.

Sub-searches let you use LaunchBar to find all different kinds of items. Now, the only penalty for enabling lots of indexing rules is that LaunchBar uses more RAM.

Browsing

Any time you are in the middle of a search or sub-search, you can use LaunchBar to *browse*. In a Finder column view window, typing the left arrow key moves you left one column into the containing folder of the selected item. So it is with LaunchBar. (LaunchBar only shows one column at a time, however, as does the iPod.) Similarly, the right arrow key lets you delve into folders. You can type some letters to search the contents of the folder that you’re browsing.

You can thus browse the entire contents of your Mac from within LaunchBar, and doing so is quick and easy. You type some letters to choose the folder or file at which you want to start browsing. This is like opening a Finder window showing an arbitrary location on your

disk, and you can do so by only typing a few letters. Then you can browse up and down the file hierarchy. At any point during the browse, you can apply one of LaunchBar's commands to the selected item.

Commands	Window	Help
Show Running Applications		⌘R
Show Recent Items		⌘B
Get Finder Selection		⌘G
Drop Finder Selection		⌘D
New Folder...		⇧⌘N
Rename...		⇧⌘R
Duplicate		⇧⌘D
Get Info		⌘I
Move to Trash		⌘⌫
Eject		⌘E
Open Location...		⌘L
Open Terminal Here...		⌘T
Run Terminal Command Here...		⌘⇧⌘T
Run Terminal Command With...		⇧⌘T

Commands

Of course, you aren't limited to browsing the file system. You can browse the contents of any indexing rule, and LaunchBar synthesizes a hierarchy for browsing purposes. For example, browsing the iTunes library lets you explore songs grouped by artist or album, as with the iPod. You can browse the iPhoto library by album. You can browse the address book, drilling down through groups and individuals to find addresses or phone numbers. Selecting a phone number displays it in large type. If an individual works for a company, you can drill into the company to browse the other people in your address book who work there, a feature not present in Apple's Address Book application.

In fact, when browsing you can even search within individual files. With a text file selected, press the spacebar and type a search string. LaunchBar will then let you browse the lines of the file that contain your search string, grep-style. This is like having a lightweight database at your fingertips. Unfortunately, LaunchBar requires that the text files have a suitable file extension; it doesn't honor HFS type codes.

Search Templates

LaunchBar isn't limited to searching the contents of your Mac. The search templates feature lets you access any number of Internet search engines from within LaunchBar. Just type the first few letters of the name of the engine and press the spacebar. It is as if you are performing a sub-search on Google or VersionTracker, except that the search results are displayed in your Web browser rather than in LaunchBar. LaunchBar ships with support for about 25 search engines, and if you understand URL query strings it's easy to add more. All in all, search templates are like having [Huevos or iSeek](#) built into LaunchBar, only better. With LaunchBar, you can select the search template that you want using LaunchBar's adaptive abbreviation technology, and it doesn't clutter your screen with another widget.



Using a Search Template to Search Wikipedia

Scripting

LaunchBar sure gets a lot of mileage out of the space bar. You can use it to sub-search or browse an indexing rule or with a search template to search IMDB, Wikipedia, Google, or other sites. You can also use it to pass parameters to Unix tools or AppleScripts. For example, if you press spacebar with the `traceroute` tool selected, you can type the address of a server and LaunchBar will open a Terminal window with a `traceroute` to it. In general, text that you type is passed as a command-line argument to the tool. Likewise, you can write an AppleScript with a `handle_string()` handler, and LaunchBar will invoke the handler with your typed string as the parameter. An example script dials phone numbers using [Skype](#).

Conclusion

LaunchBar 3 was already one of my favorite utilities, and version 4 is a huge improvement. Aside from the new feature mentioned above, it feels much more polished. For example, in version 3 the Configurations window, which lets you manage the indexing rules, was somewhat confusing. The new Configurations window provides more options, but it seems less complex. The documentation is also improved.

There are other utilities that can do a lot of what LaunchBar does, but I think LaunchBar is the best. It's not that LaunchBar has a killer feature that the others lack, but that to me it seems more refined. The main widget is compact and unobtrusive. It searches faster. The abbreviation algorithm is smarter. The preferences and options are presented more clearly. Features seem to fit together naturally, packing a lot of power into a simple interface.

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Review: PolyRingtone Converter 1.0.1

by Chris Lawson, clawson@atpm.com

Developer: [Andy Drabble](#)

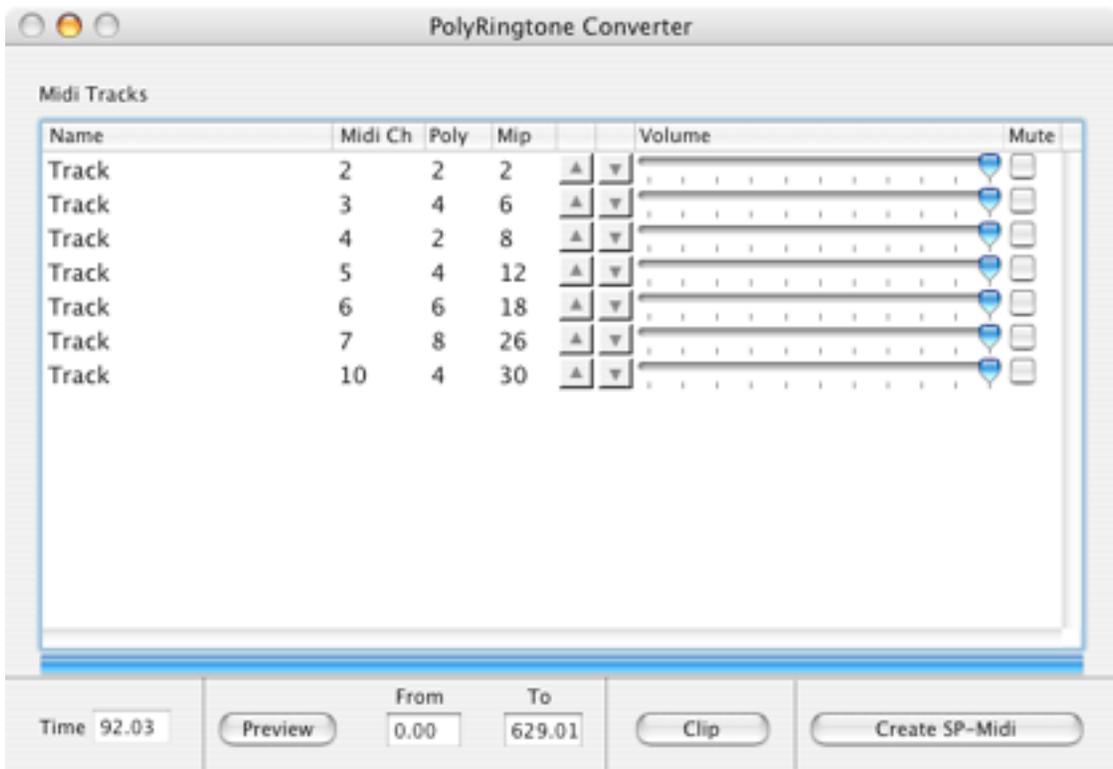
Price: \$15

Requirements: Mac OS X 10.2.8

Trial: Feature-limited



Andy Drabble's PolyRingtone Converter tempts the user with the promise of creating scalable, polyphonic MIDI (SP-MIDI) files that are optimized for the limited MIDI sequencers in modern cell phones, allowing users with data cables or Bluetooth to circumvent the outrageous prices charged by cell phone providers for downloadable ringtones. Unfortunately, this poorly implemented and feature-poor application does little more than tempt.



The main—and seemingly only—window of PolyRingtone Converter is shown above after a MIDI file was imported. Tracks can be promoted or demoted in priority with the up and down arrows, but the user is left wondering why the Mac’s drag-and-drop capabilities aren’t put to use here. The window cannot be resized, though columns can be resized and rearranged as in many Mac applications, making the omission of drag-and-drop capability for track priority even more puzzling.

The mute checkbox for each track works wonderfully within PolyRingtone Converter, but it seems to have no effect on the MIDI files the application creates. The volume control, on the other hand, does indeed have an effect on output, as well as within the application, but there is no ability to remove a track entirely. As a result, if you find a MIDI file with a couple what-the-heck-were-they-thinking tracks in it, you can only turn down their volume to about 10 percent of max, rather than eliminating them entirely. The best advice if this happens is to find a different MIDI file.

Clipping a song down to the portion you want to use as a ringtone works, but the textual interface for doing it is incredibly difficult to use. An iTunes-like song progress slider with movable start/stop markers would be a tremendous improvement. A true Help file, rather than the brief (though informative) Read Me, would also be welcome. The menus are littered with non-functional items and simple oversights, like a Preferences menu item that no amount of finagling will enable; non-functional Open, Save, and Save As commands; and the most egregious omission of all: no keyboard shortcut on the all-important “Import Midi File” menu item.

Finally, we come to the limitations of the unregistered demo version. The point of having demo versions of shareware is to provide potential customers a chance to evaluate the capabilities of the software, but with some limitation imposed to encourage purchase of the full version. In PolyRingtone Converter’s case, this limitation is that no more than approximately four seconds of SP-MIDI data will be generated from an edited file. Three to four seconds of export is a nearly impossible basis on which to judge the effectiveness of modifications to a song. Unregistered users will find that they really don’t know whether the song will sound any better or not, and charging \$15 to find out seems excessive, considering the other serious drawbacks of this application.

The realities of the fast-changing cell phone market may doom this application to an early grave. Virtually all recent cell phones with Bluetooth, the primary means of transferring ringtones from your Mac to your phone, support 32 MIDI voices and/or MP3 ringtones.

The more voices a phone supports, the better standard MIDI files will sound, and the less need there is for SP-MIDI conversion. And, obviously, support for MP3 ringtones renders MIDI files obsolete. While a full-featured, well-thought-out SP-MIDI generator would certainly be worth \$15 to custom-ringtone-crazy users who already have the means to transfer files from a Mac to their phone, PolyRingtone Converter fairly screams, "Keep your money in your pocket."

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Review: WireTap Pro 1.0.1

by Eric Blair, eblair@atpm.com

Developer: [Ambrosia Software, Inc.](#)

Price: \$19

Requirements: Mac OS X 10.2

Trial: Fully-featured (30 days, certain recordings are watermarked)



Often times, it's far easier to get something out of a box than it is to put something back into said box; just asked anybody who's tried to jam a child's toy back into its original packaging. You could say the same thing about the audio on your Mac, with your sounds of choice playing the role of the toy and your Mac acting as the box. Making sound come out of your computer is relatively simple—you hit play in iTunes, you follow a link in Safari, you launch the game with the cool sound effects, or any number of other things.

The difficulty comes when you want to get audio back into your computer. Maybe there's a live feed broadcast over the Internet that you want to save for later. Or maybe your children want to record a message for the grandparents. Perhaps you just want to snatch a snippet off a DVD to use as a cell phone ringtone. You need some sort of program that can take the audio and turn it into a file that your computer/iPod/cell phone can understand.

Ambrosia Software's WireTap Pro may be able to fulfill all of your needs.

Wiretapping

When I think of a wiretap, I think of the cop shows you find on TV—some number of police officers and technicians in a van listening and recording everything said over a tapped phone line. It would seem as though there's a good deal involved with tapping a telephone line. To the person using the tapped phone, though, it ideally doesn't appear that anything is out of the ordinary.

WireTap Pro is sort of the same way—it's very unobtrusive while it is running, but there's a lot going on behind the curtain. Fortunately, WireTap Pro doesn't require a van full of technicians to operate. In fact, if you just want to record the audio coming out of your computer, you can be up and running with a single mouse click.

WireTap Pro features a very simple user interface that exposes the application's basic functionality. The main window features three large buttons for starting a recording, pausing a recording, and stopping a recording. At first glance, it looks a little like the left portion of the miniature iTunes controller.



The WireTap Pro controller and the small iTunes controller.

The bottom portion of the controller contains a marquee, which displays some of WireTap's current settings.

Additional controls are located in a drawer that slides out from the bottom of the controller. From here, you can quickly toggle between recording your Mac's output and input; enable or disable Play Through; and access your Preferences, Audio Settings, and Recording Sessions.



WireTap Pro's extended controller.

Recording Options

WireTap Pro offers a plethora of options for recording your audio. With a bit of tinkering, you can probably come up some combination of settings to meet your needs.

As I said earlier, WireTap Pro can record all audio that is played out over your Mac's speakers. This already gives you a huge number of sources from which to pluck your audio. That's not WireTap Pro's only trick, however—it is also capable of recording any audio that comes in via a line input. On my PowerBook, this means I can record content using the built-in microphone. Theoretically, this also opens up a whole slew of other possibilities. You can add a Griffin iMic to your system and record sound from any device that can be connected to the iMic's line-in port. WireTap Pro recognizes the microphone on the iSight. Heck, I'll bet you could even record yourself using a Bluetooth headset. Basically, if a device shows up in the Input tab of the Sound Preference Pane, WireTap Pro can record audio from it.

Sadly, I don't actually own any of these devices, which is why I say they should "theoretically" work. I don't see any reason why this shouldn't be the case.

Additionally, WireTap Pro also includes support for the [Griffin radioSHARK](#). This is another device I don't own, but the [demo movie](#) of this feature seems very impressive. It appears you can tune the radioSHARK to any channel and record the broadcast using WireTap Pro. Given our own Chris Lawson's reaction to the radioSHARK software, you might want to consider WireTap Pro simply as a replacement for the radioSHARK recording interface.

WireTap Pro can convert the recorded audio into one of 4 format: AIFF, MP3, MPEG-4/AAC, and QuickTime movies. Each format has its own set of options; the AIFF or QuickTime movie options also allow you specify a compressor. If you know the final destination for your recordings, you can tailor your settings appropriately.

You also have multiple options for what you do with the generated audio files. The obvious choice is to save them to your hard drive. (In fact, WireTap Pro allows for something I'd love to see added to Snapz Pro X, Ambrosia's screen capture application—the ability to save your files *anywhere* on the hard drive.) At this point, it's

just like any other file on your system. Double-click the icon and it opens in the appropriate program. WireTap Pro can also add files directly to iTunes or any iTunes-compatible MP3 player, including the iPod.



WireTap Pro offers multiple options for generating audio files.

If you're saving to iTunes or an iPod, WireTap can also add you new audio file directly to a playlist.

The idea of saving to an iPod took me a little while to figure out. I tried and I tried, but I couldn't see any difference between saving to iTunes and saving to my iPod—in both cases, the new file was added to iTunes and copied to the iPod the next time I synced. Once I remembered I could also manually manage the contents of my iPod, I saw how saving to an iPod is supposed to work—the new file was created directly on my iPod, bypassing iTunes entirely. In retrospect, this makes sense. It would have been nice if this had been mentioned in the manual, though.

One other issue I had with saving to the iPod was that WireTap Pro did not generate unique file names if I elected to have it automatically save files when I finished recording. It appears that WireTap Pro looks to see if a file name already exists and, if it does, generates a new, unique name. This doesn't work with the iPod—it looks like WireTap Pro uses multiple folders when saving files, so it doesn't detect that a name is already in use. As a result, you can end up with a number of tracks that have the same name.

Also, WireTap Pro's support for metadata is a little weak. When you save MP3 files, WireTap Pro fills in some of the ID3 tags with information about the recording. The Album tag indicates the files source (for instance, Mac Audio or Built-in Audio), the Artist tag is set to WireTap Pro, and the Genre is set to Sound Clip. None of the other audio file formats include any of these tags.

At the very least, it would be nice to see these tags in AAC files—the information would be especially nice on files that are transferred to iPods. Beyond this basic support, the ability to specify your own values for these tags would be useful. For instance, if you use WireTap Pro to record your own podcasts, you might want to set your Artist tag to your name and the Album tag to the name of your broadcast.

WireTap Pro also supports Play Through, where any audio recorded is also played out over the computer's speakers. Due to the placement of the microphone on my PowerBook, turning on this feature generated some rather horrid feedback, but it worked extremely well when I plugged in my headphones. Realistically, though, this feature is something you would use when you otherwise couldn't hear what WireTap Pro was recording, not when you are recording yourself using your computer's microphone.

One minor problem I have with WireTap Pro is that the Finder comes to the front whenever I stop a recording. As I said, this is pretty minor, but it's still annoying.

Recording Sessions

Support for Recording Sessions is one of WireTap Pro's biggest features. The short description of Recording Sessions is that they are saved copies of WireTap Pro's Preferences and Audio Settings. While it is true that Recording Sessions save pretty much every recording-related preference (except for Play Through), they also have additional options.



Recording Sessions can be scheduled for automatic recording or simply saved for later use.

The first major option related to Sessions is that they can be scheduled. If you like to hear your local radio station's Top 10 Countdown, but actually have to work during the day, you can simply have WireTap Pro tune your radioSHARK to the station for a set period of time. WireTap Pro can also automatically record streams off the Internet, assuming you have the proper client software installed.

WireTap Pro doesn't really control your scheduled recordings; it delegates most that role to iCal. On the plus side, you get to use a real calendar for keeping track of your recordings. WireTap Pro recordings are exactly the same as any other iCal entries. If you need to reschedule a recording, you simply drag it to a new time slot. If you normally record

something every weekday, but want to skip next Tuesday, you simply delete next Tuesday's entry from your calendar. If you sync your calendars to .Mac or an iPod, your scheduled recordings can be automatically backed-up.



WireTap Pro's scheduled recordings show up in iCal like any other scheduled event.

The one downside I can see to this scheme is that you can clutter up your calendar with radio recordings. Of course, you can always hide the WireTap Pro calendar to get rid of the clutter.

The only schedule-related task that WireTap Pro seems to retain control over is the initial scheduling and unscheduling of recordings. When you initially schedule a recording, it gets added to your calendar one hour in the future. You then switch over to iCal to set the actual time and date for the recording, along with any other information. If you want to stop a scheduled recording, you can either delete it from iCal or use the Unschedule command in WireTap Pro. The latter option removes all occurrences of the recording from your calendar. If you later decide you want to reschedule a recording, WireTap Pro remembers the original scheduling information.

Recording Sessions don't need to be scheduled in order to work. If you just have a particular configuration of audio inputs and file formats you like to use, then you can simply create an unscheduled Recording Session. When you want to record a particular session, you simply select it from the Sessions menu.

Another main feature of Recording Sessions is the ability to perform pre- and post-processing. WireTap Pro can run an AppleScript, launch a program, open a file, or open a URL before or after recording. In my mind, the most obvious use of this feature is automatically starting Internet streams at a particular time. There are any number of ways this could be used, however. For instance, you could write an AppleScript that would post your recording to the Web and then send out an e-mail notification to anybody who was interested in the recording.

The final big feature of Recording Sessions is the ability to share sessions. Once you have everything configured just right to record the nightly 4 AM test of the Emergency Alert System, you can export your Recording Session and share it with anybody else who uses WireTap Pro.

WireTap Pro ships with a number of sample Recording Sessions for Internet streams. The majority of these are for NPR, which is available for both RealPlayer and Windows Media Player. Whenever I imported any of these sessions, though, they were all configured to try and open their streams in RealPlayer. As you might imagine, RealPlayer doesn't work particularly well with Windows Media streams. I believe this is an issue with the included Recording Session files and not a problem with WireTap Pro.

My other complaint about shared Recording Sessions is that there's no way to import a session from inside of WireTap Pro. You either have to go to the Finder and double-click the Recording Session file or drag the Recording Session file to the WireTap Pro icon. You can't even drag the file to the Recording Sessions window. This could be addressed by the addition of an "Add Shared Recording Session..." command to the Sessions menu.

Scheduled Recording Sessions allow you to work around one of WireTap Pro's shortcomings—the inability to record for a set period of time. One of the first things I tried to do with WireTap Pro was to grab the soundtrack from Steve Jobs Macworld keynote webcast so I could later listen to it on my iPod. Since I was heading out, I wanted WireTap Pro to stop recording after a set period of time. The only way to accomplish this from within WireTap Pro is to create and schedule a Recording Session for the length of the keynote broadcast (though an AppleScript to do timed recordings is [available](#) from the Ambrosia Software Web site.).

Conclusion

When I started using WireTap Pro, it took me a little while to really get into the flow of the application. While it is extremely easy to start recording using the default settings, things can get a bit daunting once you start getting into WireTap Pro's more advanced features. Eventually, things just started to click for me and I started to realize the extent of what I could do with WireTap Pro.

WireTap Pro is still a 1.0 product, so there are understandably some places where it could be improved. I've already mentioned that timed recordings would be useful and that certain aspects of saving files to an iPod could be improved. The ability to spread recordings over several files would also be useful for generating several smaller files that could be posted to the Internet instead of generating one large file.

Small issues aside, I've found WireTap Pro extremely useful. I'm actually a little disappointed that I don't own more gadgets capable of working with WireTap Pro—I got rather intrigued when I started considering all the different things that seem possible.

If you ever want to either get audio into your Mac or keep the audio coming out of your Mac, check out WireTap Pro.

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