

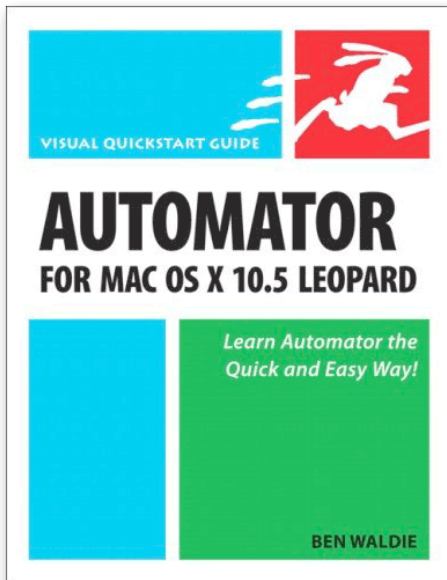
Review: Automator

Peter Fitchett

When I started programming on Apple computers (the Apple II+), there were no built-in user interfaces that I didn't have to write myself from basic language facilities, and any ideas of a workflow to accomplish a task usually consisted of running the program on this disk after the one on some other disk. Today, getting started with programming is far more intimidating with an extensive user interface to learn. Luckily, there are many applications available to do tasks that we want to do, so we don't have to spend our lives trying to reinvent their functions, and sometimes their elegance. Unfortunately, though, we are still spending needless time repeatedly putting these applications together in particular sequences to accomplish jobs we want done. For example, we seldom just use Photoshop in isolation - we first need to get a photo from somewhere, and afterwards, we want to do something with the edited photo, such as email it. Automator is aimed at helping us to link repetitive steps together so that they happen quickly and accurately; saving us time and errors. And we don't have to learn how to program to use it.

Of course, we still need to learn to use Automator and how it interfaces to our applications, and this is where you may want to reach for a copy of the Visual Quickstart Guide: Automator For Mac Os X 10.5 Leopard,

by Ben Waldie, and published by Peachpit Press. So what can you expect?



The style of the book is great for the novice user. Following an extensive introduction which describes where Automator fits in the scheme of things, there are 14 chapters which step us through different aspects of building our custom scripts, and 3 appendices providing examples and developer resources. When you take all this into account, even the intermediate user will find the book useful, but once you graduate to the more experienced levels,

you will leave the book in favour of doing your own thing with assistance of a number of internet resource sites.

The Visual Quickstart Guides have been around for a while and provides a well tested recipe for presenting necessary information at a novice level. Each page is written in a simple direct manner giving the clear instructions required to accomplish the topic being discussed. There are clear screen images showing what you will see, and a Tips section on many of the pages telling you additional information about what you can do, or what may go wrong and how you can avoid getting into trouble.

Ben Waldie is an established author contributing numerous Automator and Applescript columns to Apple.com and to Macworld and MacTech magazines, as well as writing the book: AppleScripting the Finder. Ben is the president of Automated Workflows LLC (<http://www.automatedworkflows.com>) and has developed professional automated solutions for such companies as Adobe, Apple CNN and Microsoft. He is also a popular presenter at Macworld Conference & Expo and other events.

Starting at the beginning, Ben starts by introducing us to the basic components of Automator and its development interface, then pushes us into the learning curve with a few basic workflows. From there each chapter builds on the basics with further details on how to create workflows and how to work with Actions; and when there are no suitable Actions available, how to record manual events. Having covered all the basics of Automator, Ben then takes us through Saving and running workflows, and the necessary associated requirement, Troubleshooting, which, if you are like me at this stage, you could well need to ensure the scripts actually do what you wanted.

With the basics behind you now, it is now time to lift the level a little and look at some slightly more advanced tools. First you will learn how to customise Automator at better suit how you want to work, and you will learn about adding plug-ins to extend Automator's capabilities. Then the more powerful tools in Automator are introduced; how to construct looping workflows, how to use variables to pass information through the different steps of your workflow, and how to build advanced workflows interfacing to AppleScript and to the Unix shell environment.

If your use of your computer involves regular repetitive workflows, then you can benefit from automating some of your activities. Automator For Mac Os X 10.5 Leopard could be just the book to help you get control over your computer, and save yourself some time and possible frustration.

Now, if only I could find some way to assimilate all this information without having to do all the hard work ... that would be something great!

Thanks to Peachpit Press (<http://www.peachpit.com>) for providing a copy of this book for review.