



Mac OS X Hacks: 100 Industrial-Strength Tips & Tools

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Reviewed by Peggy Skelly

To Hack or not to Hack? Perhaps the word "hack" is becoming overused, for these tips and tricks generally do not involve any hardcore modifications to the OS, but rather little tweaks here and there to let you get the most out of OS X, the first user-friendly (mostly), industrial-grade UNIX truly meant for the desktop of both the system administrator and his grandmother.

Mac OS X Hacks is filled with quite a mixture of information related to Mac OS X and OS X-based applications. There is a little something for everyone - from the computer neophyte to uber-geek. Topics range from booting and file system issues to the basic use of iPhoto and iTunes. Each of the 100 "hacks" are intended to be self-contained and can be read separately in any order. Many of the "hacks" don't really hack into the system or change its behavior, but are tidbits of information describing system features. The variety of the information comes from the diversity of the dozen or so contributors to the book. Consequently, some of the hacks are geared to an audience familiar with the command line, shell and perl scripts, whereas other tips use are intended for those already familiar with Mac OS 9.

The first chapters cover information about the file system and a bit about the boot process, providing the casual user more than they ever might have wanted to know, but never really giving enough detail for the true techie.

Perhaps the most useful section for the average user provides a survey of the features of the i-Applications - most of which are readily apparent from an overview of the applications menu and preferences. There are over a dozen tips for getting more from iTunes (including how to set up your own internet stream), to how to jump right into instant messaging. There is also a wealth of information for the user who wants to synch up with a Bluetooth-enabled phone, or to use it as a controller for their Mac.

Those of us who have made the transition from OS 9 and before are often flustered by the differences in function and appearance in OS X. One chapter discusses several shareware applications to modify the system appearance until it becomes a bit more familiar, and once you have become more comfortable, it shows how OS X can take you well beyond where OS 9 ever could. Since everyone has their own opinion about how the interface should look and operate, this chapter, at least, introduces some of the possibilities and the web sites referenced can be a good starting place to find the particular tools or add-ins for you.

The deep beauty of OS X is not in its "lickable" Aqua interface (going away in 10.3, anyway), but in the power any user can harness without knowing a single UNIX command. But eventually, you may find yourself growing curious about how those pretty graphics translate to actual working commands. If so, there is a whole chapter that briefly introduces the terminal and some basic unix commands. By the end of this chapter, you should be able to navigate the file system and even write some rudimentary shell scripts to automate some basic OS chores.

The last third of the book covers networking, e-mail and web topics. Although some of the hacks in this section are very detailed and technically oriented, like setting up sendmail, they are not especially oriented to troubleshooting particular problems.

By far the book's strength is its many references to web sites with shareware and additional information. This seeming hodgepodge of topics is actually blended together with a cohesive layout, organized into well-defined topics. The authors have done a good job making each hack as self-contained as possible with ample cross-references between tips.

Rating: Five out of Five stars

- +wide variety of hacks, hacks available for all levels of users, good references
- some areas not technical enough for "true techie"