Introduction: Advanced Secrets of Mac OS X

I’ve been using a Mac as my desktop since 1985, with a short detour into Windows (don’t hate me!) in the late 1990s and a much longer detour into Linux in the early and mid 2000s (I still love Linux, but now my usage of it is pretty much limited to servers, where it is excellent). When Mac OS X came out, I thought it was a brilliant move on Apple’s part: take a rock solid, dependable UNIX core and put a beautiful, supremely usable GUI on top of it. As a confirmed UNIX lover (and author!), moving back to the Mac was easy and exciting for me, and my appreciation has only grown as Apple has further developed Mac OS X with Snow Leopard. When I was asked to write this book, I jumped at the chance.

The title of this book is Mac OS X Snow Leopard for Power Users. So what’s a Power User? Why should power users be interested in Mac OS X, an operating system famed for its ease-of-use? And what will power users learn in this book?

Power Users and Mac OS X

A power user is defined by Wikipedia as “a user of a personal computer who has the ability to use advanced features of programs which are beyond the abilities of ‘normal’ users, but is not necessarily capable of programming and system administration” (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Power_user). That’s pretty accurate, except that I would contend that any reasonably competent computer user has to be a system administrator these days, as computers (and yes, even Macs) have gotten more complex. Fortunately, Macs are still much easier for individual users to administer than Windows machines, so they have that advantage.

So if power users are interested in “advanced features,” why should they be interested in Mac OS X? Isn’t the Mac focused on usability and ease-of-use? What’s there for power users?
My answer is, a lot! First of all, remember that Mac OS X is UNIX under the hood, which means that a whole universe of programs, techniques, and tools is available to those who are curious (this was one of the big reasons that I happily switched back to Mac OS X as my full-time operating system). In fact, the combination of UNIX automation tools plus Apple’s own work in that area (AppleScript and Automator, which I cover quite a bit in this book, are pre-eminent here) means that power users can get more done, much faster.

Unfortunately, a few misinformed folks still hold the erroneous belief that Apple so tightly controls Mac OS X that users face limited choices in almost every area: settings, programs, and usage. This is just not true, and power users in particular will find that Mac OS X has both power and a kind of elegantly hidden complexity, in which it is possible to get under the hood and tweak and change things at will, while at the same time preserving the Mac’s famed ease of use, consistency, and refinement.

Here’s one example of that elegantly hidden complexity: when “quote-unquote normal users look at the Mac’s System Preferences, they see a (perhaps) overwhelming number of choices. When power users look at System Preferences, they see options, but they also notice things that are not there. It turns out that System Preferences only displays a subset of the total number of preferences that are possible on Mac OS X. Apple effectively hides the rest by not presenting them in the GUI (Graphical User Interface); instead, you enable and disable those preferences on the command line using Terminal.

Want to automatically play movies when you open them in QuickTime Player? Enter this on the command line:

defaults write com.apple.QuickTimePlayerX MGPlayMovieOnOpen 1

Likewise for QuickTime Player, if you’d like to automatically show subtitles on movies that support them, try this on the command line:

defaults write com.apple.QuickTimePlayerX MGEnableCCAndSubtitlesOnOpen 1

Don’t like the stripes that show in Finder’s List View? Use this on the command line and then restart the Finder:

defaults write com.apple.finder FXListViewStripes -bool FALSE

Hate the way that iTunes 10 runs the Close, Minimize, and Zoom buttons vertically, like a stoplight? Want to go back to the old horizontal view? Type this on the command line:

defaults write com.apple.iTunes full-window -1

That’s the kind of stuff that power users love. But here’s what’s nifty about Mac OS X—if you want to use the command line to make those changes, great. You can, and it’s no problem.

But if you don’t want to have to remember those, or you get sick of looking them up, or you just don’t want to have to whip out Terminal all the time (“What’s wrong with you?!” he asked in mock horror), you can instead use a third-party Preference Pane called Secrets, available for free from http://secrets.blacktree.com. Install Secrets, go to Finder ➤ System Preferences ➤ Secrets, and you’ll see the hundreds of possibilities shown in Figure 1–1.