

J O H N C A R T E R

Prescott Mac Users Group

BENTO

A REVIEW



Bento, by FileMaker

a review by John Carter

The Package

Dan Simpson came to my house on April 3, 2008 at 9 A.M. Okay, it was Erica who knocked on the door and handed me the package that I had been waiting for. Bento. A database program by FileMaker. Instead of a single package, there were two. A small box and a nicely packaged 8.5" by 11" bound, plastic covered document labeled *Editorial reviewer's Guide*.

The box contained the CD, instructions for installing the CD, and a document describing FileMaker Customer Services. Not sure I was going to need that. I'm not the kind of person who bothers with installation instructions or details of what my legal obligations and rights are regarding software. But I took a look anyway.

But since I am reviewing Bento, it did seem somewhat necessary to give the Reviewer's Guide a once-through. My first impression was that this 18 page booklet was going to be all the documentation I would need, and at the very least give me directions on how to review the product - after all, it did say it is a *Reviewer's Guide*.

The Documentation

It is probably appropriate here to give some idea about what Bento is and isn't, just like what is mentioned in the Reviewer's Guide.

Bento is a personal database enabling a Mac user to organize virtually anything on the Mac.

Bento is not a database that can be shared with other users or that you can add scripts to.

Given that much information, I am now confronted with the possibility that I might have to get organized if I am to actually use this product.

As to the content of the *Guide*, other than the usual marketing effort to get me all hyped up to use the product (and get organized), it walks through three simple exercises, which I presume are the basics for how to use Bento. These exercises are 1) do more with iCal and Address Book, 2) create a library to store your data, and 3) create data relationships the easy way. Now I'm not sure how much better I can make iCal or Address Book - they seem pretty complete as they are. I was definitely drawn to knowing how I could create data relationships with the mess I have in my Mac.

I thought it would be nice right here to add some pizzazz to this review with some pictures.



Substance Meets Style



Bring It Together



See Things Your Way

Okay, time to start organizing. The box, installation brochure, and customer service brochure goes in the trash, the CD envelope gets taped to the inside back cover of the *Reviewer's Guide* and gets squeezed in with other software items in my bookcase, and the CD finds a number slot in my *discgear*.

The Software

To install the software I had to break a seal on the CD envelope. I never like doing that for fear of really making a mess of the envelope. Do I use my fingers or a knife? Okay, fingers. It didn't matter. I destroyed the flap anyway. But the license key is still intact.

After cleaning off the debris found on the CD, the CD went into the drive. I expected something to pop up on the screen. There it was. A nicely done window complete with pictures and the words "Drag to install". I can do that. This is where I realized that the price of the product and the size of the product seem to be a match. \$49 for 49 MB.

Oops! There's an icon that says "Read Before You Install.pdf". A little late, because I'm usually in such a hurry to install and start working on things right away. So I opened this and discovered it was pretty much the usual stuff about system requirements (which I met), how to install (follow the onscreen instructions), and all the acknowledgements (what is the Growl Project?)

And there's the User Guide! I always have misgivings about copying a user guide to my Mac, especially when the filename is "User Guide.pdf". Once it gets copied to my Documents folder, I have to rename it and find an appropriate subfolder for it - the easier to find by. I have my own kind of organization in my Documents folder - a bunch of subfolders from A to Z. So it goes into the Documents/B folder and gets renamed to "Bento User Guide.pdf". I wonder how Bento is going to help me organize and access my documents.

After installing, I know from experience that I have to close the installation window and eject the CD. Now I have to do something with the CD and the license key on the envelope. I have a *discgear* CD holder that contains all my CDs, but it doesn't have a place to keep the license key. Right away I can see a need for Bento - how to keep track of where I put things.

Registration

After opening the product for the first time, entering the license key, user name, and registration was straightforward.

When Bento first comes up, the appearance of the main window is quite pleasant. I was also presented with the following choices:

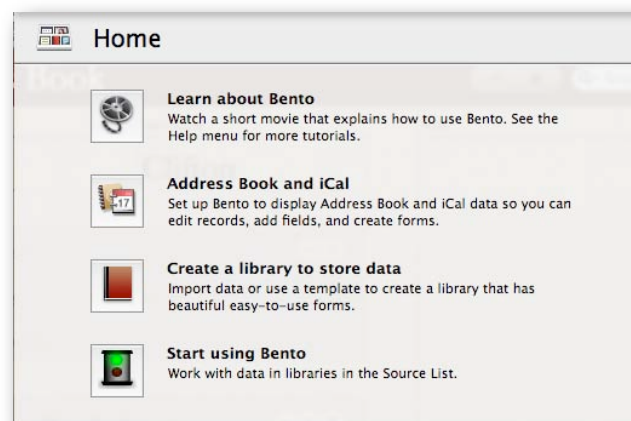


Figure 1

Getting Acquainted

The video is well worth watching and it is very short. Still, it is only an overview and not intended to be a full tutorial. After watching it, I was thinking how nice it would be to be able to share any new database I created, because Bento is intended only to be a personal database and you have to have Bento on a Mac to share. Maybe FileMaker Pro is really the way to go for me.

I noticed right away that my iCal and Address Book was already showing in the Source column of Bento (far left column of the main window), but I went ahead and selected to set up these items to show in Bento.

I looked carefully at the “Create a library to store data” selection. I don’t think I am ready yet to think about organizing anything, even my DVD collection.

So the next step was to select “Start using Bento”.

Address Book

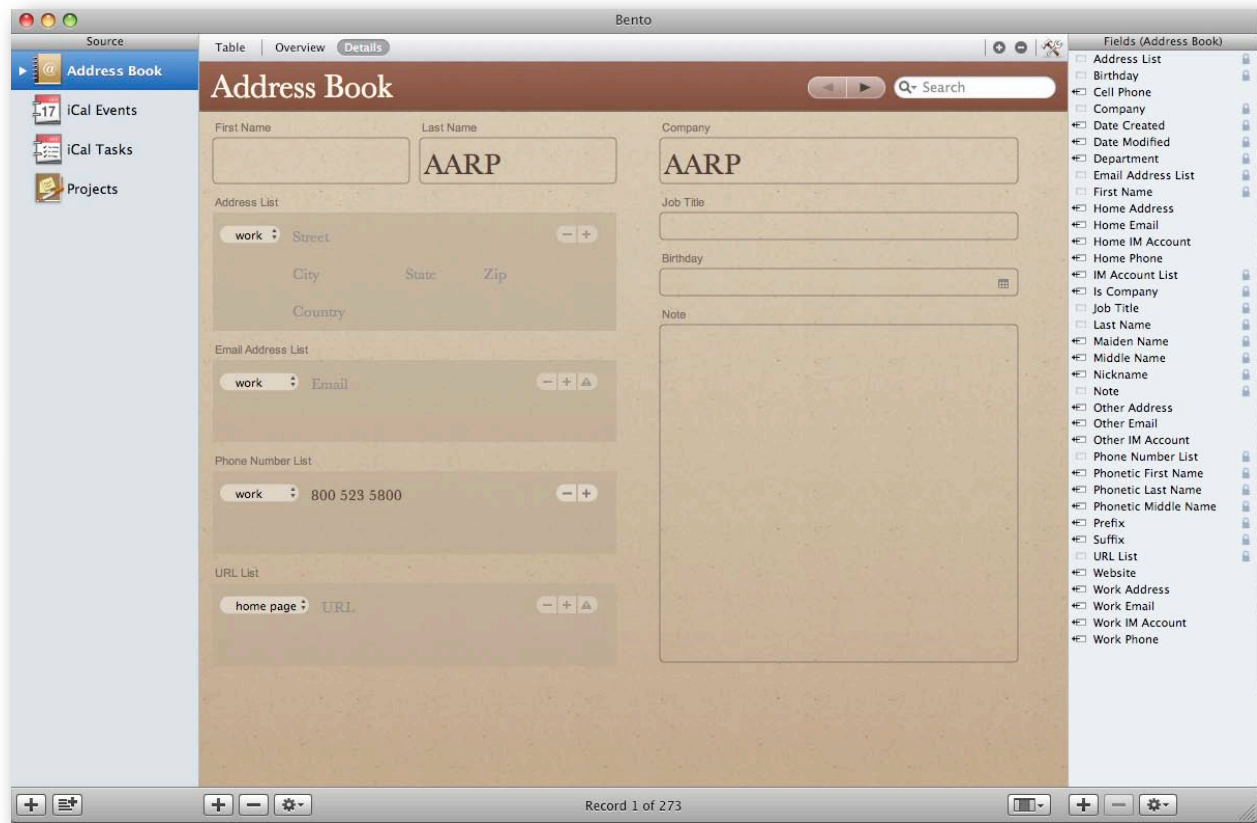


Figure 2

What was showing in Bento right away was the first alphabetical entry in my Address Book. All the fields that I was familiar with in the Address Book and that had data in them were there. The note field was also there, nice and large off to the right. Some fields were empty as I had not yet entered anything into those fields.

I noticed that as I entered data into these fields, or modified an existing one, the same record in Address Book was instantly updated. Scrolling through the address book was easy enough, and doing a search for any given person was also simple and easy. Even though it seemed very straightforward enough, I wasn't ready yet to start adding new fields to my address book.

In the Source column were entries for the three different address groups I had set up. Nice. What is missing from this list is the Smart Groups I had set up in the Address Book. Hopefully, I'll find a way to include them in this list at some point.

What is disturbing here is that alarms in Address Book do not show up here, and there is no way to add an alarm in Bento. This means having to keep both open if alarms are to be set or viewed or modified. This kind of makes Bento useless in this regard.

Bento has three views for the address book records: Table, Overview, and Details. In the Table view, selecting which fields to use and which fields to sort on was really easy. What I also like about this view is the header.

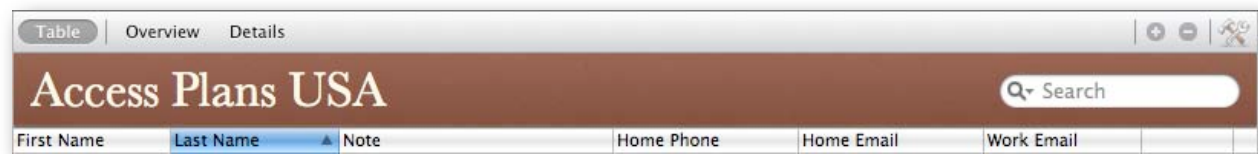


Figure 3

The plus, minus and tools icon on the far right are to add a new form, delete a form, or edit the contents of a form. These icons are disabled in the Table view.

Unlike a spreadsheet, double-clicking on any of the column separators does not adjust the width of the column. If you want to adjust the width of a column, you have to hover the mouse over the separator until it changes to a double-ended arrow and then click, hold, and drag the separator.

In the Overview and Details view, the default display shows a border around each of the fields. The border can be displayed or not, depending on the esthetics you want.

As seen in Figure 3, the background and all other features of the display such as the placement of the field labels can be changed using the tool icon.

Switching from the Overview to the Details view shows the window contents shifting from left to right or right to left (as though the non-visible view was hiding in the wings) depending on which view was last shown. Switching in and out of the Table view shows the contents fading in or out. Really nice - no sudden vision shock as the contents are changed.

iCal Events

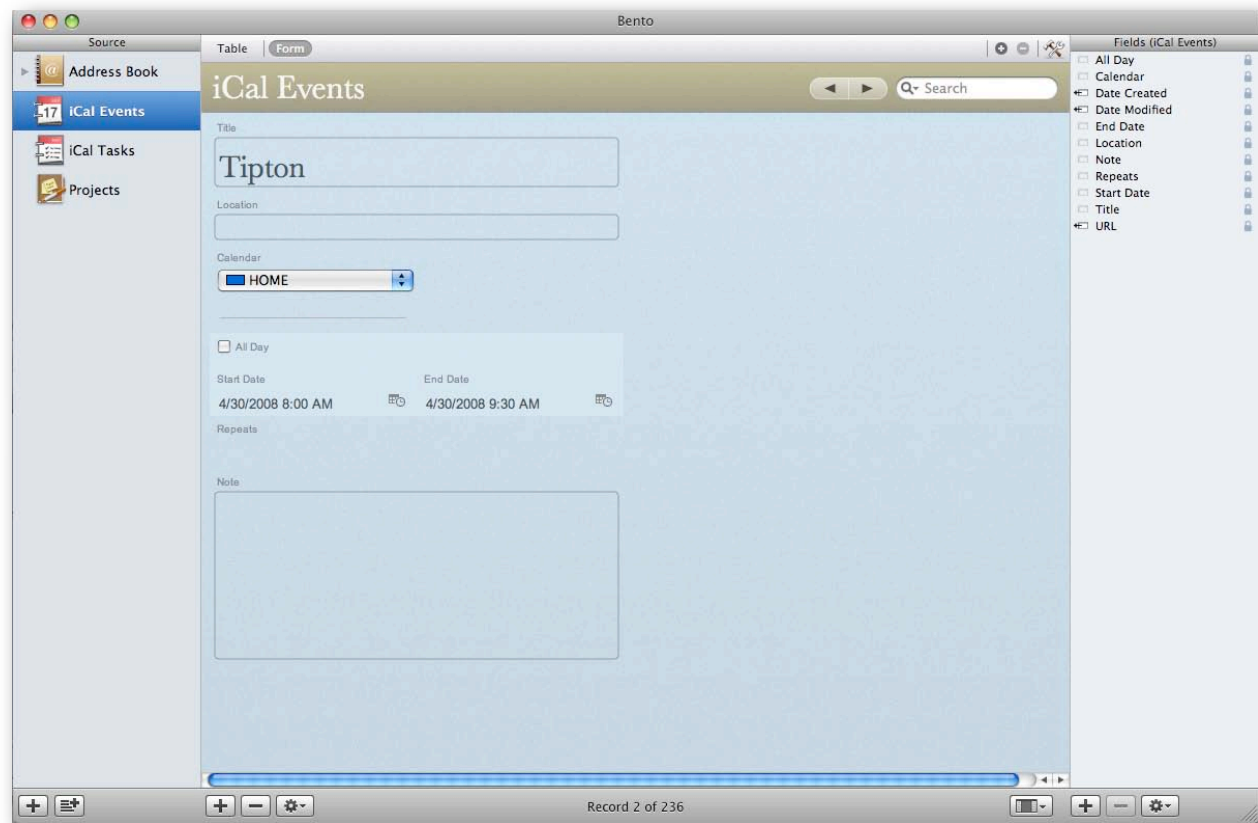


Figure 4

The default background for the iCal Events is blue. There are only two views available: Table and Form. In the Table view I quickly learned how to sort the entries by date and discovered just as easily how to delete entries older than a certain date, making sure to delete only the selected entries and not ALL, which would have deleted repeating entries beyond the selected dates.

I also discovered that one of my iCal Events entries needed to be updated to be a repeating entry, but I could not find a way to do this in Bento, so I have to switch over to iCal application to make that change. This tells me that there really isn't any way to edit certain fields of the iCal Events in Bento. In fact, when I attempted to add a repeating event in Bento, I could not find a way to add anything to the Repeats field, whether I am in the Table view of the Form view. Again, I am asking myself why should I use Bento if I have to keep the iCal application open?

One handy feature for the calendar form is that there is a calendar/clock icon next to each of the Start Date and End Date fields. Cute, but I would have thought that by pressing RETURN that it would accept the changes I made there. Actually, the counter-intuitive way to accept the changes is to click on the Close button in the upper left.

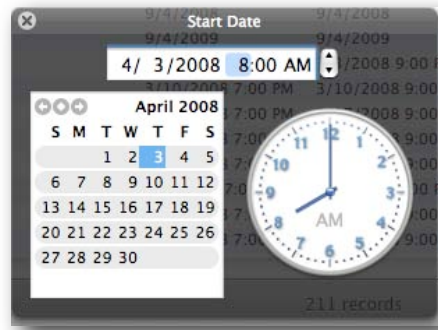


Figure 5

When you add a calendar entry in Bento, by default it creates a new group named Bento in iCal application. You can select the group for the entry. See the Calendar field in Figure 4.

iCal Tasks

iCal Tasks showed nothing exceptional, if only because I don't have any tasks.

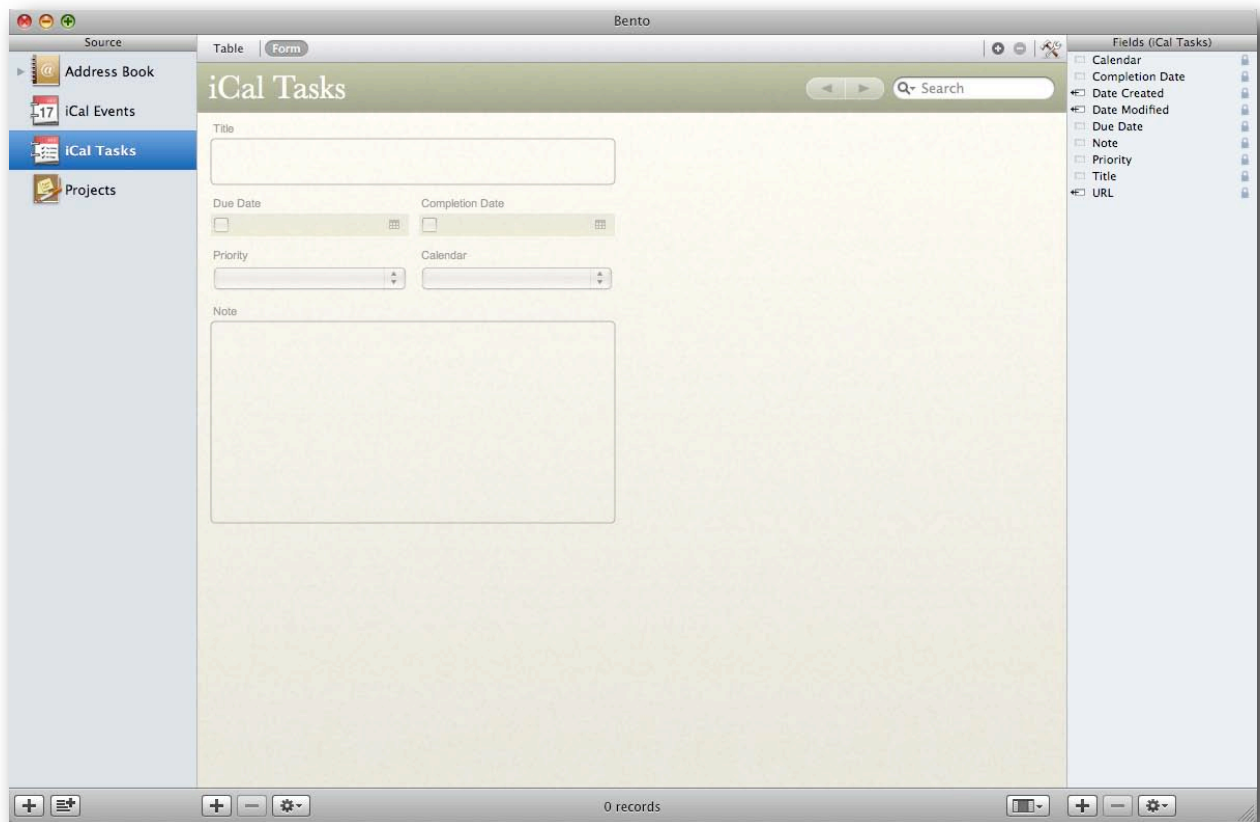


Figure 6

The form fields are pretty much self-explanatory.

Projects

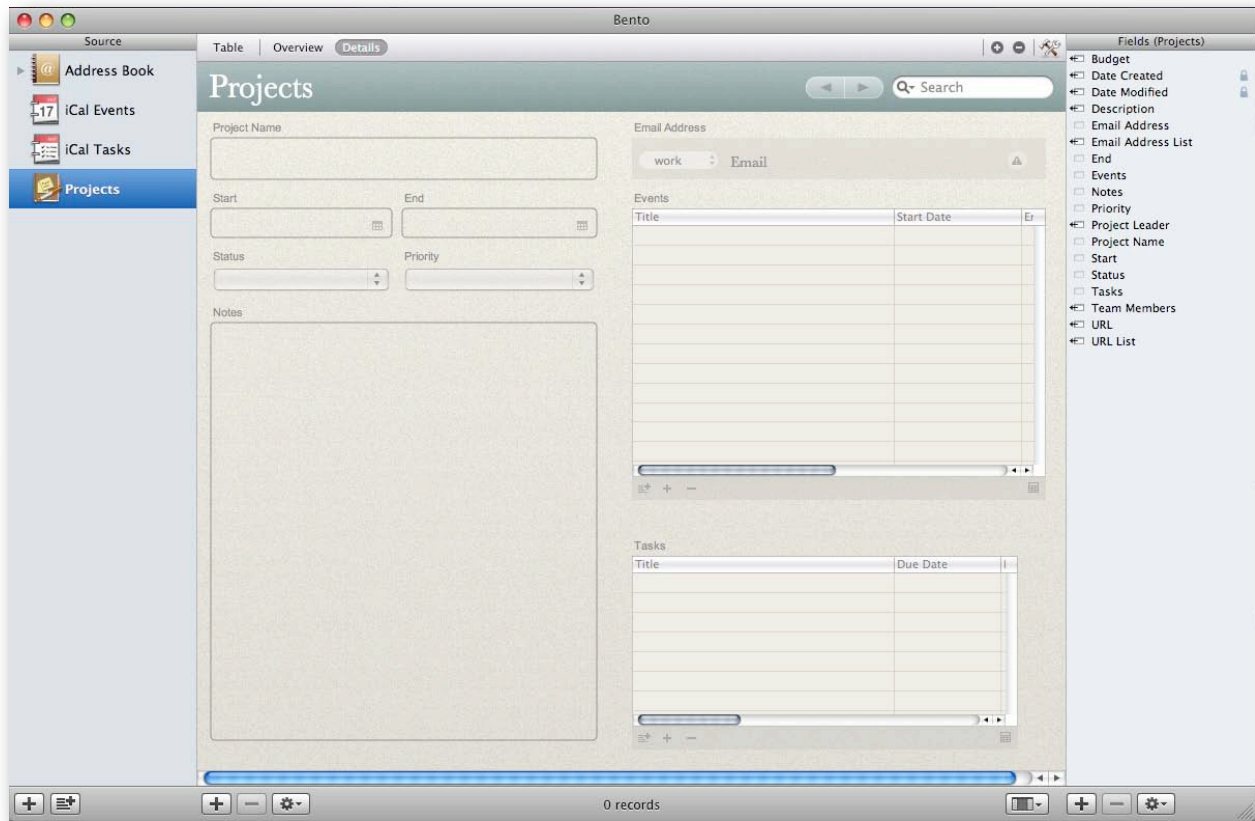


Figure 7

Projects shows promise of helping me keep track of Things To Do. This has three views: Table, Overview, and Details. This is really designed for team orientated projects if only because it has a Team Members and a Project Leader field, which can be deleted if you aren't working in a team on a project - which I never do anymore. Be careful that when you delete a field from a form that you do not delete the field from list of available fields. Hovering over the header area of a field allows you to delete a field from the form.

The Events and Tasks fields are tied to iCal. These fields are actually tables within a table, each having their own set of columns such as Title, Start Date, etc. The Tasks field has its own column for Notes allowing for each tasks to have a detailed description of the task.

And there is a Note field for adding whatever luminous information might be useful to keep the project on schedule or bring attention to key problem areas or accomplishments.

For each Task there is a Start and End date which are different than the Start and End date for each Event.

I found it quite easy to add, delete, move, and edit fields within a form. There are a number of tools available for doing a number of things with these forms that can be done with FileMaker, such as adding objects, and establishing relationships between data fields.

The Buttons Across the Bottom

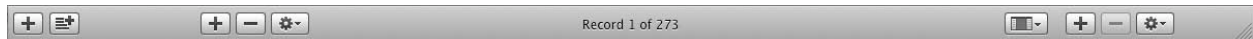



Figure 8

Hovering over a button gives you a help message for that button.

Reading from left to right:

 This button is to add a Library. Selecting this button displays the following panel:

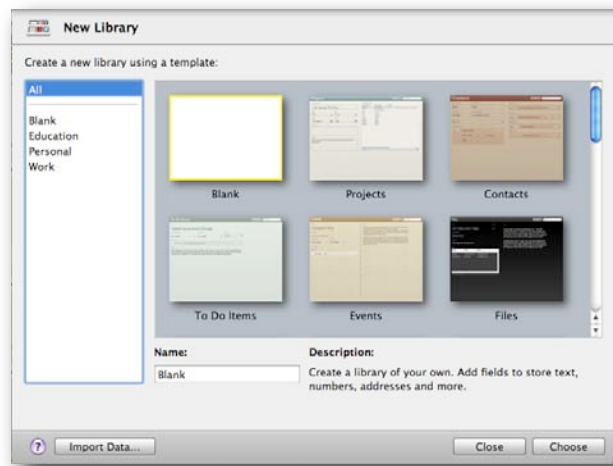





Figure 9

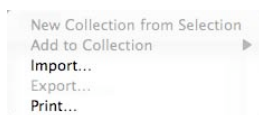
Here you can create new libraries, rename it, and add fields of your own choosing. You are given a wide variety of libraries to choose from. Aside from what is showing in Figure 9, there are: Inventory, Event Planning, Time Billing, Home Inventory, Expenses, Exercise Log, Vehicle Maintenance, Classes, Digital Media, Student List, Membership List, Products for Sale, Equipment, Issue Tracking, Items Sold, Customers, Donations, and Notes.


 Add a collection. A collection is nothing more than a subgroup of a library.

 Add a record.


 Deletes the selected records. Meaning that you can select multiple records and delete them all.

 Select from a list of additional commands as shown below:



 Choose which panels to display as shown below:



 Add a field. There are 19 different data types that can be assigned to a field (Figure 10b shows the remaining data types not shown in Figure 10a). Not a very complete selection by any means. What is not available is the ability to assign logic or an equation to a field. If you need that kind of feature, use a spreadsheet or FileMaker.

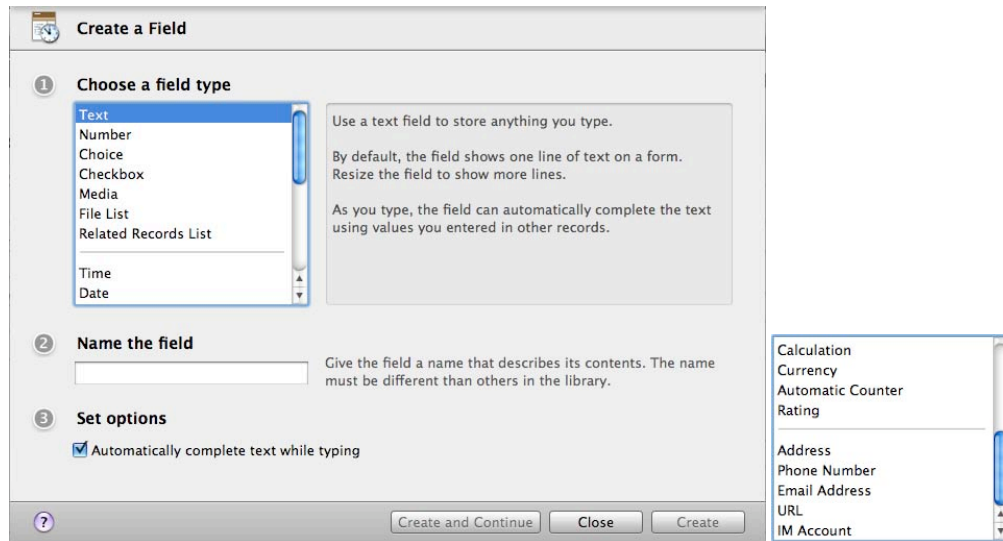


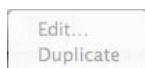


Figure 10a and Figure 10b

 Delete the selected fields. Meaning that you can select multiple fields and delete all of them.

 Select from a list of additional commands as shown below:



Summary

Obviously, the real power of Bento is in creating your own libraries. But even that may be limited in what you might want to do with a given field. Still, to be able to create something like a database of music or books in your library quickly and very easily and present the data with a flair, Bento is there. To see what could be possible, I selected to add a Billings library.

The screenshot shows the Bento application window titled 'Bento'. On the left is a sidebar with a 'Source' pane containing icons for Address Book, CE Champions, PAC members, Access Plans USA, iCal Events, iCal Tasks, Projects, and Time Billing (which is selected). The main area has a 'Table' and 'Form' tab, with 'Form' active. The form is titled 'Time Billing' and is divided into two main sections: 'Payee' and 'Account'. The 'Payee' section includes fields for First Name (John), Last Name (Lee), Extension (7890), Employee ID (43434), and Department. The 'Account' section includes fields for Customer (Bengt Larsen), Project (Landscape Design), Activity (Initial drawings), Date (8/14/2006), Rate (\$150.00), Total Hours Worked (10), Total Hours Billed (10), and Total Amount (\$1500.00). A 'Notes' field contains the text 'Met to discuss the new project last Monday.' On the right side, there is a 'Fields (Time Billing)' list with various fields like Activity, Customer, Date, Date Created, Date Modified, Department, Email Address, Email Address List, Employee ID, Extension, First Name, Last Name, Notes, Project, Rate, Total Amount, Total Hours Billed, and Total Hours Worked. The bottom status bar shows 'Record 1 of 1'.

Figure 11

This record came complete with its own data filled in. The list of Fields to choose from on the far right are provided as examples. You can modify any of those fields, create your own field, size it, label it, position it, and assign one of 19 data types to it (see Figure 10a and Figure 10b). The labels can be above or to the left of the field. Any of the existing fields can be moved around, modified, or deleted.

Bento is easy to use. It can also be fun. I found that it is more convenient to use Bento to display my calendar activity and address book in the Table view than it is to use iCal or Address Book, but I still have to use iCal and Address Book for setting alarms, entering anniversary events, or anything that is more complex than entering names, contact information, and dates.

-O-