

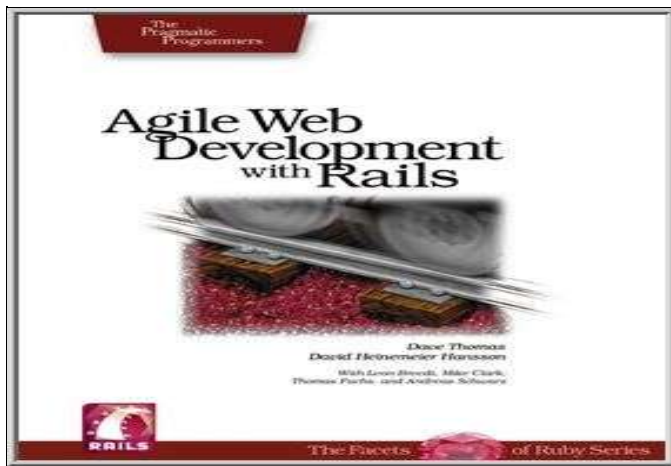


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## ***Book review: Agile Web Development with Rails by Dave Thomas and David Heinemeier Hansson, et al***

By Martin Brown

The last time I looked at Ruby was many years ago, when the language was still relatively new. At that time it had yet to find wide acceptance when competing against the older and more established script-based languages such as Perl and Python. Although Ruby has since become more popular as a general purpose language, one of its most significant impacts has been within the web development space due to the development/deployment environment that is Ruby on Rails. Agile Web Development with Rails from The Pragmatic Programmers is a complete guide to getting the most of the Ruby on Rails system.



Agile Web Development with Rails

One of the more interesting approaches of the book is that it is available both as a physical book and as a PDF which can be obtained directly from the Pragmatic Programmers website. Other books from the publisher are released in the same choice of formats and it's clear when looking at their website that the publisher is a keen supporter of the Ruby language.

I was reading the PDF version of the title—while it is less convenient than a paper version, it has the bonus of being easy to navigate (the PDF has a comprehensive set of bookmarks and contents) and is, of course, searchable in a way that transcends the index. If you have both the book and the PDF, you can search and then look up the physical content. A quick “flick” through the book shows a comprehensive set of ideas and the examples and guides to back them up; the result is a book that is easy to follow but which includes enough detail to let you build your own Ruby on Rails applications when you've finished reading the book.

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## The contents

The core content of the book is divided into four sections, followed by a comprehensive set of appendices. The book leaps in first with a good description of the fundamental issues surrounding Rails and then with an overview of the architecture of a typical web application and how this applies to the Rails environment. This is followed up by an installation guide and the “Instant Gratification” section giving you some very quick examples to try, just so that you can get a feel of the power of Ruby on Rails.

The meat of the book is then equally spread between the remaining two sections, Building an Application and The Rails Framework. The former is a step-by-step guide, in seven parts, detailing the process for building a simple store application using Ruby on Rails. There are sections dedicated to product maintenance, catalogue display and the creation and management of shopping carts, checkout and shipping.

The latter section, The Rails Framework, is a comprehensive guide to the entire Rails framework, from the basics of record management and the database interface through views, Web 2.0—which concentrates primarily on AJAX (Asynchronous JavaScript and XML)—and finally onto the deployment and scaling of your finished application.

The appendices provide a Ruby programming guide (in case you aren’t already familiar with some of the Ruby basics), configuration options, source code and a handy resources guide.

## Who’s this book for?

Purely and simply the book is targeted at web developers who want to develop dynamic web sites quickly and easily using Ruby on Rails. While existing programmers will be likely to get the most out of the book, you don’t need to be a programmer to follow it—that’s the benefit of the Ruby on Rails environment. However, due to the development and deployment style of Rails, not being an existing web programmer may mean a much steeper learning curve than you might expect. This isn’t a criticism of the book, just a factor of the Ruby on Rails environment.

## Relevance to free software

Ruby, and Ruby on Rails, are both free software projects and you can obtain full source to both Ruby and Ruby on Rails.

## Pros

The book takes an interesting approach to the development of web applications by providing both the “Instant Gratification” section to whet your appetite, followed by a complete guide to developing a feature-rich application using Ruby on Rails. This is all further backed up by the comprehensive guide to the Rails environment and technology. The combination of both step-by-step guides and reference material means this is probably the only title you will ever need on the topic.

## Cons

I have a few minor criticisms of the book, but nothing that significantly detracts from the quality of the content. While I appreciate that it has become something of a standard to demonstrate the power of a web

application by developing a web-based store, I am beginning to tire of seeing the same basic functionality redescribed in different languages or environments. We have been seeing these examples in books for the last 10 or 15 years, which, considering how the technology, power and expectations of the web have moved on, feels a little dated. Consistency of examples across environments is obviously an advantage if you are trying to make a comparison between environments, but it may have been more effective to show the true power of Ruby on Rails with a more exciting application.

Related to the example issue is the rather over-simplified view of Web v2.0. Web v2.0 is not just about using AJAX, although reading the appropriate section within this title would lead you to believe otherwise. Rails includes a built-in AJAX component, but AJAX is just one of the components that you can use as part of Web v2.0 application.

Neither of these criticisms should stop you purchasing this title, but both indicate a lost opportunity to make a more significant example application and demonstration of Web v2.0 technology in action.

Title	Agile Web Development with Rails
Author	Dave Thomas and David Heinemeier Hansson with Leon Breedt, Mike Clark, Thomas Fuchs, and Andreas Schwarz
Publisher	The Pragmatic Programmer
ISBN	097669400X
Year	2005
Pages	554
CD included	No
FS Oriented	10
Over all score	8

#### **In short**

## **Biography**

[Martin Brown](#) (/user/6" title="View user profile.): Martin â' MCâ' Brown is a member of the documentation team at MySQL and freelance writer. He has worked with Microsoft as an Subject Matter Expert (SME), is a featured blogger for ComputerWorld, a founding member of AnswerSquad.com, Technical Director of Foodware.net and, and has written books on topics as diverse as Microsoft Certification, iMacs, and free software programming.

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