



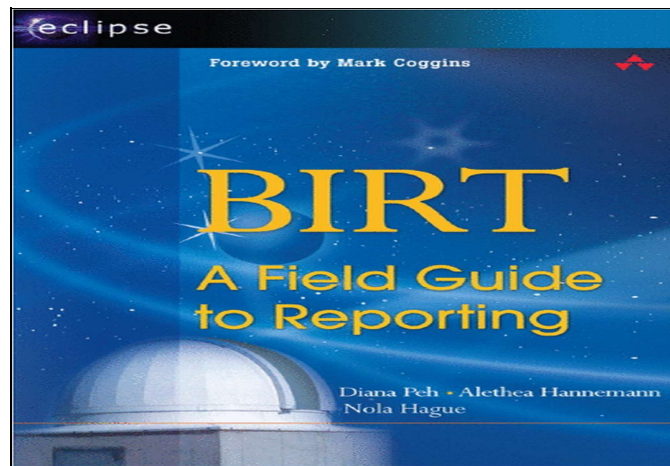
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## **Book review: BIRT: A Field Guide to Reporting by *Diana Peh, Alethea Hannemann, Nola Haque***

### **Report making the easy way**

By Alan Berg

The creation and generation of well presented and delivered reports is a specialized profession that requires the correct skills, mentality and tools. An excellent free software example of such a tool set is the Eclipse-based Business Intelligence and Reporting Tools (BIRT) system for web applications. The system includes two report creation applications (one embedded in Eclipse and the other stand alone), different viewers (including a Java Servlet-based web application), and a set of relatively easy to use Java libraries, which help you develop your own tools and an extensible framework to expand the current functionality even further. *BIRT: A Field Guide to Reporting*, authored by Diana Peh, Alethea Hannemann and Nola Haque, is a consistent set of tutorials that develops your skills base from scratch to the level required to build sophisticated, database-driven, chart rich, well laid out and complex sets of reports.



The book's cover

Before going any further I would like to note that there is a second complementary book whose title is [Integrating and Extending BIRT](#). The second book is all about extending BIRT via JavaScript or Java and using the associated libraries to enhance applications.

The ...*Field Guide To Reporting* is a step by step guide to creating sophisticated reports in Eclipse. The book is rich in screen grabs and offers a reliable path through the potentially complex maze of functionality.

**The book offers a reliable path through the potentially complex maze of functionality**

## **The contents**

The field guide delivers an evenly distributed set of helper chapters whose subject varies from installing the report designer, creating a basic report, using and filtering external data sources to making sub reports,

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aggregating data, creating and using charts and a lot more relevant info besides. Each one of the 23 chapters contained within the 704 pages has a well defined and separate purpose. If you follow each chapter vigorously then by the end of the book you will become a fluent report generating artist fulfilling the wanton needs of the most verbose business orientated manager or evilly demanding boss.

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Being a visual beast, I particularly liked the chapters on chart generation (chapters 18, 19, 20). I thoroughly enjoyed the section on aggregating information for a chart, which, though short, heralds in some significant value added functionality.

The most practical chapter for a team of report creators is, without doubt, chapter 23 on the subject of building a shared report development framework. This chapter explains where to place libraries and the best approach to sharing templates and styles, the basic structures that will save your team a significant amount of work and help enforce project consistency.

## Who's this book for?

Eclipse is more than an IDE it is also an extensible framework where extra added value functionality is achieved in the form of plug-ins. Having a report generation GUI within Eclipse makes a lot of sense. Report makers can more quickly learn within a well known environment. Even better, motivated developers will find that writing and debugging Java to extend BIRT's report generator can be achieved simply within the same application. Therefore, the target audience for this book must be free software aficionados who wish for a highly viable vector for creating reports and perhaps wish later to contribute back to the community. This book is a good first step in the right direction, with a second supportive book within reach.

## Relevance to free software

Eclipse, BIRT and Java are as free software as you are going to get. Therefore, the book is 100% relevant and on target. Many free software developers use Eclipse as their IDE of choice and perhaps after reading this book their report generator of choice.

## Pros

The authors have written a straightforward and relatively easy to understand set of tutorials that delivers a clear learning path for those who wish to generate reports. I particularly like the extensive use of screen grabs that delivers the context of the text in an obvious and intuitive manner.

The field guide dovetails accurately with the second complimentary book in the series which explains how to extend BIRT.

## Cons

A trivial nag, BIRT: A Field Guide To Reporting is all about using BIRT and very little to do with the finer details of reporting such as database design or the fiddly details of graphic design.

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**In short**

## Biography

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Alan Berg Bsc. MSc. PGCE, has been a lead developer at the Central Computer Services at the University of Amsterdam for the last eight years. In his spare time, he writes computer articles. He has a degree, two masters and a teaching qualification. In previous incarnations, he was a technical writer, an Internet/Linux course writer, and a science teacher. He likes to get his hands dirty with the building and gluing of systems. He remains agile by playing computer games with his kids who (sadly) consistently beat him physically, mentally and morally.

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