

Government Computer News

Database for the masses

These four desktop programs stress ease-of-use for lighter agency chores

BY GREG CROWE | SPECIAL TO GCN

Those who monitor the GCN Lab's e-mail say one of the most frequent questions they get from users is "What database program should I buy?" Because of this, the lab tries to look at the topic every year to see if new developments—or entirely new software—have shaken up the category.

This time around, we looked at desktop databases. These programs would be appropriate for projects such as tracking a program's expenses, where each new expense has to be cataloged and subtracted from the main budget. GCN uses a desktop database program to store and share contact information and story ideas among the editorial staff. While these can be complex projects, they do not require huge database servers with thousands of users logging in.

This year's review is a mix of old standards, some of which have been heavily revised since last year's review, and new faces too. While these products may have been on the street for a while, agencies are just now considering whether and how they should move their old databases to one of these platforms.

Programs were graded based on user interface—specifically, how easy the program is to use and also how well it serves to teach its functions—features, performance and, finally, price.

After using each of these products for a while, it became clear FileMaker Pro 7 is an

excellent choice for agencies. It's still about the easiest desktop database to use and includes helpful security features for sharing data.

Meanwhile Microsoft Office shops won't be disappointed in the updated Access 2003 database, which has ironed out early bugs and performs faster than any desktop database we've tested.

Alpha Five Version 6

Pros: Wizards make program easy to use; emphasis on Web-based applications

Cons: Some logic problems with open files

If there were a prize for most improved, this version of the Alpha Five database would win it. Version 6 is a quantum leap ahead of its previous incarnation.

Emphasis is solidly on the Web this time around. The program makes it relatively easy to create a database that users can monitor or even modify using the Web. This makes data easy to share.

Say everyone working on a project needs to know exactly how much money is left in the budget after the current round of buying. The administrator can simply post this information to a Web site, and then anyone can log in and get the real-time information.

All the Web applications are managed from a single Web applications control panel. You can add HTML support to documents very easily, and the main window is WYSIWYG, so you won't have any surprises.

One of the reasons the program is so simple to use is that there are now wizards available for just about every function you can imagine. From doing something simple like creating a new database to working within the HTML framework of a document, the Alpha Five program will ask if you would like to use a wizard. The wizards walk you

through both basic and advanced functions. Though you probably would not use them to do all your work, because they eventually would slow you down, they are extremely helpful when attempting a new task.

And it's impressive how many wizards are in the program. I spent 20 minutes trying to find a function without a wizard attached. There is almost no chance you are going to be lost and not know what to do with this version of Alpha Five.

The one negative I found in working with the program extensively is that its logic for handling open files seems a bit off. More than once I ended up saving an older file over a newer one.

If you want to get fancy with your Web database applications, such as displaying specific information when a user clicks a button, you are going to need to work in the program's proprietary XBasic program language. This language is more complex, and harder to learn, than the more industry standard Visual Basic .NET language used by Microsoft programs. However, Alpha provides plenty of wizards and even pop-up help.

Alpha Five Version Six would be a great choice for an agency that wants to put their databases online, whether to just display information or as an interactive component. One or two users could self-train themselves with the program and become highly proficient very quickly.

Alpha Software Inc., Burlington, Mass., 781-229-4500, www.alphasoftware.com

Corel Paradox II

Pros: Customizable databases

Cons: Archaic interface, difficult to use, can only be bought as part of a suite

The Paradox II program (which, to be clear, actually comes with WordPerfect Office 12 Professional) was the least changed from last year. Other than some minor

there, the program is largely the same. That means the interface remains the most ambiguous and requires a good deal of training to create complex documents.

Corel has tried to tighten the interface up a bit, however. At the initial welcome screen, you are given access to a host of wizard-style programs called Paradox Experts. These programs will help you set up basic templates, and if you pay attention, will also show you how to do it yourself.

If, however, you want to do anything beyond keeping a simple ledger, you need to learn ObjectPAL, which is the scripting language the program uses for advanced functionality. I sat down and learned enough ObjectPAL to create a pop-up chart that would appear on a Web page when a user clicked a button. This seemingly simple operation took the better part of the day and made me feel like I was back in college programming classes again. Paradox doesn't have Alpha Five's helpful wizards for learning a proprietary language. Other than some very basic instructions, you're pretty much left to your own devices to figure out ObjectPAL.

You can't purchase Paradox 11 separately, though Corel officials say they may sell version 12 by itself when it comes out. If

they do, the new release will need to handle XML for cross-application data sharing. Currently, Paradox does not support XML. You can stream your output to Quattro Pro, another program in the suite, which will perform an XML conversion, but you can't do it natively in Paradox.

If your agency uses the WordPerfect Suite, Paradox 11 is a working, functional database that is very customizable. Just expect to spend a lot of time learning how the program works and how to make it work for your needs. If your office doesn't use WordPerfect, almost any other program would be a simpler way to go. Once you have it mastered, you can do a lot of advanced data display with Paradox, but the learning curve is extremely steep.

Corel Corp., Ottawa, 561-733-6200, www.corel.com

FileMaker Pro 7



Pros: Excellent inter-cell database support; fully customizable user-based security

Cons: Does not have some of the most advanced features of other

programs

FileMaker Pro 7 is a big improvement over the previous version. The program has always been known for ease of use, and now

changing or adding to a FileMaker database is even easier.

The biggest improvement is in relationship support. Although a key requirement to any relational database is the ability to update fields that have been changed in newer versions, FileMaker Pro 7 makes it easy to compute the relationships between various cells as well.

There is even a visual editor that lets you do this. Let's say the budget for the head of a department is one field. Then that budget is distributed to various programs according to a relationship set up by the program head. Finally, those program budgets are distributed according to some formula each program head uses.

Now say the main department budget changes. Not only will the main field change, but all the related fields linked to that one will change as well. At a glance, you can see which fields on your database have changed and why.

It's nice to see the new version of FileMaker taking the lead in security as well. When you share a database with others, you don't necessarily have to open yourself to trouble. You can define which users are allowed to look at the database and then refine it even further. Certain users may be able to edit specific fields but not others. Some fields may not even display to all users, such as salary data available only to managers. Those without access to invisible fields won't even know they're there. And field protection is very easy to set up.

For more advanced functionality, such as making the database perform an action on the Web when a user pushes a button, you use a script language called ScriptMaker. The tool is fairly complete: Just about every basic function I could think of had an appropriate script file. You simply pick the appropriate one and attach the object you want it to relate to, such as data from your chart.

The only problem is that ScriptMaker can't do everything. Opening up multiple windows with a single click, for example, was a feature I could not seem to add. For basic functionality, however, this is the best solution in the bunch because it requires



RELATIONAL REDO: FileMaker Pro 7 (above) made huge strides over earlier versions, especially in relationship support. The ubiquitous Microsoft Access 2003 (right) squashed most of its bugs with updates. And the Web-enabled Alpha Five Version 6 (far right) wins the "most improved" trophy.

absolutely no programming knowledge.

FileMaker Pro also works with both Apple and PC systems. There is a different version for each platform, but databases created in one version can be edited in the other with no apparent data alteration, such as extra characters being thrown into the mix during conversion.

For an easy-to-use database for small or mid-level enterprises, FileMaker 7 is the way to go, especially if you don't want users to spend a lot of time learning the application.

FileMaker Inc., Santa Clara, Calif., 408-987-7000, www.filemaker.com

Microsoft Access 2003

Pros: Auto-update feature keeps program refreshed, easy-to-use basic functions, fast

Cons: Training required to access most advanced features

Access 2003 is still the 800-pound gorilla of desktop databases, if only because so many users have it and may not know they do. And a string of updates since its release has made it an even better product.

Initial reports on Access 2003 said it was buggy. But through a program of auto updates, most of those early bugs have apparently been quashed. Once loaded, I ran the auto-update feature and received a patch dated just a month before, so I figured I was completely up to speed. You can set the program to look for updates or manually trigger a patch look-up.

Access 2003 comes as part of the more professional versions of the Microsoft Office Suite but can also be purchased as a separate product. Looking at the standalone version, the first thing I noticed was how quickly it ran.

Even on my more modest Pentium III

500-MHz computer, large databases opened right up for editing with very little wait time. It was much quicker loading and operating than any of the other programs tested.

Easy Access

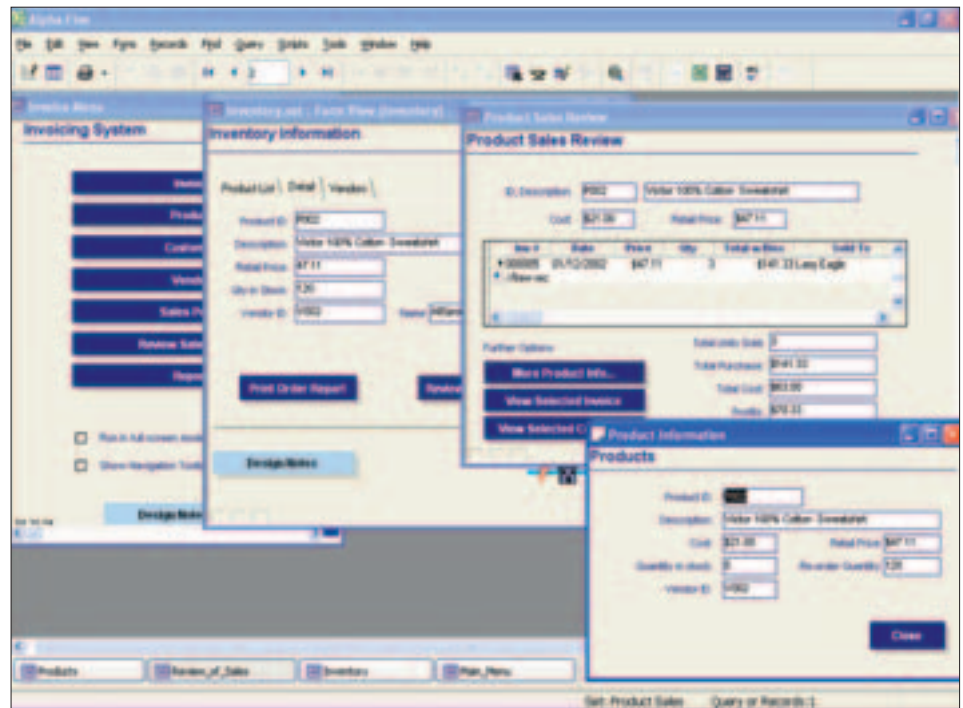
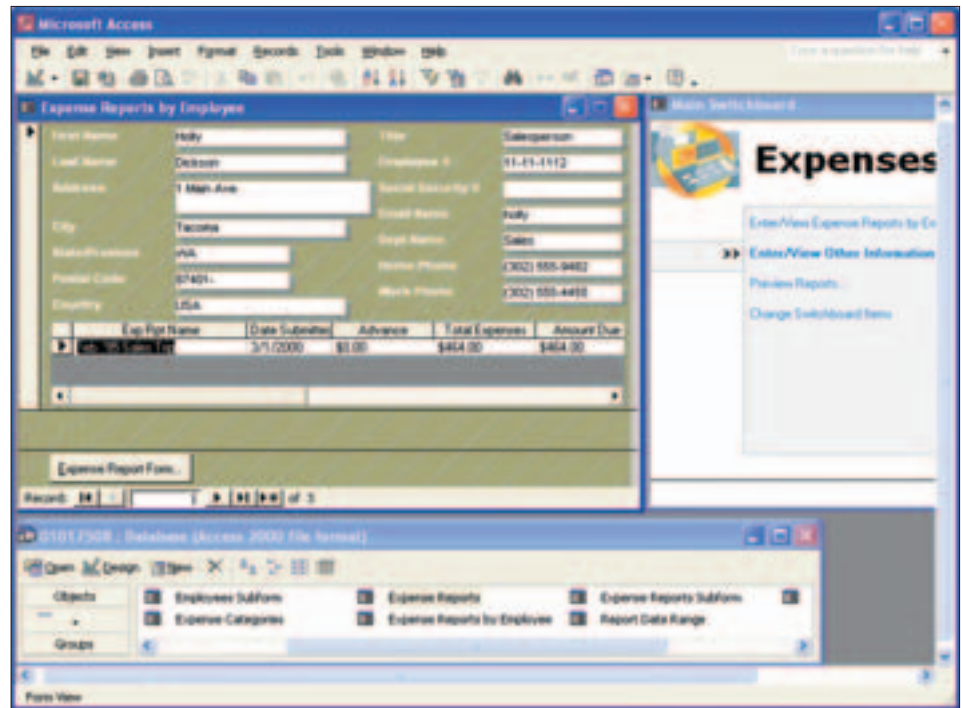
One of the biggest strengths for most users is the program's similarity to the rest of the Office suite, which so many people use. Besides easy integration of database objects and charts into Word or Excel, the interfaces are very similar as well. Since most users already know how to work Word or Excel, they will find they already have a great deal of knowledge with Access as well. Many of the commands are the same, at least at a basic level.

Access 2003 was the only database that seemed to have completely embraced XML. Although FileMaker 7 could also import XML files, only Access offered easy and complete editing of them. When you import an XML file, the program prompts you to run the file through the XML editor program. When it does that, it will go through the different programming commands step by step and determine if they all work. If the editor finds a command that does not work, it will let you fix it in the context of your database normally done by adding an extra object or function, and then continue until the XML is perfect. It will also do this for you when you want to export XML.

To fully exploit Access 2003, especially if you want to post your data to the Web, you will have to learn the Visual Basic .NET language. Since this is a fairly standard language, most database developers probably already know it. But if you are a novice, the program does not do a very good job of bringing you up to speed. You can do literally anything with your databases on the Web, but if you have no skills in this area, you should instead go with a desktop database such as FileMaker that requires little programming training.

Access 2003 offers Office users easy-to-access basic database functionality for expense tracking and similar actions. But it requires the most training, and offers the least help, for advanced uses such as working on the Web. ■

Microsoft Corp., Redmond, Wash., 800-642-7676, www.microsoft.com



AT A GLANCE: DESKTOP DATABASES

**MAKING
THE GRADES**

For details on how the lab grades products, go to www.gcn.com and enter I12 in the **Quickfind** box.

PRODUCT	ALPHA FIVE VERSION SIX	COREL PARADOX II	FILEMAKER PRO 7	MICROSOFT ACCESS 2003
PRICE	\$349	\$299 (part of WordPerfect Suite only)	\$299	\$299
FULL XML AND XSL SUPPORT	XML export only	XML export only	Yes	Yes
HTML GENERATOR	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
SCRIPTING ENGINE	Xbasic	ObjectPAL	ScriptMaker	Visual Basic .NET
AUTOMATIC UPDATES	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
MAC OS-COMPATIBLE	No	No	No	Yes
USER INTERFACE	A	B-	A	A
PERFORMANCE	A-	A-	B+	A
FEATURES	B	B-	A-	B+
VALUE	B-	B	A	B+
OVERALL GRADE	B+	B	A <small>REVIEWER'S CHOICE</small>	A-