

In a Sequel, File Making Made Easier

By DAVID POGUE

SOMEWHERE along the line, electronic databases started getting a bad name. Once word spread that our buying habits, Web explorations and video rentals were being tracked and recorded, the reputation of the computerized database somehow drifted from “symbol of efficiency, accuracy, and a better tomorrow” to “Big Brother’s best buddy.” If databases were human, they’d hire an image consultant right about now.

But if the only affairs you want to track are your own, a database is one of the most useful pieces of software. Many small-business owners, in particular, would be lost without some convenient way to track inventory, print invoices, maintain customer lists, tally billable hours, prepare expense reports and so on. And even at home, a true-blue database program is a much more flexible system for keeping track of CD collections, eBay auctions and even recipes than typing them all into Excel spreadsheets.

Among nonprogrammers working in non-skyscrapers, the best-selling individually packaged database program is FileMaker Pro. (Microsoft might argue that more copies of its Access database are sitting on the world’s hard drives; after all, for years, Access came with every copy of Microsoft Office. But because Access can be daunting to learn, a spokesman for FileMaker jokes that it’s “one of the world’s most widely distributed unused products.”)

FileMaker Pro became an unsung hero in small businesses and in homes by permitting even amateurs to create powerful, good-looking databases with no programming — and very few \$45 calls to FileMaker technical support. The central concept: once you have entered your data, you can design unlimited layouts of the same information, or subsets of it. One layout of your customer list might resemble a phone book; another might be mailing labels; a third might extract nothing but the first name from each

customer’s information so that you can print out “Hello, My Name Is” stickers for your customer-appreciation barbecue.

FileMaker Pro 7, released last month for Mac OS X and Windows, is the most sweeping overhaul in years. The good news is that the rewrite extends the program’s power and potential so far upward, it begins to challenge far more expensive corporate database systems, yet it’s still as friendly as a cocker spaniel.

The bad news is that the program has been so thoroughly renovated, FileMaker veterans are in for some unlearning and redesigning. Regime change, as everyone knows, can get a little messy.



Stuart Goldenberg

The biggest change in FileMaker 7 is that it’s now fully relational — a statement that either sent shivers down your spine or left you baffled, depending on your degree of database geekiness. But as databases grow more complex, being relational becomes a very important attribute.

Suppose, for example, that your store maintains two separate lists: a customer address list and a list of orders. In a relational database, these two lists (and many others) can be linked: as soon as you type the customer’s name on the order form, the address automatically appears beneath it. That information isn’t just pasted in, either; it’s live. If you update the address on the order form, you’ve just corrected the master address book, too.

In FileMaker 6, a setup like this involved linking separate files on your hard drive. But in FileMaker Pro 7, a single file can contain dozens of these so-called tables—a configuration that’s a lot easier to back up, password-protect, copy to other machines and so on. An ingenious map view illustrates all the tables you’ve set up and lets you establish relationships between them just by drawing lines on the screen.

The new program converts older FileMaker files into the version 7 format. Incredibly, though, it can’t convert one of those pseudo-relational file setups (a constellation of linked files) into a single self-contained relational one. You wind up with the same mess of scattered files you started with, and you miss out on one important benefit of the upgrade.

In those situations, the company says you’re better off starting over, rebuilding your database from scratch in version 7, claiming that you will benefit from the efficiencies of 7’s more modern architecture. That’s true, but the time you spend reinventing your custom-built wheel represents quite a loss of efficiency at the outset.

“Relational” wasn’t the only watchword of

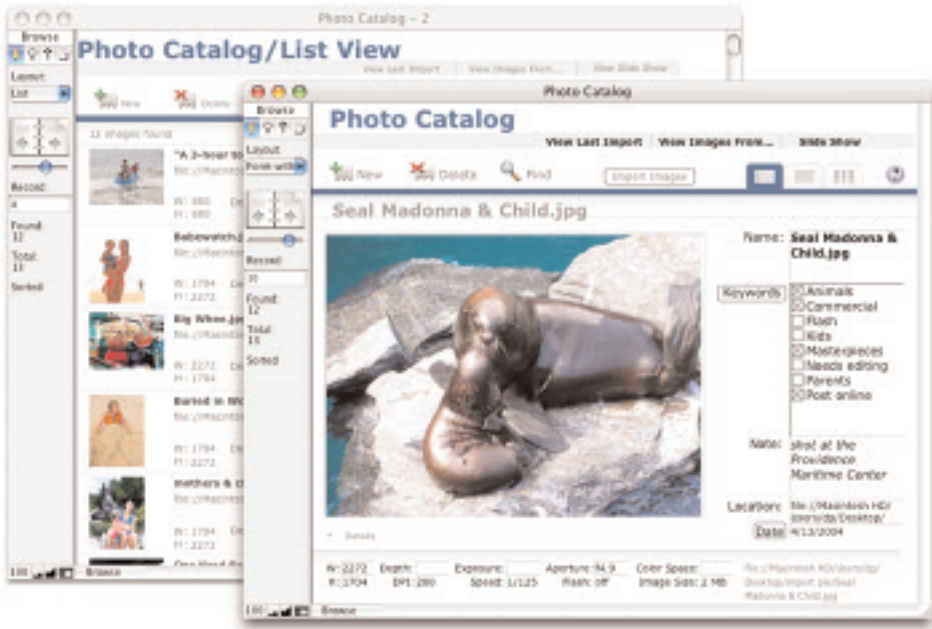
A better system for keeping track of your time, your money and even your CD collection.

this upgrade; another was, “Limits? What limits?” One database can grow up to eight terabytes (8,192 gigabytes). That’s 4,000 times the capacity of FileMaker 6, and big enough to let you track stars in the sky, angels on the head of a pin or sentences that Donald Trump begins with the word “I.”

Similarly, text fields (text boxes) can now hold two gigabytes of prose each; number fields can fit numbers up to 800 digits long; and each “container field” can hold up to four gigabytes of pictures, movie files, sound files, Microsoft Word files, Excel spreadsheets, PDF documents and so on. This last feature opens up some intriguing possibilities; FileMaker, in its way, can serve as a sort of master document dashboard for whatever Mac or PC projects you’re working on.

FileMaker has always been a superstar at collaboration; five people can have access to the same database simultaneously from across your office network. (Any more than that and you’ll have to buy FileMaker Pro Server, which accommodates 250 connections at once.) But now the program’s security system has been overhauled. You, the all-knowing administrator, can control how much access each network citizen has over each field, layout and so on. You might permit the rank and file to see the names and phone numbers on the company roster while only the executives can see the salaries.

And speaking of sharing, FileMaker’s Instant Web Sharing can put your database on



DOUBLE VISION FileMaker Pro 7 lets you customize layouts displaying your database information and open multiple views at once.

the Web with three clicks. At that point, up to five citizens of the Internet can search, sort and manipulate the database simultaneously, right in their Web browsers. If you use FileMaker Pro 7, they don't see just a simplified stand-in for your database. They see a nearly full-blown version of FileMaker right in their Web browsers, including all of your layout designs.

In another nice touch, you can now open the same database in several windows, each with a different view or displaying a differ-

ent set of search results. It's a lot like opening two Web-browser windows to compare their contents.

All of this is cause for rejoicing, but there is some grumbling in the crowd. FileMaker for the Mac can download photos straight from a digital camera into a database, but that feature is unavailable in Windows. The Windows version, meanwhile, gets several exclusives of its own: phone dialing, scrolling when you turn the mouse's scroll wheel, and dishing up data using corporate

OBDC (two protocols, popular among power users, that permit databases and spreadsheets to share data with each other). That's a strange twist, considering that FileMaker is a subsidiary of Apple.

Note, too, that switching your whole operation to FileMaker Pro 7 can be quite an undertaking. FileMaker Pro costs \$300 (or \$150 to upgrade from an earlier version). But big networked offices may also have to contend with upgrades to FileMaker Pro Server 7 (\$1,000 new; \$500 upgrade) and, for viewing databases on a Palm or PocketPC organizer, FileMaker Mobile 7 (\$70 new, \$35 upgrade), and neither will be available until this summer.

The greatest worry, though, is that parts of FileMaker Pro 7 are so different, long-term fans will have to relearn tips and techniques they've used for years. (Even FileMaker's product manager acknowledges that for old-timers, the long list of changes may seem like "a firehose to the mouth.") Download the free 30-day trial version from www.filemaker.com to see what you're in for — it comes complete with 30 ready-made databases for common tasks — and expect to spend a lot of time reading the on-screen help. Fortunately, it's surprisingly good; it even includes illustrations and examples.

Many an important high-tech advance entails a transition period, but we get over it. Who, these days, mourns the horse and buggy, butter churns or hand-set lead type? FileMaker Pro 7 may be different, but it's also better in 100 ways, large and small. It offers so much flexibility in such an easy-to-use package, it just might restore some shine to the tarnished reputation of the electronic database.