Db Analysis for MS Access

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The Microsoft database explorer window is simple and gets the job done, but have you ever wished it exposed more functionality? John Reid did more than just wish. In fact, he may have built the proverbial "better mousetrap" when it comes to managing your Microsoft Access database objects. See for yourself as Danny Lesandrini explores this new Access Add-In called Db Analysis.

ABOUT 20 years ago, while in college, I memorized a poem about a fiddling contest. It's called "The Mountain Whippoorwill" and you can read it in its entirety at my Web site (http://datafast.cjb.net/FiddlerPoem.asp). Like most stories about fiddling contests, there's a young, new contestant who surprises everyone and wins the contest, beating out even the skilled old timers.

I'm reminded of this poem after all these years because John Reid, the developer of this month's featured product, is a lot like that young mountain boy attending his first Fiddlers' Show. His product, Db Analysis, goes head-to-head against Access tools that have won nearly as many awards as seasoned fiddlers. Will Db Analysis take first prize for Access Add-In of the year? Ultimately you, the Access users and developers will answer that question. In this article I'll introduce you to this fascinating new utility and tell you how I'd vote.

Meet Db Analysis

Since Db Analysis is a Microsoft Access Add-In, you begin by opening any database and selecting Db Analysis from the Tools | Add-Ins menu. Before the main explorer window appears, you are reminded to always work with a backup copy of your database. This is good advice—though I've never corrupted any of my applications using an Add-in.

The first time you run Db Analysis, it has to collect metadata about your application. This process takes only a few minutes. You'll automatically be prompted to refresh Db Analysis' metadata each time the utility is reopened and it detects that objects have been added or modified to the database. At times I found it necessary to manually refresh the list by pressing the "Refresh tree data" button near the bottom of the main menu.

Db Analysis' main window appears as shown in **Figure 1**. The left pane contains all the context-sensitive menu commands, the center pane displays a list or hierarchy of filtered objects, and the right pane shows detailed design information for the selected object. The left vertical menu bar is logically divided into sections. The top nine menu options allow you to determine *how* the database objects and their details are displayed in the center and right windows. The middle two buttons provide a way to open an object or to do a text search on the highlighted object.

The next eight menu choices function as a group. These options change, depending on if you're viewing objects as a list or as a hierarchy. In list view, selecting a single option allows you to display ALL objects, or select a subset (all tables, all forms, and the like). In hierarchy view, the options allow you to expand, collapse, search, print, or refresh the data in the tree view. **Figure 2** illustrates the printed output of the hierarchy, displaying the count for each type of object. You also get things you wouldn't expect, such as database references (not expanded in Figure 2) and the values for database option

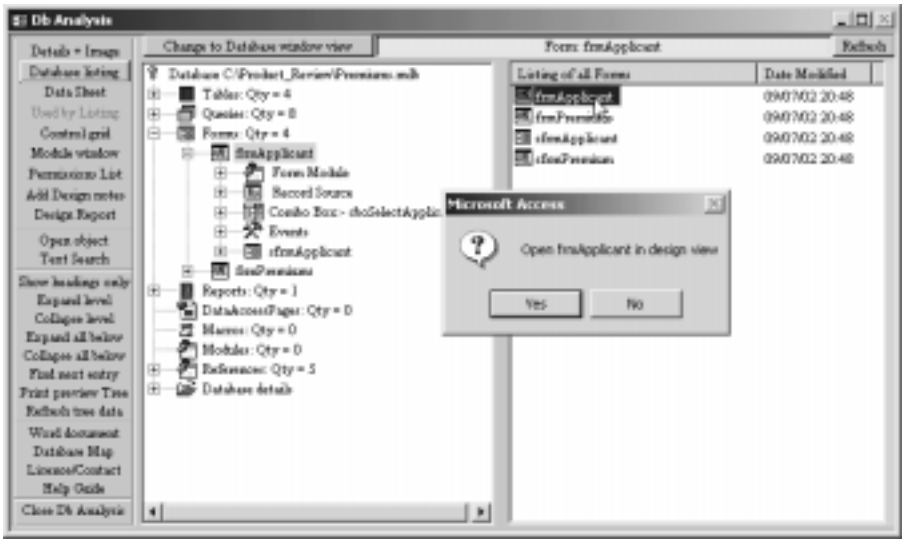

Figure 1. Open forms in design view from Db Analysis main window.

settings. These reports are simple to create, easy to read, and pleasing to the eye.

The last set of menu options exposes the License, Help and Close Db Analysis links, as well as two of the most powerful tools in Db Analysis: Word Documentation and Database Map. Selecting the Word Document button opens a new window, where you can select the specific objects (tables, forms, and so forth) for which you want to generate documentation. You have the option to create a massive document with information and metadata about all objects for the entire database (complete with screenshots), or you can filter for a particular type (such as all forms or all reports). There's also an interface that allows you to select a single table, form, report, and so on. Running Word Document for a simple report in my test application generated three pages of information, in addition to a very presentable cover page and table of contents. Very nice indeed.

How can Db Analysis help you?

The Db Analysis Web site's home page asserts that using Db Analysis can save you both time and money. I wanted to test several of the bulleted points listed there to find out if that's true. By the way, if you visit the site (http://dbanalysis.co.uk), you'll see a lot more screen shots than I have space to include here. Many of the points that I touch on here are covered in more detail on the site.

Here are the claims that I tested against:

- *Db Analysis can generate professional documentation in just a few minutes.* As mentioned previously, the documentation created by this tool is unlike anything I've seen to date. For example, I ran Db Analysis against the main data entry form in an insurance premium calculation database of mine. Db Analysis produced six editable pages of metadata, including a screen shot of the form in design mode, and a graphical hierarchy depiction of the forms controls, record source, events, and permissions. The output is quite different from what you get from other third party tools and far superior to the documenter that comes with Access.
- *Db Analysis makes the database layout easier to understand.* Unlike the database object explorer window that comes with Access, this tool allows you to view all objects together. You can then sort by name, date created, date modified, and type. This simplifies the task, for example, of finding the most recently modified objects. The hierarchy view allows you to drill down into an object, expanding levels. For instance, to see what tables are used for controls on a form, you could click your way down the hierarchy starting with forms, going on to the form's record source, the query itself, and then to the query's base tables.
- *Db Analysis lists all the objects that link to the selected object.* This is really just simple cross-referencing, but if you need to make a change to an object (say, modifying a table name), it helps to see how many

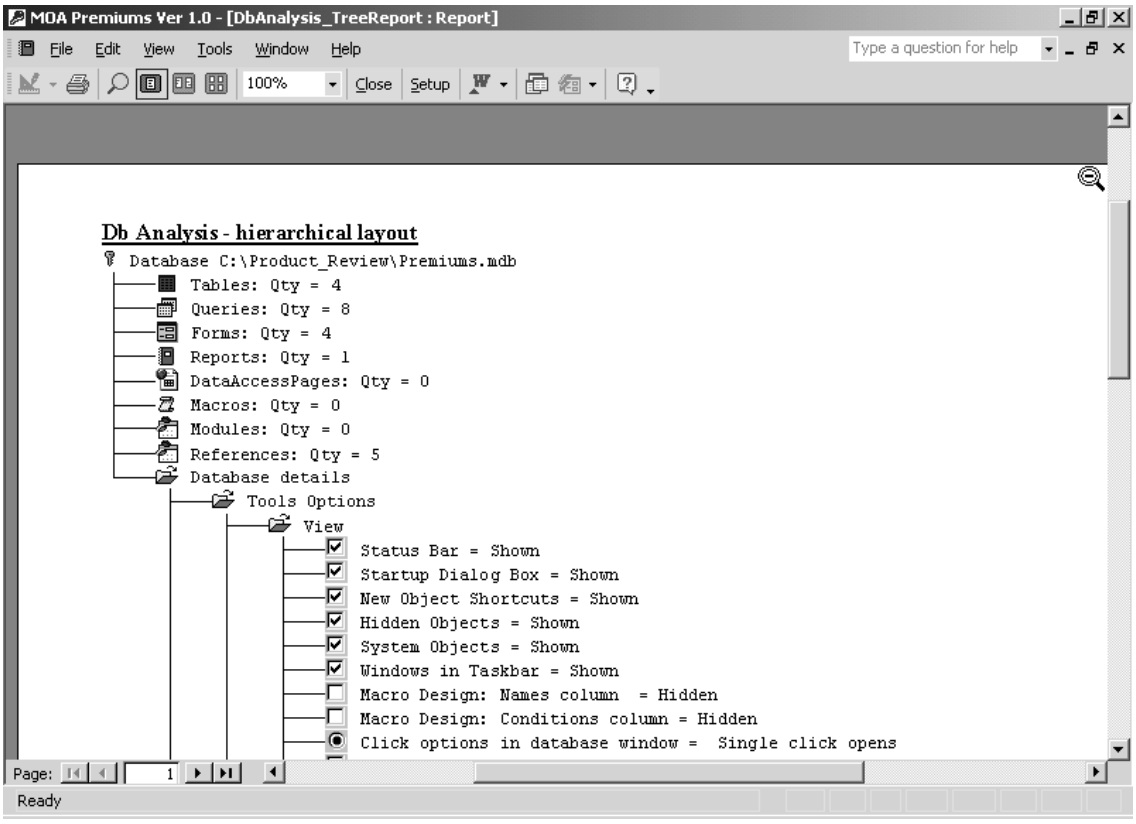

Figure 2. Preview output of Db Analysis hierarchy of objects.

other objects will be affected. You do this by selecting the object and clicking on the Used By listing. This alone could save a developer lots of time and headaches.

- *Db Analysis can format VBA coding at a touch of a button.* I must admit that there are other tools on the market that accomplish this task with greater functionality. All the same, the more functionality you can leverage from a single tool, the better. While I didn't see any way to customize the format applied, I can't complain about the default that's used. It makes your code appear clean and consistent. Perhaps a future version will provide the opportunity to create your own format templates.
- *Db Analysis can use the spell checking facility for VBA code and object property text.* Finally, onto one of my favorite components, the spell checker. Recently I wrote a product review for a spell checker and bemoaned the tool's inability to check code module comments. That's actually how I first learned of this tool. John Reid wrote me to say he had such a tool. Db Analysis' spell checker is easy to use and it really works. You simply select any code module and click the spell check button, just as you would in Microsoft Word. It also checks controls for misspelled words and I caught a few mistakes in my test database that I didn't realize were there. I was glad I tested Db Analysis on that particular database before I sent it to the client!

Conclusion

If it's not already clear, let me say that I'm thoroughly impressed with this Add-In, and I still haven't even described one of its cleverest tools, the Database Map. This tool allows you to navigate to various mdb files and add them to a list. Clicking on one of your "mapped" databases exposes a list of all its objects. Double-clicking an object raises a message box, asking if you would like to import the object (table, form, and so on) from the mapped database into the current one. That's cool, and could be extremely useful.

In all fairness, there are a few technical issues that need addressing. Some have to do with my personal preferences and opinions, so I won't take off points for them. Some have to do with consistency in the user interface. On occasion, it seemed like a single-click launched an object and sometimes it seemed to take a right-click. Also, I'm not sure how it could be done, but if the metadata could be automatically updated with the modification of objects, this tool could conceivably replace the Access object explorer.

Db Analysis is too new on the market to have won any awards yet, but I predict it will. You can check it out for yourself by going to the company's Web site (http://dbanalysis.co.uk) and downloading a trial version. The Professional version of Db Analysis sells for $395 and the Lite version is only $295. The Lite version is fully functional but excludes Word documentation, spell checking, data file mapping, and the VBA productivity tools. It may take time for this Mountain Whippoorwill to beat the old timers, but in this contest, it's you, the end users, who really win. ▲

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Access Data Projects...

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and see what happens. You may notice that if you modify one instance of the Project Name and then requery the form (press F9) that all instances of the Project Name are updated. If you don't requery the form, only one record will show the change. Also, you may notice that the Calculated field is never updated, despite the fact that the underlying value changes constantly.

To pick up the latest version of the Calculated field, in Access 2000 you'll need to use the Resync property. The form frmProjectTasks_Unique_Table_Resync illustrates the use of the Resync property. This property should be set to a SELECT statement that will return the data for one row only. The criteria that Access will pass to this statement are determined by the Unique Table property. Access will use the primary key field(s) of the Unique Table (or the first unique index it can find on that table) to determine the identifying information for a record. This identifying information determines what parameters can be used to uniquely identify a single row in the recordset. Access will then pass a parameter value for each field in the key or index that is used as an identifier to the Resync SELECT statement. In this case, Access will pass a value for the TaskID since our unique table is tblTask. All you have to do now is to add a parameter placeholder for that field to a WHERE clause in your

SQL Server Web Site

The Technical Resources section of the SQL Server Web site (www.microsoft.com/sql/techinfo/default.asp) has some really useful information and samples on it. In particular, check out the Tips and Tricks section to find some useful tricks that can help you out when developing against SQL Server.