

Why Choose Ffenics over DataEase?

December 2007
Graham Smith
PLM Consulting, Inc.

This is a very difficult question to answer without getting deep into both the history and the technology of the DataEase product itself. The reasons being that there is much that is not known other than by those people involved in the products and what is known is of a rather esoteric nature. In other words, it's just plain hard to explain.

What I do know is that for better than 15 years, I was one of a number of people who were routinely involved with the beta testing of all new DataEase product releases. I was also one of a number of people who had input into new features, a role which was both satisfying and frustrating. Satisfying when new changes and new features I had championed worked out and frustrated when they did not. For example, I was one of the people that pushed hard for interoperability only to find that it was more often than not a Frankenstein's monster that turned on its developer.

When plans for DataEase 7 were being laid, the #1 thing on the list for all developers was the creation of a product that was stable and that fixed some long-standing bugs. This was not going to be easy because the first thing that had to happen was that the existing code would have to be converted over to a new compiler. For years, DataEase had been built using an increasingly outmoded compiler from Borland. The decision was made that DataEase 7 would be developed using a newer C++ compiler from Microsoft. This meant not just a new compiler, but a variation of the C+ language that had been used. In and of itself, this was going to be a lot of work.

The biggest challenge in this update was going to be in the database engine itself. A database program like DataEase is basically composed of two layers, the user interface and the engine. When DFW was first created, there were a lot of changes made to the user interface, but the engine (named PRISM) did not need to be changed very much at all. In fact, in DFW5, the data files were interchangeable between DFD and DFW, hence interoperability was made possible.

Now that a new compiler and a slightly different language was going to be used, a lot of things in both the user interface and in PRISM had to be tested and tweaked before it was going to be possible to move forward. Since there were not enough skilled people employed by Sapphire to handle all this work, the decision was made to outsource part of the work to a development team Sapphire had in Russia that had been working on DFD to DFW conversions. While this initially proved to be a wise move, problems later developed between the UK and Russian teams.

When beta testing on DataEase 7 first began, things seemed to be going fairly well. But it did not take long to discover that there was a lot of work still needed. And to make a long story as short as possible, that's pretty much the way it stayed for the next several months. As the winter of 2005/2006 progressed, it was starting to look as if a number of new features were going to have to be removed before any kind of real progress could be made in testing. In many cases, developers found that only the more basic apps they had could be migrated and run without complete failure. What's more, the two most desired new features (tabs and multiboxes) were so buggy as to be almost impossible to use. So it came as a real shock to everyone when Sapphire pronounced that DE7 was ready to ship. Needless to say, this came over the almost universal protest of the beta testers.

After a while, a patch was released and while the patch fixed some issues, many more complex existing DE652 apps would still not be able to be run without significant rewrites. Because of this, we at PLM Consulting chose to continue doing development with DE652 until an alternative could be found.

Ffenics is Born

With the (reluctant) approval of the ownership at Sapphire, the head of DataEase development and the head of QA (Pete and Trina Tabord) left Sapphire not long after that to begin a process aimed at creating a new database program based on DataEase technology but with the clear goal of cleaning up years of patches and make-dos in the code and reworking some of the fundamental aspects of the underlying database engine known as Prism.

Based in Wales, Pete and Trina started a company named DataBase City and received some small business assistance from the Welsh government. The first order of business was to put together a list of things to do. It was at that point that we committed ourselves to helping this process as much as we could. We figured that if they couldn't solve the problems DataEase 7 had created, we would be out looking for new software anyway. When it came to naming the product, one name everyone liked was Ffenics – the Welsh spelling for Phoenix; the mythical bird that rises from its own ashes.

Top of the list was to bring the code one more step up to the latest release of MS C++ and to dig into the code and do a major cleanup. The decision was made to fix any DataEase features new to DE7 that could be fixed and to abandon anything that was more work than it was worth. In the end, I think that Pete wished he had just ripped out a couple things as the fixes were more work than recreating them.

Over the course of more than a year, work and testing progressed. In September 2007, Ffenics was officially released, and the very next day, work started on version 1.1. And this is why we think that Ffenics will make it where DataEase has failed. The product is being driven by the people that are doing the development in cooperation with the people who are building the applications. The early adopters of Ffenics are largely people with a lot of experience doing application development. These are the people who will find the problems and work with the Ffenics development staff to get them fixed in a timely manner. From personal experience I can tell you that the initial product release was delayed a week to fix a relatively minor problem I found and that another problem has already been found and fixed in the first beta of version 1.1, due to be released around the end of November 2007.

Marketing is being done on a gradual basis with two main target groups. There are a lot of people in the UK that have become dissatisfied with the status quo in the information management arena and are looking for a product that will help them solve their problems the way they want. Ffenics appeals to them because it is a young company that looks at things the same way they do.

The other group is long time DataEase users that have become disaffected with DataEase. They don't feel that the program is evolving the way they would like and are drawn to Ffenics because that was the initial goal of the product. Further, they see Ffenics continuing to break ties to the past and evolve without the prior accepted constraints.

For more information on Ffenics and how it differs from DataEase, see the document "Based On DataEase Technology". Also visit www.ffenics.com for links to the forum and downloads of other documents and evaluation software.