

Introduction

The purpose of this program is to provide a handy dandy method for Macintosh users to convert the data from databases running on mainframes or other platforms into something that can be read in and used on their desktop machines.

The Problem

Not all databases speak the same language. Many databases (especially on mainframes) use a flat file format. This format is simply a text file in which each record is defined as a string of so many characters in length, and each field is a subset of that string (for example, the "Name" field might be the first 20 characters and the "Address" field the next 30). The major short coming of this format is that it is unreadable by the majority of personal computer programs (including Microsoft Excel™ and Claris FileMaker Pro™). In fact, even word processors tend to have serious problems handling a large file in this format since it usually lacks any carriage returns and requires the program to spend an inordinant amount of time just figuring out the proper line breaks for the millions of lines of text. Additionally, this file format wastes an awful lot of space on a personal computer because fields are "padded out" to the required number of characters by adding the appropriate number of spaces to the fields' data.

In order for a data file to be readable by most Macintosh applications, it needs to have each of the fields and records separated (or delimited) from each other by special characters (usually tabs or commas for fields and carriage returns for records). Once this has been done, there is no longer a need for extra spaces to pad out the data, so these can be gotten rid of (usually reducing your file size by one third to one half). DataConverter accomplishes both of these tasks.

Why Use DataConverter?

There are other ways to convert flat data files into something useful, but none so quick and easy as DataConverter. For instance, in Microsoft Excel 4.0™ the "Parse" command and the "FLAT FILE" macro can be used to convert a flat data file. However, these commands will not work if the data file contains no carriage returns or the record length is greater than 255 characters. Also, some databases like ACI US's 4th Dimension™ allow you similarly parse data. But, this requires a bit of custom database programming to accomplish. Finally, mainframes (or whatever other source you get your flat file data from) can be made to spit out tab separated text. However, this usually requires an experienced (and high priced) programmer to find the time to write the necessary program to do so.

Please note, though, that DataConverter is by no means a substitute for any of these or other database or spreadsheet programs since it does NOT manipulate data in any way. DataConverter does enhance the usefulness of these programs by allowing them to access data that would be otherwise useless.

If you deal at all with flat file data, DataConverter will help you out significantly by allowing you to spend less time pouring over printed pages to examine your data only to find out that you need it to look a different way (for analysis or for executive summaries or whatever). Instead, you can simply request the data you need once from your data processing department, and then manipulate it on your desktop Macintosh with your favorite spreadsheet or database program. After all, it's your data, you should be the one who knows what to do with it, and you're the one who has the deadline which can be screwed up by the data processing department's delays and queues.

Using the Program

The first step in converting your data is to make sure that it is a format that DataConverter can make

sense of. This format is any plain text file (often called an ASCII file) which has a fixed length for each field in the data.

Next, open the DataConverter application and then open the data file you wish to convert (or, if you're using System 7, simply drag the icon of your data file onto the icon of the DataConverter application).

When you open the DataConverter application, you will notice that there is a bar near the top of the window containing a row of numbers with small squares between them. The numbers correspond to character places of each record in the data file. You use this bar to set the positions (hereafter referred to as marks) where DataConverter is to insert field and record delimiters, and where it is to delete characters (this last option is useful if the data contains extraneous characters such as quotation marks around every text field or a line feed after every carriage return). To set a mark, first you must enter a mark setting mode. To do this, click on the button corresponding to that mark type you wish to set (optionally you can type the tab key for field mode, the return key for record mode, the delete key for delete mode, and spacebar to clear the current mark mode). Once you have entered a mark mode, simply click on the number or square where the mark is to be placed.

Setting a mark on a particular position will replace the character in that position in every record in the file with the proper delimiter or will delete it (do this if your data file already contains field or record delimiters). Clicking on one of the squares between positions will insert the proper delimiter between the characters in those positions for every record in the file (do this if your data file does not already contain delimiters). To clear a mark, select either the same mark mode or no mark mode and click on the mark's number or square, or click on the "Clear Marks" button to clear all marks. You cannot set a mark both on a position and in the half way position after it (because this would be pointless).

Once you create a particular set of marks, you can save it for future use in similar data files. To do this simply select "Save Settings" from the File Menu or click on the button of that name. To use the Settings later choose or click on "Load Settings" after opening a data file.

After your marks are set, choose "Save Converted File" from the File Menu or click on the "Convert File" button (you must set the record mark before these options are available). That's it. Your done. Pretty easy, huh?

Customizing DataConverter

If you choose "Preferences" under the Edit Menu, you will be able to change several of DataConverter's parameters which are explained here.

The field delimiter and the record delimiter are the characters which will be inserted into the saved file to indicate the two types of delimiters. To change a delimiter, choose one of the options from the pop-up menu. If you want to use a character which you do not see listed, select the "Other..." choice. You will then be prompted to enter either the character you wish to use or its ASCII number.

The "Save File As" option is the four character signature of the application which will open when your saved file is double-clicked in the Finder. The application you choose must be able to read plain text files.

Shareware Info

DataConverter is not free. You may try it out and see if it is something you like and need. If it is, PLEASE send \$25 in U.S. funds to the author at:

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Please include both the serial number of your program (found in both the opening dialog box and on the "About DataConverter" dialog box) and either your mailing address or email address so that I can send you a password to eliminate that excessively annoying opening dialog box telling you to register your copy of the program. **PLEASE**, if you do use this program, pay the shareware fee, it will have saved you a lot more than \$25.

You may freely distribute this program provided that:

1. You include all files that came with the program
2. You do not charge any fee for the distribution (online charges excepted) without first getting permission from the author.

If you have any questions, comments, or bug reports about this program, please report them via email to:

BriDurand@aol.com (Internet)
- or -
BriDurand (America Online)

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