CodeCharge 3.0

Yet Another IDE?

by PETER B. MacINTYRE

This month I am reviewing another IDE for PHP. I wanted to look at this one, because I have a need to find the "Perfect PHP IDE," and I have yet to find one. There are limitations to this one as well: the first one being that it is Windows-only. The plus side (if you consider it a plus) is that it can generate code for many web development platforms, namely ASP.NET (C# & VB), ASP (VBScript), Java (JSP or Servlets), ColdFusion 4.0, PHP, and Perl. Naturally, this review will focus on the PHP side of the fence. Keeping with tradition, here is what the yessoftware web site has to say about the product:

CodeCharge Studio is the most productive solution for visually creating database-driven Web applications with minimal amount of coding. The support for virtually all databases, web servers and web technologies makes CodeCharge Studio one of a kind. It is a complete solution for Web development.

Well I have to protest against the claim of it being a complete solution, but let's get into the review before I focus too much on the down side. There are 2 versions of this product, one that you can use for a yearly cost (a little cheaper in the short term) and another that is a little more expensive, for "perpetual" use. The perpetual license is the one to choose if you are committed to using this tool as your long term development environment.

PHP: *4+, 5+ (MySQL - plus other ODBC databases)*
PRODUCT VERSION: *3.0*
O/S: *Windows 95, 98, ME, NT4, 2000 or XP*

PRICING: *$279.95 (non-perpetual, per user peryear)*
$499.95 US (perpetual, per user)
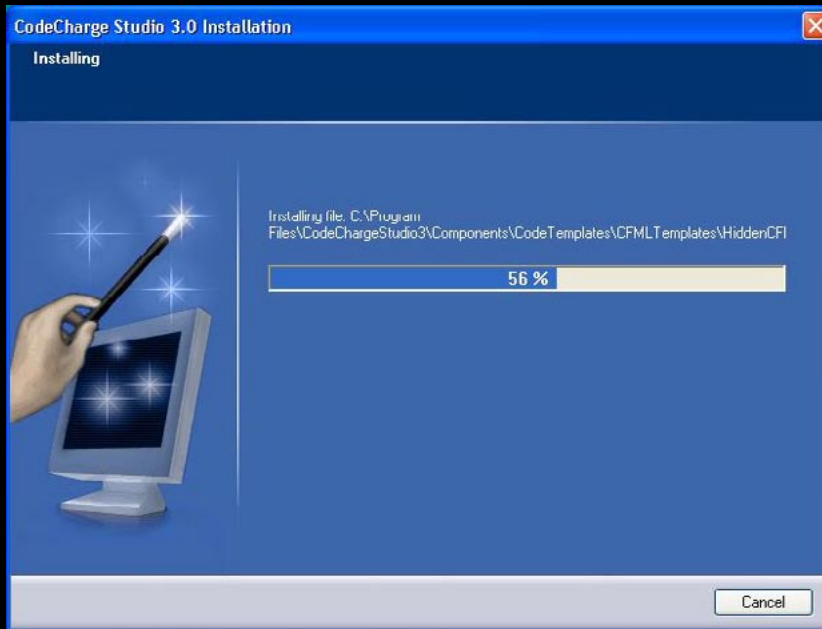
LINK: *http://www.yessoftware.com/index2.php*

Getting Started

The install was clean and uneventful. Many ODBC drivers are installed at the same time as well as a few sample MS-Access database files. Icons are created on the desktop and you are ready to explore. Figure 1 shows one of the screens that are involved in the installation process. I show this because I was suitably impressed with the way that this installation process was done. Many install processes are not very concerned with the presentation of this step of the products life. First impressions being what they are, I thought it worth a mention here.

The basic layout of this IDE is very well done and very functional right away. It took me only a short time to become familiar with the general use of the product. Figure 2 shows the appearance of the IDE upon initial start up. CodeCharge Studio is project-based and therefore has a project management panel on the left side of the IDE.

FIGURE 1

The basic layout of this IDE is very well done and very functional right away.

FIGURE 2

This is useful in many aspects of the development process, as you will see as we go through the review.

The first thing that I did was check the type of documentation that was available for this product, and oddly enough there was plenty. I downloaded and printed the 150 page Getting Started guide, and began reading. This is an excellent guide that helps you get acquainted the tool, quickly and efficiently. I only got into trouble a few times and had to call the technical support line just once. The technical support was excellent. My issue was solved in about 5 minutes, and had to do with me getting a little confused on the process of connecting to a data source, but more on that later.

So, you have to start with a project definition. Figure 3 shows the screen that helps you with that process. Here, I have the list pulled down showing what optional languages I have at my disposal. Apparently, you can build an entire Web site with one language, then change the language option and have the entire web application re-deployed in that other language without further work. I did not

attempt this, but I have faith that it is possible with this product. Once you select your language and set the other project directives, you are ready to start designing.

Digging Deeper

I followed the tutorial fairly closely at first and then I started wandering off on my own, much like being on a field trip to a museum: once you get the idea of how things work, you want to explore a little on your own. So, off I went. What I discovered is that this is indeed a fairly involved tool. It is quite powerful, as well. The power comes primarily from its ability to generate (Object Oriented) code for you, and all you have to do is design the underlying database and then design the web pages. This power is known is a "builder" and it is probably the best form designer I have ever come across. The builder will take a connection to a data source and allow you—the designer—to build forms, or reports, or data entry pages based on that data source. I tried out 4 of the 9 builders and was suitably impressed with all of them. Figure 4 shows the fourth step in the process of designing an editable data grid and Figure 5 shows the end result.

There are a few caveats here that you should know about. First, when you are setting up your server connections within this environment, you will see that the default is an ASP/IIS environment, so be sure to adjust this setting before you try to look at any live pages from within the IDE. Also, when trying to connect to a local MySQL server, you need to download and install the MySQL ODBC tool from *mysql.com*, so CodeCharge can make the connections.

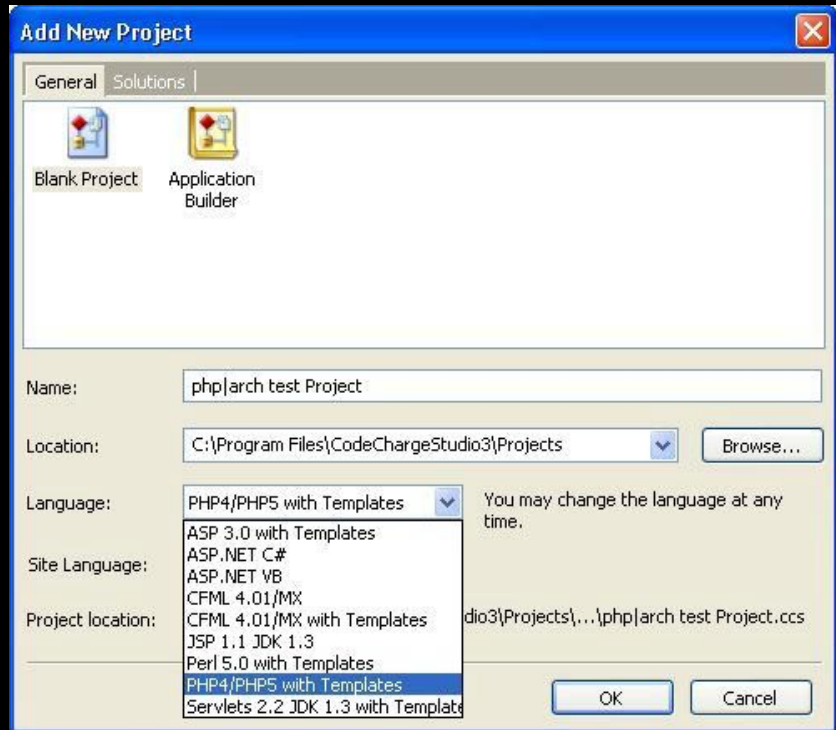If you look at the code that this

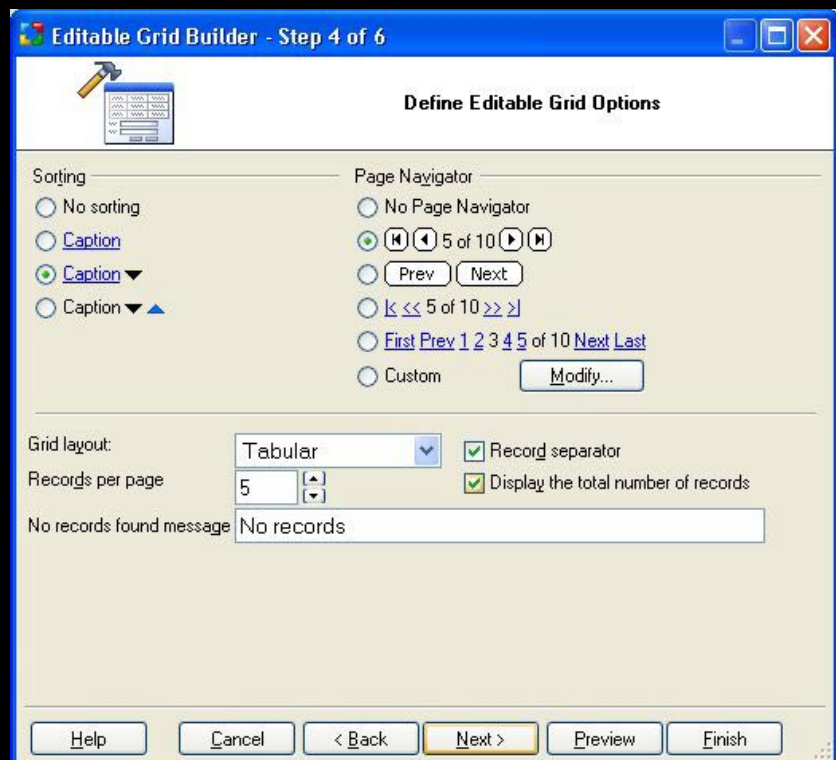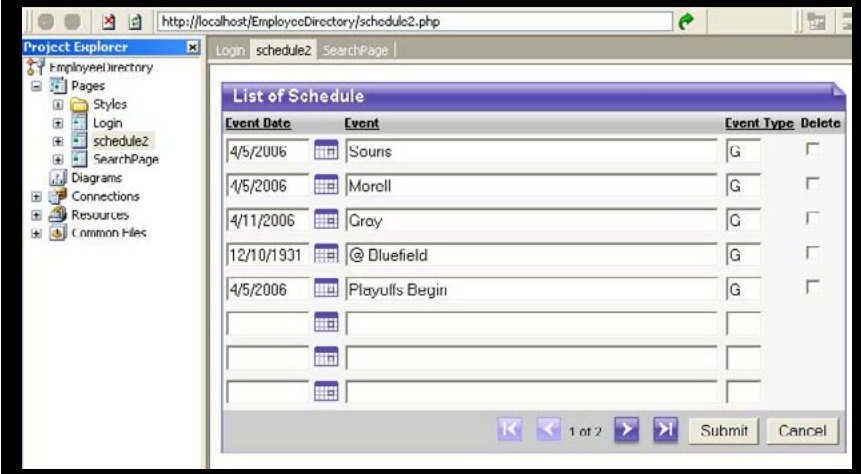**FIGURE 3**

FIGURE 4

FIGURE 5

to make sure you spend some time getting familiar with their Object Oriented writing style. Once this is accomplished, you should have no problems at all with extending the code that this generator builds for you.

One final concern here, that I came across when dealing with a MySQL data source is that there is no rendering for the `DATETIME` type, only `DATE`. This is the only mismatch that I saw, but there may be others: `TINYINT` and `SMALLINT` come to mind.

IDE generates, you will see that it is very Object based; Figure 6 shows a sample. So, even though CodeCharge allows you to add your own code, you would be well served

FIGURE 6

Summary

After looking at this product for a few days, I have to summarize that I was very impressed with how it was able to communicate with such a diverse range of data sources. It was able to turn those data definitions into forms, and convert between scripting languages on the fly.

There are, however, some shortfalls, that I haven't yet mentioned. First, there is no debugger, which is a must for a modern day IDE (the documentation tries to put some salve on that by directing the programmer to echo variables out to the browser). Second, there was no menu designer—even though the Application builder generates one for you, it is just a table with ref links in it (to be fair I did not explore this too deeply).

On the plus side, the web site, documentation, and technical support were pristine! Any problems that I had, whether due to CodeCharge itself, or caused by my own confusions, were readily resolved. I am still looking for that perfect PHP IDE, however—one that has connections to the database, form designers, debugger, and a menu designer. CodeCharge has come close to the zenith on this, but it is not quite there. Maybe somewhere, some day in the not too distant future...

I give this product 3.5 starts out of a possible 5.

PETER MACINTYRE lives and works in Prince Edward Island, Canada. He has been and editor with php|architect since September 2003. Peter is a Zend Certified Engineer. Peter's web site is at http://www.paladin-bs.com.