A Comparison of Crystal Reports & Windward

In this report, the features of the Windward Report Designer are compared to the features of Business Objects' Crystal Reports. Many of the tools in Designer feel like lightweight versions of Crystal Reports' tools. For example, Designer's set tags are like lightweight versions of Crystal Reports' Parameter Fields. Another example is the small set of functions Designer's function tags offer compared to Crystal Reports' extensive library of predefined functions.

The process of building reports using Designer is straightforward. This is because tags are explicit. Maybe a user wants to repeatedly create a new row in a table for each item in an inventory list – a forEach tag will be used. Suppose part of a report should only print if a condition is met – an if tag will be used. On the other hand, with Crystal Reports, users have to figure out how to manipulate the Group section and Details section of the development environment to do simple for-each-record actions, and they have to set up Parameter Fields and Formula Fields to get the effect of the conditional actions.

Crystal Reports' sectioning scheme brings up another point: **Designer's development environment is simpler and easier to learn than Crystal Reports' environment.** In fact, it's likely that users will already be very familiar with it because it is MS Word! Why would anyone waste time learning a whole new piece of software when they could stick to one that they were already familiar with (and if they are not, it's very easy to figure out) and reduce the amount of information they would have to trudge through before they could get going on serious report creation?

Well, there are at least a couple of things that might drive one to that decision. One is that it's actually possible to get away with creating a lot of reports without having to look at any code in Crystal Reports due to its Link Tab, Group Sections, and Linked Subreports. Basically, those three things cause automatic record selections to occur. Actually, automatic record selection is probably the best part of Crystal Reports, especially for those who are not very good with databases. Unfortunately, automatic record selection can only be taken so far, and on its own, it can generate reports of only a low level of complexity. Another reason to spend the extra time learning Crystal Reports is for the beautiful charts with their powerful drill down capability.

Returning to Designer's straightforwardness, suppose a user wants to print a table, then an image, then some text below that, then another image, and then some more text. Well it certainly makes sense to lay them out on their page that way, which is exactly how the laying out would be done in Designer, but it would take some tricky (or at least unintuitive) work to achieve this layout in Crystal Reports.

Awkward report design seems to be the biggest problem with choosing Crystal Reports. The Cross Tab object – which is a grid that allows users to return values based on criteria they enter – is a good example of the problem. This object looks and sounds spectacular – until the developer tries to use one. In fact, it is so hard to figure out that Business Objects actually made an entire template wizard just for reports that include a Cross Tab object. The Windward alternative to using Cross Tabs is to simply place tags in a Word table, which feels much more natural.

Indeed, it is in the nature of Designer to grant users with intuitive control over their reports' layout – even down to the cells of tables. For example, Designer's Table Sample report demonstrates how tags can be used to make special arrangements of data within a table. Although replicating this particular example is probably achievable, users will find it difficult to accomplish in Crystal Reports without struggling with special selection formulas and studying the manual for a while.

The last features to compare here are Desinger's Xpath and SQL wizards to Crystal Reports' Formula Workshop. It's still true here that Designer is much simpler than Crystal Reports, because the Formula Workshop is loaded with so many buttons and frames that it is quite intimidating. However, Formula Workshop provides users much more power in constructing whatever formulas that they require. The Designer wizards are incredibly efficient for building simple selection formulas were no comparison to other data from the data source is needed, but unlike Formula Workshop, they cannot compare one node to another.

Designer's has simplicity, has a lightweight, intuitive feel, and provides explicit control over report layout, but it lacks some of the power of more functionality. Crystal Reports is a complex monolith, and the design environment takes time to understand, but it provides better charts with drill down capability, automatic record selection, and nearly codeless report designing capability.

Try Windward Today!
Visit www.windwardstudios.com and **download a free, 14-day trial** or **schedule a live demo**.