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Editor's View

Another year, another DevCon

The annual Developer's Conference provides a chance to learn how to work today and what's coming tomorrow

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As I write this, I'm sitting in an airport on my way home from DevCon reflecting on the DevCons I've attended. Just the word "DevCon" brings lots of images rushing to my brain.

This was the 14th Visual FoxPro DevCon, the 12th I've attended and the 10th at which I spoke. DevCon has taken me to hotels and conference centers from Miami to San Diego, from Toledo (Ohio) to Phoenix. Over the years, I've met FoxPro developers from just about every state in the US and from dozens of countries around the world.

This year, we gathered in Palm Springs in mid-June. For those of us from the East, where this Spring has brought one rainy day after another, the constant blue sky and sunshine was a treat, though the desert heat made it hard to enjoy for long.

Days at DevCon are long, and feature a mix of intense learning and outright fun. The learning isn't confined to the sessions; some of my most interesting "a-ha" moments have come in conversation over meals or chatting in the Trade Show, or sitting in the lobby or bar after hours.

One of my most vivid DevCon memories comes from the first one I attended, in Toledo in 1991. It was "Anything Goes" night, an evening party with karaoke, inflatable sumo wrestling suits, ping-pong and more. Where was I? Sitting at a table with a group of friends I'd made on CompuServe; one was Chip, whose principal business was a lawn care service. He'd gotten into programming in order to write software for his business. He had a report he couldn't figure out; we kicked some ideas around, and eventually inspiration struck. I gave him an outline of a solution; as he sat there testing (he was about the first person I knew to bring a laptop computer to a conference), I went off to play. By the end of the conference, he had it working and I had an idea for a magazine article.

I had a remarkably similar experience this year. A fellow came over to me at one of the breaks and told me about a problem he was having with memo field bloat. After he explained what he was doing, I gave him some suggestions. I saw him that evening and he told me he'd implemented and deployed the new code and it was already improving the situation.

I overheard about half a dozen people say that they'd gotten the solution to a problem or learned a new technique that paid for the conference. For them, everything else was gravy. That's DevCon.

So what happened at this year's DevCon besides the same old stuff? Developers got an opportunity to see VFP 8 in action. Perhaps half of the attendees were already using VFP 8; the rest went home with plenty of reasons to upgrade. One of the vendors in the Trade Show was selling copies of VFP 8; they sold out (and started taking orders) before the end of the first day. The same vendor was selling books; copies of *What's New in Visual FoxPro 8* (which I wrote with Doug Hennig) were sold out fairly quickly too, as were several others.

Those trying to figure out whether .NET fits into their development picture got plenty of chances. The keynote featured demos that showed how to use VFP with .NET, and plenty of sessions tackled that question, too. The client-server crowd had an opportunity to learn how to use SQL Server better; those considering a switch could hear about MSDE, Microsoft's low-end client-server product.

Of course, there were plenty of sessions featuring VFP on its own (or, as with one of mine, as an Automation client). Lots of these showed off the new features of VFP 8, teaching people how and why to use them.

In informal discussions, I heard about a variety of applications and enterprises using VFP. Reading the company names on people's badges offered an interesting glimpse into who uses VFP. Among those I encountered or heard about were MGM and the Bellagio hotel in Las Vegas.

We didn't focus only on the present, though. An evening bonus session offered a sneak peak at Europa, the next version of VFP. The list of features mentioned was pretty impressive.

The big ticket item for Europa is significant enhancements to the Report Designer. Nothing in this area was demonstrated, but the list of goals and some of the planned changes were reviewed. There'll be changes both for design-time (including for end-users using the Report

Designer within applications) and at runtime, including more flexibility in output and in chaining reports together, and an open architecture that'll make it possible for us to extend the Report Designer.

Some of the highlights in other areas include removing limits. The list of areas where the only limit will be the constraints of the individual machine (such as memory) include array size, the call stack, the size of a single procedure, the number of joins, subqueries, UNIONs and tables in a query, and several others. (However, the 2GB limit for a single table is not going away.)

There was much more, too much to list here. Besides, Europa is still in the early stages of development and clearly won't ship until sometime well into 2004. If you want to see a list of the features mentioned, check out <http://radio.weblogs.com/0117767/2003/06/16.html#a486>.

For now, while I'm excited about the possibilities of Europa, I'm focusing on mastering the wonderful possibilities of VFP 8, and, of course, planning to be at next year's DevCon, where no doubt we'll learn a lot more about Europa. Be sure to watch FoxPro Advisor or check Advisor.COM to find out when and where.