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Editor's View

If I Had a Hammer

Windows' Automation abilities help us to stop seeing every job as a nail.

By Tamar E. Granor, Editor

I've been programming computers for nearly 25 years now. In that time, I've used a number of languages and a lot of different computers. But one of the things that's remained the same is that there always seem to be parts of a problem that just don't fit the language I'm using.

Back in school, they usually gave us problems well suited to the language being taught. But the real world isn't that friendly. So, like most of you, I've written my share of code forcing a language to handle a task it just wasn't designed for.

Visual FoxPro and its predecessors (FoxPro and FoxBase) have always been open to this kind of programming and over the years, the language has grown to include a variety of sub-languages (like the low-level file functions and textmerge) to make non-data focused tasks easier. Nonetheless, the people responsible for creating FoxPro have been amazed more than once by what others were doing with it. Those of you who saw the FoxPro 2.x version of JFast, Brian Jones' group's incredible logistics application for the US Department of Defense, can understand why. (To read about the VFP version of JFast, check out Mac Rubel's article in the June '98 issue.)

Increasingly, though, the things our users want are complex enough that twisting ourselves and VFP into a pretzel to do them natively doesn't make sense. Fortunately, the whole nature of personal computer programming has been changing as fast as our users' wishes.

Today, instead of having to write everything ourselves in a single language, it's getting easier and easier to build applications that use a variety of components written in assorted languages to perform diverse tasks. Where it once may have made sense to write a simple word processor in FoxPro code, now it's so easy to call on Word or another word processor that it's almost malpractice to write it yourself.

I've talked about COM programming in this space before. (See the December '98 and January '99 issues.) We've also had a number of articles that covered various aspects of COM. In fact, the monthly ActiveX Control Showcase highlights one or more COM tools a month – ActiveX controls are one aspect of COM. Lately, you also may have noticed an increase in the number of tables in each issue. When we write about COM servers, tables are usually the best way to present properties and methods.

This month, we have a pair of articles that step back a little from presenting the COM tools themselves to get you started with what I consider the most powerful aspect of COM. Automation lets you "drive" one application from another. Our cover stories use VFP to control Microsoft Office applications, but many other applications let you put VFP

in the driver's seat, as well. Menachem Bazian's article explains what COM is and how it works, then concludes with a simple example. The other article, by Dan Freeman, talks about how to get started using automation, and especially, how to find out what you need to know to work with an automation server.

The old adage says, "When all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail." COM, and especially automation, gives you a screwdriver, a wrench, a saw, a drill, and all the other tools you need so that you can see each task as it really is and always use the right tool for the job.

FoxPro Y2K Suit Dismissed

In the April issue, I told you about a class action suit filed against Microsoft regarding FoxPro's handling of the Year 2000. The suit, from a Chicago developer, has been dismissed with prejudice by a federal court in Illinois. Dismissal with prejudice means that, while the decision can be appealed, the suit cannot be refiled.

The key point in the decision is that FoxPro works as documented. The court also notes that the CENTURY ON option means the product is Y2K-compliant. To read Microsoft's press release on the subject, as well as the court's full decision, see <http://www.microsoft.com/presspass/press/1999/mar99/y2klawsuitpr.htm>.

Incidentally, there was an error in my April column. Reader Mark Winston pointed out to me that the original dBase did not have date fields. In fact, they weren't added until dBase III.

VFP is Hot!

After years of bad publicity for FoxPro, lately it seems that almost every time I hear of a mention of VFP in the press, the news is good. A number of the computer trade magazines have mentioned VFP in the last few months, talking about it as a tool for building middle-tier components, Microsoft's designated role for the product. It's great to see the rest of the world finally noticing what we've known for years – VFP has a terrific data engine.

Along with the good publicity, VFP conferences seem to be the rage lately. This issue is coming out just in time for the official DevCon in Palm Springs. In addition, I recently heard about conferences planned for Amsterdam (late May) and Prague (late June). FoxTeach, Toronto's entry in the VFP conference list, was held in April. In addition, the third annual Southern California VFP Conference (www.mesllc.com/conf99.html) is scheduled for late August. I'll be speaking there.

Finally, several people working on revitalizing with local user groups have contacted me lately. As the founders retired from leadership, a number of groups have dwindled. But now, new leaders are working to bring some of them back to life. If you'd like a chance to talk to your colleagues face to face on a regular basis, find out whether there's a group in your area; if not, consider starting or restarting one.