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Introducing the Task Pane Manager

This new tool provides a portal for VFP development, community and more

by Tamar E. Granor, Technical Editor

Over the years, I've come to expect new tools in every version of VFP. Some of them get added to my regular working repertoire, while, for others, I never quite see the point. When I first opened the Task Pane Manager in VFP 8, I thought it was going to fall into the second group. Then, I spent some time exploring it. The deeper I dug, the more impressed I was.

The Task Pane Manager is, essentially, a portal for VFP. The tool itself is simply a container—it contains task panes. What's a task pane? Anything you want it to be. VFP 8 comes with seven panes that span a wide variety of activities, but it's possible to add panes, either ones you write yourself or ones provided by others. In this article, I'll take a look at what you can do with the provided task panes. My next article will look at creating and installing custom panes.

Running the Task Pane Manager

You start the Task Pane Manager by choosing it from the Tools menu or from the Standard toolbar. The first time you open it, it opens to the Start pane (Figure 1). The button bar just below the title bar contains a list of available panes. If the list doesn't fit, the chevron button indicates that more panes are available; click it to see the list.
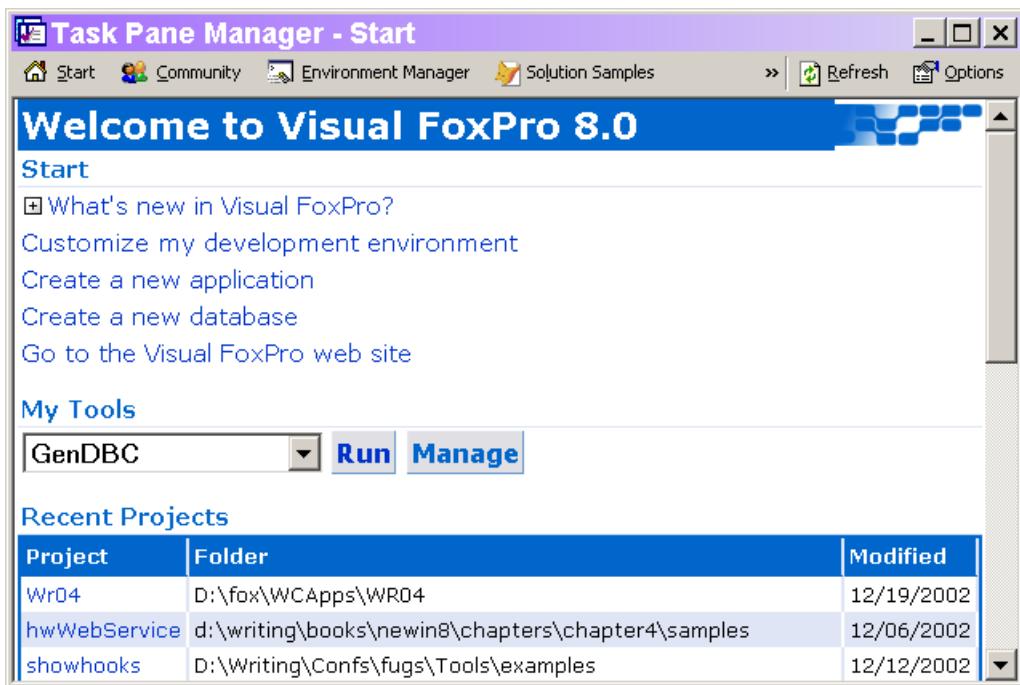
Figure 1: The Start Pane—This pane gives you quick access to both information and tools, as well as to the projects and databases you've worked with most recently.

You can also set the Task Pane Manager to open when VFP starts. To do so, click the Options button or click on Task Pane Manager startup options at the very bottom of the Start pane. Either choice opens the Options window (interestingly, not a dialog) shown in Figure 2. If necessary, click on Task Pane Manager in the list to see options that affect the tool as a whole. To have the Task Pane Manager open when you start VFP, check the appropriate checkbox. (Because the tool is written in VFP, CLEAR ALL does shut it down.)
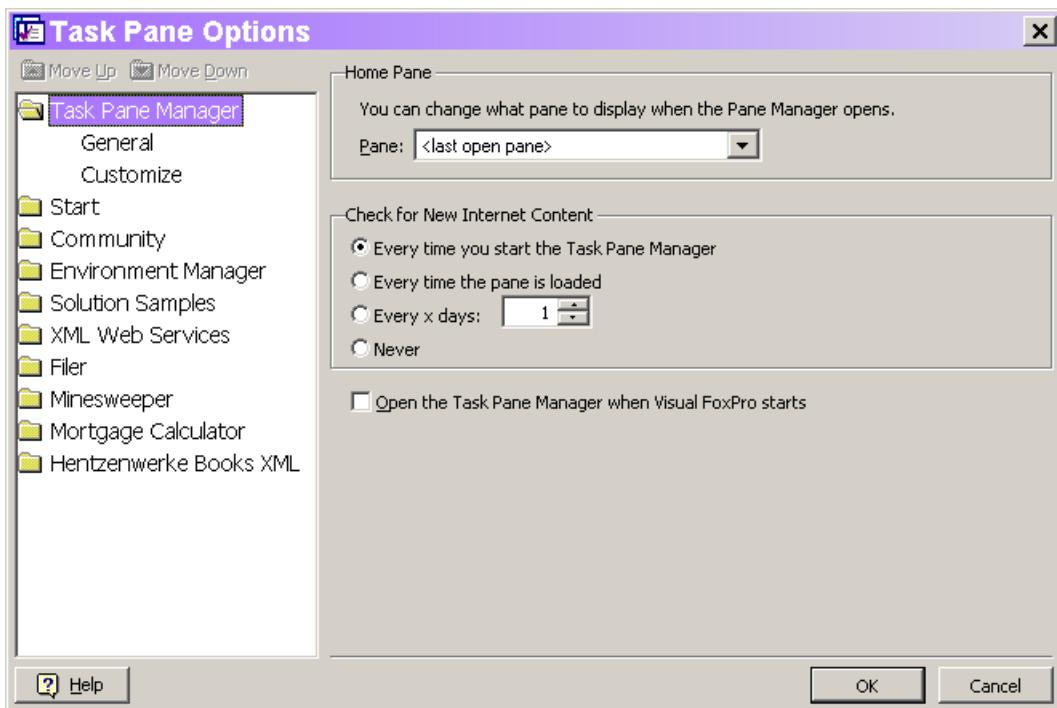
Figure 2: Setting Task Pane Options—This window lets you specify options for the tool as a whole and for individual panes.

The dropdown at the top on this page lets you specify which pane is displayed when the tool opens. By default, it returns to the pane that was displayed when you closed it, but you can choose a specific pane if you prefer.

A number of the panes get some of their data from the web. The Check for New Internet Content section determines how often the tool looks for updated data. The setting on this page is a default. The Options page for each pane that has Internet data includes the same section; there, you can override the default for that particular pane.

The Start Pane

The Start Pane collects a variety of information and tools into a single location. It's not hard to imagine using this pane as the center of VFP development.

The pane is divided into four sections (plus the link for the Options window at the bottom): Start, My Tools, Recent Projects, and Recent Databases. Each can be controlled individually from the Options window, so you can include as many or as few of them as you wish.

At first glance, the Start section may look like it simply points to documentation. In fact, several of the links actually run tools. What's New in Visual FoxPro and its sub-items are, in fact, links to the VFP help file, and Go to the Visual FoxPro website does what its name suggests. But Create a new application and Create a new database run the Application Wizard and Database Wizard, respectively. Customize my development environment switches to the Environment Manager page, discussed later in this article.

The most intriguing section here is My Tools. When you click Manage, the My Tools dialog (Figure 3) opens. You can add a variety of items here, from VFP applications to forms to custom scripts.
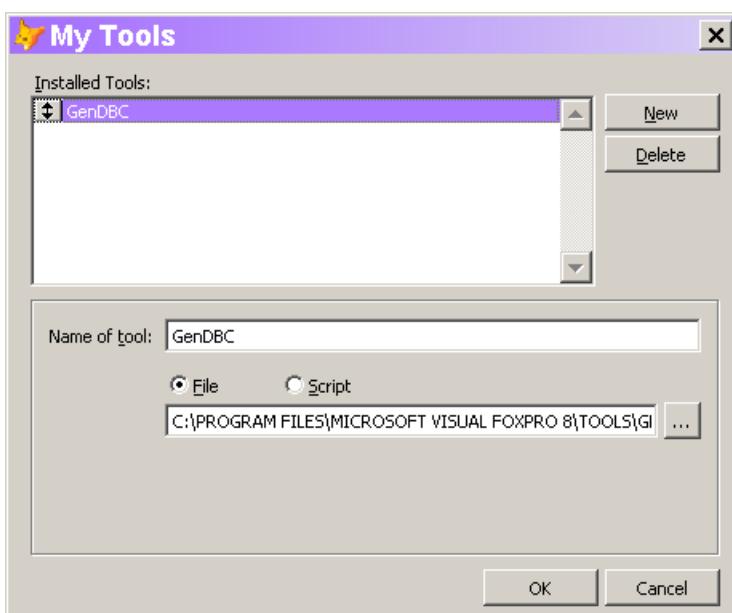

Figure 3: Adding tools to the Start pane—The My Tools dialog lets you call existing applications, programs, forms and reports, or write scripts in VFP.

In Figure 3, the GenDBC utility is added to the My Tools list. You might also add a script that cleans up after running an application. The script code might look like:

```
SET SYSMENU TO DEFAULT
MODIFY WINDOW Screen
_Screen.Caption = VERSION()
```

Of course, a script could also prompt for input, so it doesn't have to do exactly the same thing every time you run it.

Initially, the My Tools section contains only the Manage button. Once you've added at least one item to the list of tools, it expands to include

a dropdown of tools and a Run button, as shown in Figure 1. Choose a tool and click run to execute the specified tool.

The Recent Projects and Recent Databases section draw their entries from the MRU (most recently used) lists maintained by VFP. The number of items in each section is based on the setting for MRU list size in the Tools>Options dialog. Clicking on a project or database in the list opens it, along with the appropriate tool (the Project Manager or Database Designer). Each section has buttons beneath it that let you open an item not on the list or create a new one.

The Community Pane

Community is a hot button with Microsoft these days. They're putting a lot of effort into building developer communities (something FoxPro has had for a long time). So it's not surprising that the second of the panes supplied by Microsoft focuses on community.

This pane (Figure 4) is divided into two sections, but they don't directly map to the checkboxes on the Options window page for the pane. The top section (Community) is a list of community web sites. Most of them are places where you can ask questions and get answers from your peers. A few have different structures or purposes, but all of them offer opportunities to improve your VFP skills.
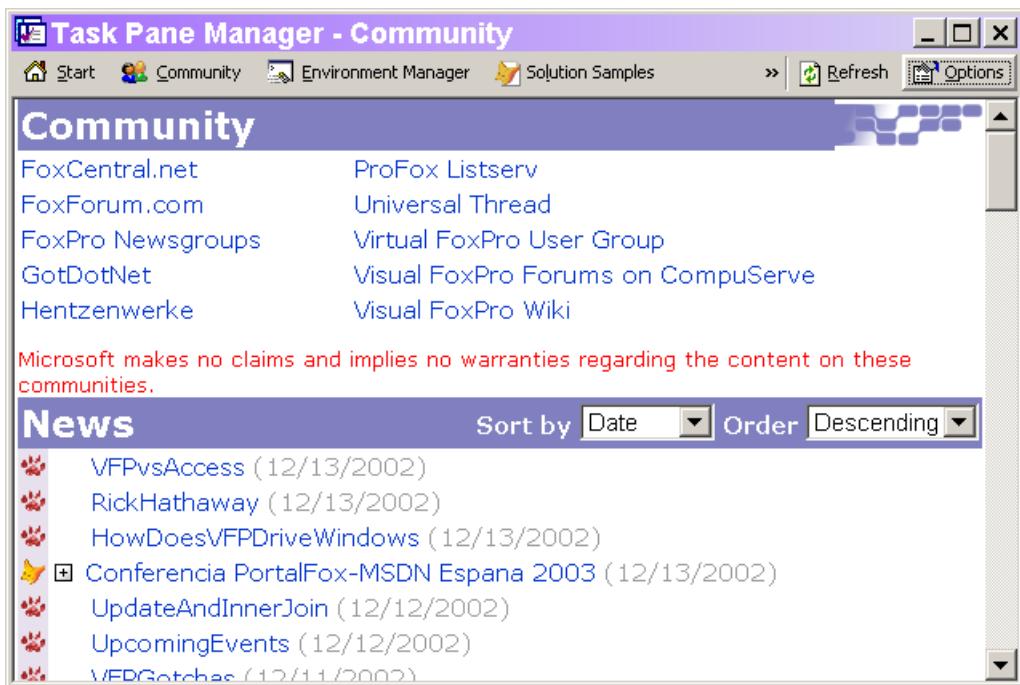
Figure 4: Joining the community—The Community pane provides quick access to VFP support sites and a listing of VFP news.

The bottom section (News) is a list of items drawn from one or more of the FoxCentral, Universal Thread and FoxPro Wiki websites. The Options window lets you specify which of them to use, as well as additional parameters for each of the three.

The Environment Manager pane

For those who work on more than one project at the same time, making sure you have the right settings in place when you work on a given project is a perennial problem. The Environment Manager pane (Figure 5) is designed to solve that problem. Click on the Manage Environments link to open the Environment Manager (Figure 6). In that dialog, you can create and edit what Microsoft calls environment sets.

Each environment set is listed in the Environment Manager pane. When you click on the name of the set (such as "Science Fair project" in Figure 5), those settings are applied. When you click on a project listed under a set, the settings are applied and the specified project is opened. Click on the design icon at the right to open the Environment Manager with this set selected for editing.
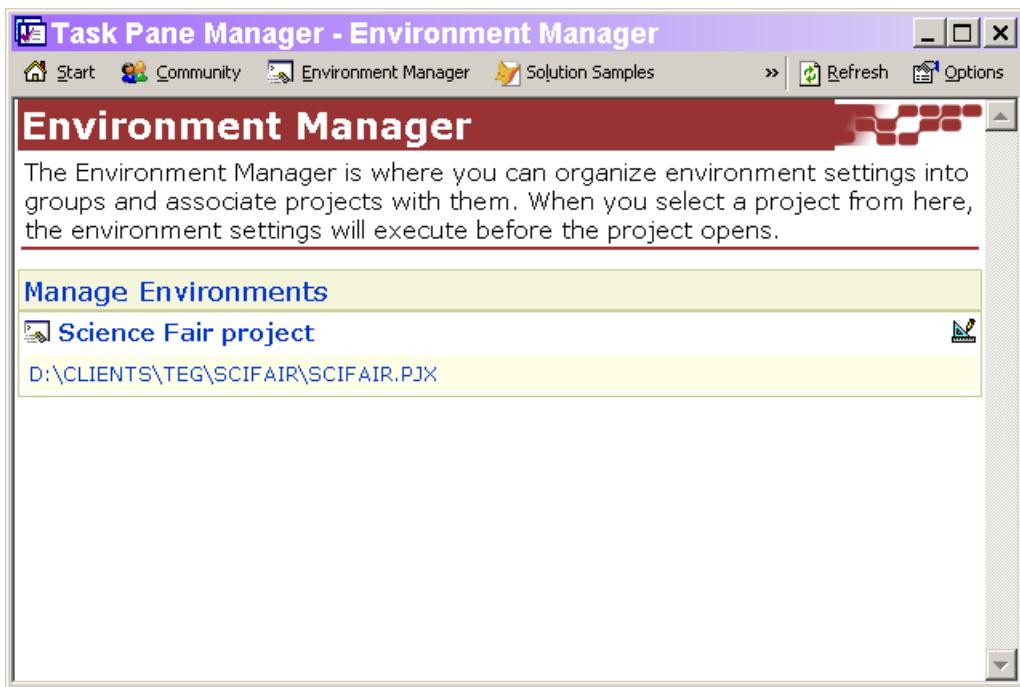
Figure 5: Managing settings—The Environment Manager pane lets you name a group of settings and, optionally, associate it with one or more projects.
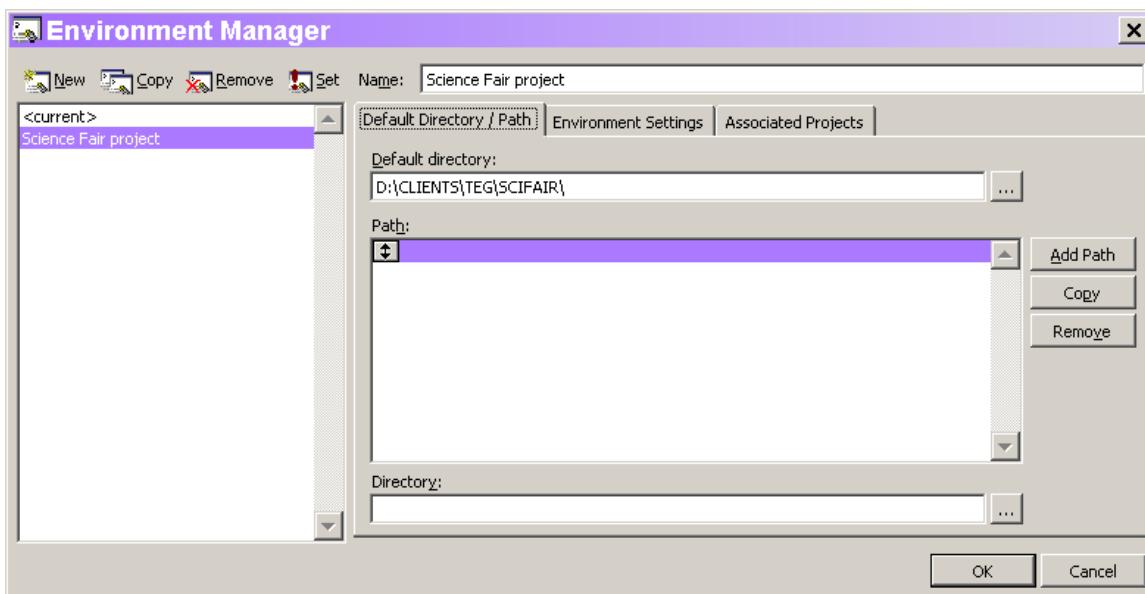

Figure 6: The Environment Manager—This tool lets you create environment sets, which are named groups of settings, including path, default directory, and many SET commands.

To create an environment set, click New in the Environment Manager. Fill in the name, then specify the desired settings. The Default Directory / Path page shown in Figure 6 includes only the default directory and path, which default to the current settings. The

Environment Settings page lets you specify values for the most common SET commands, as well as specify scripts to run before and after applying the other settings. In each case, the script can be any VFP code, allowing you to handle items not directly included in the Environment Manager. (For example, you might open the Toolbox and point it to a specific data file.) The ellipsis button next to each script opens a larger editing window to make it easier to enter your script code.

Use the Associated Projects page to list the projects for which this environment set applies. All the projects associated with a specified environment set are listed beneath it in the Environment Manager pane.

The Solution Samples pane

Since VFP 5, Microsoft has included a fairly comprehensive set of granular examples, each designed to show a single feature. The hard part has been getting people to pay attention to these Solution Samples. So, in VFP 8, they get a task pane of their own. This pane includes searching, the ability to install new samples as they become available, and a section to show links to websites that offer additional samples.

From the pane, you can both run the individual examples and display the underlying code. The samples include more than a dozen that demonstrate new features of VFP 8.

One secret for this pane. When you search, the results are listed beneath the search criteria. To remove the listing, clear out the textbox and click Search.

From time to time, new samples may become available (most likely from Microsoft's VFP website). They'll be supplied as a file called Manifest.XML. To add them to the pane, click the Install Sample button and point to the file.

The XML Web Services Pane

Web Services are a key technology direction for Microsoft right now, and VFP is well-equipped to go in this direction, with the ability to both create and consume (use) web services. The XML Web Services pane (Figure 7) provides access to a variety of tools and resources to help you in building and using web services.
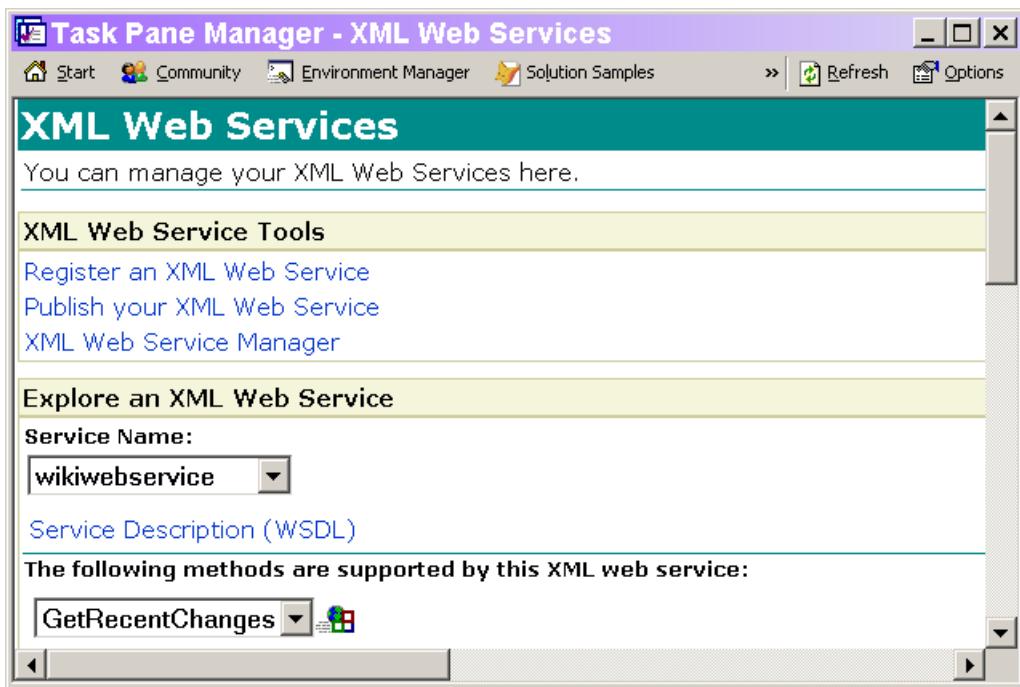
Figure 7: Working with web services—This pane is a one-stop shop for web services tools and resources.

This pane has three sections. The XML Web Service Tools section has links to three key tools for working with web services. The first is the XML Web Services Registration dialog that lets you register a web service. Doing so provides IntelliSense for it and adds it to the Toolbox. Second is the XML Web Services Publisher, which lets you make web services you create available to others. The third is the XML Web Service Manager, a new tool that lists registered web services and lets you add and delete them, as well as determine whether they're listed in the Toolbox. Each of these tools is worthy of an entire article, so I won't go into details here.

The second section of the XML Web Services pane provides help in using the web services you've registered. When you choose a web service from the dropdown, the section expands to include a dropdown of that web service's methods and sample code for using the web service.

The icon next to the dropdown listing the methods lets you test the chosen method. When you click it, a dialog opens for you to specify the parameters to pass to the method. Once you do so, another window opens showing the results from the method call. You can see the results either as XML or in a grid.

The final section of the XML Web Services pane provides links to a variety of resources for building and using web services. They include relevant sections of the VFP Help file, documentation for the SOAP toolkit, some MSDN articles, and more.

The Filer pane

The Filer tool dates back to FoxPro 2.0, where it was introduced to provide an easy way to find files meeting various criteria. The functionality hasn't changed much over the years, but the form and face of the tool have. VFP 8 adds another twist by housing Filer in a task pane (Figure 8). While the task pane version looks different than the stand-alone version (which is still available), the functionality is the same.
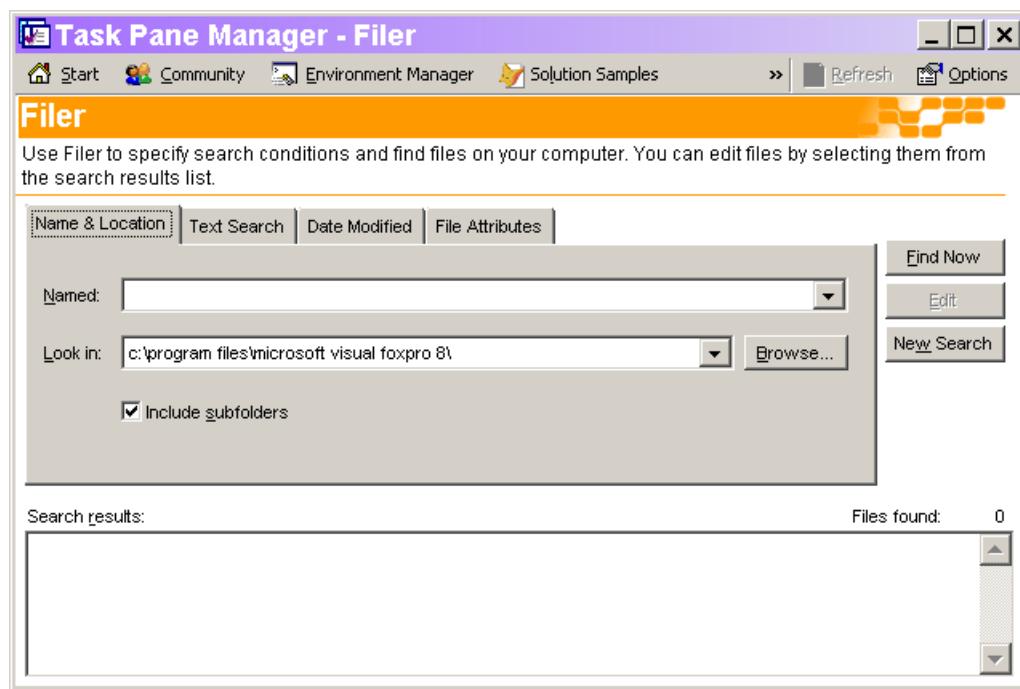

Figure 8: Searching for files—The Filer tool can be accessed through the Task Pane Manager to search for files meeting specified criteria.

The Minesweeper pane

The final pane supplied by Microsoft is just for fun. It's a VFP version of Minesweeper. It's missing some of the functionality of the Windows version, but includes the ability to set the size of the grid.

Actually, this pane has one other use. The code uses the new Collection class. You may want to examine the code to see how it works.

Looking at pane definitions

One of the cool things about task panes is that everything you need is included right in the Task Pane Manager. That means that the code behind each pane is accessible.

To examine the structure of any pane, open the Options window (by clicking Options on the button bar). Expand the Task Pane Manager folder and choose Customize. Click the Customize Panes button to open the Pane Customization window. Click on the pane you're interested in and the right-hand side of the window shows you how it was built.

In my next article, I'll talk about the different kinds of panes and show you how to build your own, as well as how to install third-party panes.