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Looking Forward

DevCon provided a chance to see what's coming to VFP as well as to look at the state of the FoxPro world.

By Tamar E. Granor, Editor

DevCon. Typing the name fills my mind with images of DevCon '97 as well as DevCons past. The rush of people in the halls as one session lets out or another begins. The feeling in a room when a speaker presents a great idea. Amazement at some of the projects people have implemented with VFP and FoxPro 2.x. The outbursts of laughter from the groups scattered around the lobby late at night. And so much more.

I've never been able to really explain DevCon to someone who hasn't been there. The intensity of the learning followed by the intensity of the playing is a rare combination but I've felt it at lots of FoxPro conferences. I always come home physically exhausted, but mentally charged up.

DevCon '97 was no exception. My personal energy level was lower than usual thanks to a bad cold, but the group was as charged as ever. More than 1200 VFP programmers descended on San Diego to hear from Microsoft and to learn how to, as the conference theme put it, "get it done." For nearly half of them, this DevCon was their first! There were a few hardy veterans of all eight FoxPro DevCons, too. (I started with the last DevCon in Toledo in 1991, so this was number six for me.)

The mood at the conference was more upbeat than the last few. Thanks to the announcement of DevCon '98 at the opening session, for the first time in four or five years, there was no feeling that this would be the last DevCon. In the keynote address, Microsoft VP Paul Gross not only discussed the next version of the product (code-named "Tahoe"), but mentioned that the version after that is already beginning to take shape.

Glimpses of Tahoe were shown both in the opening session and in a special bonus session on Monday night. The improvements range from the strategic, such as support for Microsoft Transaction Server ("Viper") including apartment model threading (I don't understand this one myself yet, but I'm told it's quite important) to language enhancements, such as a new _INCLUDE variable to specify a default #INCLUDE file and new STRTOFILE() and FILETOSTRING() functions, to improved developer tools like support for .GIF and .JPG files in forms.

The overall picture of Tahoe is substantial improvements without any major paradigm shifts. That is, everything we've learned about VFP will still be useful, but the product will become more powerful and easier to use. No specific time frame was given, but Microsoft did say that Tahoe will ship with Visual Studio '98. (It'll be available separately, too.)

The main theme of the keynote and Microsoft's message for the conference was components. Gross talked at length about Visual Studio, explaining that the idea is to combine the best of Web strategy with the best of Client-Server strategy in all three tiers of applications. He discussed COM (the Component Object Model - the new name for ActiveX Servers) and DCOM (Distributed COM) and the fact that VFP can build COM components.

Two demos were shown. The first showed a single multi-tier application running in VFP, VB, and Internet Explorer. The second wasn't really a demo at all - it was the SurplusDirect web site (written by FPA contributor Rick Strahl), which processes up to 150,000 orders a day using VFP along with other tools.

Gross discussed Microsoft's long-term plans for VFP. The goal is to support the Visual Studio vision, build better components, exploit the features of the upcoming Windows NT 5, and leverage the COM enhancements.

Monday night's bonus session was a strange, but fun, mix. The session started with what the VFP marketing team titled "fun and games." It included a couple of top 10 lists (among them the top 10 responses to enhancement requests from Microsoft), followed by a demonstration of "user-hostile" interfaces (such as buttons that run away when you attempt to click on them) all written in VFP of course.

Next, those members of the VFP team present (including representatives from development, product support, and documentation) were introduced. The audience gave them a long standing ovation - the team members seemed truly moved.

After the Tahoe demonstration, speakers were invited to the podium for a "Stump the Experts" session. The questions were an interesting mix of real problems, items contrived to be difficult, and remarks really intended for the marketing or development teams.

The technical sessions ranged from detailed how-tos (like learning to use drag-and-drop) to conceptual skills (like design patterns) to integrating various development tools (including Office and Visual Studio) and everything in between. The trade show featured 25 vendors of products from frameworks to components to training. The bookseller was incredibly busy and sold out of several books.

At DevCon '96, virtually every attendee I spoke to asked me whether there'd be another version of VFP. This year, the most common question I was asked was whether there'd be another version of my book. (The answer is "probably.")

The biggest concern I heard this year was about the number of new attendees. While people were thrilled to see so many new faces, they also wondered what happened to the others who've been to DevCon in the past. I don't have a complete answer, but I do know that many VFP developers are simply too busy to go to a conference. Several people who were there told me that, if they hadn't already paid for it, they wouldn't have taken the time off. Everybody I talked to about this issue knew several people who really wanted to come, but were too buried in work.

The good news is that all these new faces, along with the folks I hear are jamming VFP training classes, may be a sign that the shortage of skilled VFP developers is starting to ease. Certainly, there's plenty of work for anyone who can do it. The DevCon message board was loaded with job opportunities around the world.

All in all, it's a good time to be a VFP developer. The product is strong and getting stronger. The angst over its future is getting resolved and the work is out there.

Whether you were in San Diego or not, start planning now to attend DevCon '98 in Orlando May 17-20. I'll be there.

Our Top 10 List

In my September Editor's View, I suggested that what we really needed to help people make the transition from FoxPro 2.x to VFP was a top 10 list of what to learn. As soon as I'd written that, I realized that FoxPro Advisor was the perfect place for it. I asked Contributing Editors Mac Rubel, Andy Neil and Ted Roche to work with me on developing the list. You'll find the fruit of our efforts in this issue, along with a list of pointers to FPA articles that discuss those topics in more detail.