

September, 1997

Editor's View

Making it Easier

If we don't help people get started with VFP, it won't matter how good the product is.

By Tamar E. Granor, Editor

No sooner had I sent my August column off to production, in which I mentioned my concerns about the number of trained Visual FoxPro programmers, than I received a private message from an old friend expressing similar concerns. Tom Meeks is a long-time programmer who has worked in a number of fields (including computer animation, desktop video, and games). He's been a Fox guy since the late '80's and was instrumental in starting the Potomac Area Fox User Group that serves the Washington, DC area. Tom's experiences give him a breadth of knowledge most of us don't have, so when Tom talks, I listen.

Like me, Tom is concerned that a shortage of skilled VFP programmers may do more damage to our community than any marketing mistakes by Microsoft. His basic comment is that "VFP has *got* to be easier to learn and use in the heat of the workday deadline." As we conversed about this, Tom explained further that many people he talks to find the initial step into productive VFP use to be too steep and are frustrated by the various gotchas that arise.

Tom's take is that, as a community, we've been too insistent on learning the intricacies of object-oriented programming and ensuring that people do things the "right" way. By doing so, he feels we've made it too hard for people to learn by doing. The consequence is that many experienced FoxPro 2.x programmers, after spending a little time (or sometimes a long time) working in VFP, have decided to move on, not only because of Microsoft's wishy-washiness over the future of VFP, but because after a month or six months or a year of working with VFP, they still didn't feel confident in their ability to use the product and to produce reliable applications. The bottom line, for Tom, is that, despite VFP's technical superiority in many areas, the shortage of trained experts will lead to its doom.

I'm not as pessimistic as Tom is, but I think he raises some serious issues. When FP 2.x programmers come to the Fox forums for help getting started in VFP, they're typically bombarded with advice about what they shouldn't do (and I'm as guilty as anyone else for giving this kind of advice).

"Don't use SCATTER and GATHER anymore—use buffering instead."

"Don't use PRIVATE variables —use LOCALs."

"Don't even try to convert FoxPro 2.x apps to VFP. Just rewrite."

"Don't use globals—use properties of your application object."

While all of this is good advice, the overall effect is overwhelming. People upgrading from FoxPro 2.x need to feel that there's some value to their years of experience. Otherwise, why bother to move to VFP? Why not move to some other product?

As more and more end-users upgrade their machines and make the move to Windows 95, the time is ripe to move lots of FoxPro 2.x programmers to VFP. We need to make the transition easier for them and help them to gain a feeling of competence quickly.

One thing we can surely do is take all that good advice and organize it in a less threatening way. Perhaps we need to produce a "Top 10 Things to Change As You Move From FoxPro 2.x to Visual FoxPro," organized with the easiest changes (like using locals instead of privates) first so that newcomers can immediately feel successful. When we help people making the switch, we need to be less dogmatic about "proper OOP" and more focused on helping these people to be productive.

A few years ago, I heard a sermon which suggested that we shouldn't judge people by whether their religious observance was strictly in conformance with the established rules. Instead, the speaker said, we should help people to become observant gradually, welcoming each additional sign. Rather than making a person feel uncomfortable for not coming to services three weeks a month, recognize that coming the fourth week is a positive change and congratulate him for it. At the same time, expose people to additional observances in a positive way.

We need to approach those learning VFP (and, to some extent, we're all still learning VFP) the same way. Welcome each sign of understanding, offer additional information, but don't make learners feel uncomfortable because they cling to the successful practices of the past.

If we don't find a way to get more people converted into productive VFP programmers, it won't matter how many brilliant frameworks, useful tools, and cleverly designed objects we have - we won't have anywhere to use them.

DevCon's a Good Start

Learning VFP is a massive task—the product is both rich and deep. One way to enhance your knowledge is to attend a conference. The premier VFP event is just around the corner.

This year's Microsoft Visual FoxPro DevCon takes place September 14 to 17 in San Diego, California. The speakers are a corps of experts (including many FoxPro Advisor contributors like Mac Rubel, Drew Speedie, Ted Roche, Doug Hennig, Steve Black, Y. Alan Griver, Rick Strahl and me). The sessions are focused on helping you become more productive with VFP, as well as integrating VFP with other technologies like the Internet, Microsoft Office and Visual Studio.

In addition, DevCon is a great way to meet your peers, get questions answered, and network with others in the field. Almost as much learning goes on informally as in the sessions.

If you haven't made your reservations yet, see the ad in this issue for more information. See you there.