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Editor's View

More Tools to Make VFP Life Easier

In the July Editor's View, I talked about some reasons for using tools build by others rather than building your own and described some tools provided with Visual FoxPro. This month, I discuss tools written by other people - either as freeware or put into the public domain. Our community is very fortunate to have a long history of such tools – it's part of the overall sharing of knowledge that has strengthened the FoxPro world, and is part of what has kept FoxPro vibrant even when the pundits have predicted its demise more than once.

The available tools run the full gamut of the product. Since VFP is a database product, I'll start with a couple that directly impact the database. All of the tools discussed in this column are on this month's Professional Resource CD and can be downloaded from Advisor.COM.

DBCX is a public domain library that provides a technique for extending the VFP data dictionary. It was created by a consortium of third-party vendors who realized they'd want to make additions to the DBC. Rather than each coming up with their own scheme for doing so, they felt the FoxPro community would benefit from having one common system. DBCX has a set of core extensions and a mechanism for each application that uses it to add its own extensions without interfering with other applications' extensions.

Another public domain database tool is Erik Moore's eView, which picks up where the View Designer leaves off. eView lets you work with existing views, modifying their definitions, as well as setting view properties. It can handle views that the View Designer can't (such as those involving multiple unrelated child tables); it also lets you set view properties that aren't handled by the View Designer, like field properties.

While a number of editor improvements have been demo'ed for VFP 7 (see the September '99 Editor's View and Advisor.COM), right now we're still working in VFP 6 (or even older versions). A couple of public domain tools provide enhancements to today's editor. The Cob Editor Extensions (known as CEE) offer a whole set of tools for making your time in the editor more productive. It includes keyword expansion (like Word's AutoText feature, only more so), converting tabs to spaces, easy creation of variable declarations, case change, and much more.

(An earlier version of CEE was reviewed in the December '94 FoxPro Advisor.)

On a smaller scale, Contributing Editor Christof Lange's ISX.PRG provides IntelliSense for variables. Once you install it, anytime you type m. in a code window, a list of declared variables appears and you can choose from the list rather than having to correctly type in the variable name yourself.

Moving on to other kinds of tools, Christof is responsible for another of them. Struct provides an easy way to pass structures to Windows API functions. Christof described the details in the November '99 ADVISOR Answers column.

Another tool that makes something complex much easier is Rick Strahl's West Wind XML Converter. It takes various kinds of data and changes them to XML and back. As is typical of Rick's work, it's well documented, so you should be able to jump right in.

Reporting is next. DBCDoc.ZIP from Andy Kramek contains two tools aimed at developers' documentation. DocDBC documents a database, while GenSCode does the same for a form or class.

For general reporting needs, Markus Egger's GenRepoX extends the VFP (and FoxPro 2.x) Report Designer allowing you to create multiple detail bands, sort the fields in a report at runtime, add events to report fields, and much more. I've included both GenRepoX 2.1 and Visual GenRepoX 3.0, partly because the older version has a complete Help file, which isn't included in the newer one. Be sure to check www.eps-software.com for the latest documentation, as well.

Also in the GenX family is Contributing Editor Andrew Ross MacNeill's GenMenuX. This tool, which has been around since FoxPro 2.x days, expands the capabilities of the Menu Designer. Features include conditionally removing some bars from a menu and automatically creating hot keys, as well as letting you hook driver programs into the menu creation process. (See Brian Marquis' article in the March '98 issue for an example.)

One of the most potentially useful technologies in Visual FoxPro is the builder mechanism, but many developers find that writing their builders is just too hard. Tool builder extraordinaire Ken Levy has some solutions for this problem. BuilderB is a builder builder, a tool for helping you create builders. Another, later, tool to make it even easier is BuilderD (the "D" stands for dynamic). This one is actually included

with VFP 6 – look for it in the Wizards subdirectory. While BuilderB requires you to subclass a builder class for every class for which you want to create a builder, BuilderD makes the process data-driven and puts an interface in front of it. (For a complete explanation of the BuilderD technology, check out Doug Hennig's technical paper at www.stonefield.com/techpap.html.)

The last item here isn't needed as much since Service Pack 3 added run-time compilation to VFP 6, but it's still a handy tool. Randy Pearson's CodeBlick lets you execute a block of code at run-time. It's handy for those situations where you need to build a loop or some conditional code on the fly. You can't use a macro for more than one line of code, so a tool like CodeBlick is called for.

This list is by no means comprehensive. I've included a lot of the best known and most widely used free tools. There are plenty more goodies out there for VFP developers, including a number that aren't free, but are inexpensive. There are also tons of useful tools that aren't VFP-specific. For example, one shareware tool I use every day is WinZip.

No doubt, I've missed some great things. If you have suggestions for additions to the Visual FoxPro developer's toolkit, let us know by sending a message to foxpro@advisor.com. Be sure to tell us where we can find the tools; we'll post them on Advisor.COM for everyone to share.