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Editor's View

The Future of FoxPro

Don't believe the rumors: Microsoft will continue to enhance Visual FoxPro. And, farewell to Tom Rettig.

By Tamar E. Granor, Editor

I've been using Fox products since 1988. In the years since, there have been three major revisions (and countless minor ones). The code I write today looks very little like the code I wrote in '88.

In the same period, there have been at least as many times when the future of FoxPro itself was in doubt. First, there was the Ashton-Tate lawsuit, then Microsoft's purchase of Fox, then poor marketing by Microsoft, and now, rumors that Visual FoxPro 4 will be the last version. Each time, there were plenty of people ready to declare FoxPro dead.

What's really going on

For several years, the Microsoft slide for the future of its development tools has shown common front-end tools, a common database engine and a choice of languages in between. They've stated time and again that this is where they want to go. We've seen some movement toward this goal already.

Now Microsoft is taking the next step. They've reorganized the development team to work actively toward the common front-end. The folks who build the interactive development environment (IDE) can focus on creating the best single tool instead of trying to enhance several products at once.

Microsoft has stated clearly that VFP4 will *not* be the last version. There'll be at least one more version after that. That's probably two years out (my estimate, not theirs). No one knows what'll happen after that and anyone who claims to is making it up. The software industry changes too fast.

Another strong sign that FoxPro is alive and well is the announcement of an official Microsoft FoxPro DevCon. It'll take place October 27-30 in Phoenix. We'll bring you more details as they're released.

The real danger

Despite Microsoft's commitment to FoxPro, this latest incident brings the danger of a self-fulfilling prophecy. That's when we decide something might happen, behave as if it really is going to happen, and by our behavior cause the thing to happen.

If we all wring our hands and worry about whether FoxPro will be around tomorrow, we'll create fear that will cause people to steer clear. We mustn't encourage our colleagues to abandon FoxPro (of course, we should keep up with trends, though), nor should we discourage newcomers.

This is not to say that we should ignore the situation either. We must continue pressure on Microsoft to market FoxPro as what it is—a powerful object-oriented tool for building client-server and local database applications. We must also continue to press for the improvements needed to make Visual FoxPro even better.

As Microsoft envisions it, we won't be making an abrupt switch from the known to the unknown, but a smooth migration to an even better development environment. Whatever happens, history tells me we're likely to have a lot to learn within the next two years. But who cares? We've done it before and we'll do it again and we'll continue to do it as long as we choose to develop applications. I'm looking forward to it.

Farewell, Tom Rettig

The FoxPro and entire Xbase community lost a giant on February 15. Tom Rettig was one of the main reasons we can use the term "community" when we talk about the group of people who work in FoxPro. At Ashton-Tate, Tom was one of the designers of dBASE III, and wrote the essential reference book on it. He built the first add-on library for Clipper, pioneering the public domain tools that make all our jobs easier. Tom wrote articles for *DATA BASED ADVISOR,* appeared on *FOXPRO ADVISOR*'s satellite TV conferences, and spoke at many developer events including the FoxPro DevCons. *Tom Rettig's Help* and *Tom Rettig's FoxPro Handbook* taught us the intricacies of FoxPro; many of us keep well-worn copies by our desks.

Tom had every right to a high opinion of himself. Child actor Tommy Rettig had great success, starring in several movies, and playing Jeff Miller, the first owner of TV's "Lassie." Tom reprised the role a few years ago in an episode of "The New Lassie" series, for which he wrote the script that had Lassie using a computer, helped by himself as a grown-up Jeff Miller. This was especially fitting, because as an adult, Tom's ability as a programmer was legendary—he was a "guru" with a Hollywood-famous name. Yet he was one of the most friendly, accessible people you'd hope to meet.

As news of Tom's death (from natural causes) spread, dozens of people posted messages on the various Fox forums. The messages were deeply touching, but most remarkable was the similarity of what people had to say. Here are some examples:

"He spoke to people as peers, whether they were on a 'guru' level or a novice level. He *never* seemed condescending. Once he was introduced to me, he remembered my name, and always greeted me by it as if I was a long lost friend."

"What a class act: here he is, an acknowledged guru, author and vendor of a powerful FoxPro development environment (*Tom Rettig's Office*), and instead of talking about himself, he asks about my (relatively piddling) work."

"Somehow when we were around Tom we got to be more *valuable* than we were before—smarter, funnier, more gracious. And he seems to have made *everybody* feel like that."

The FoxPro community will never be the same without Tom Rettig. May we all learn from the example of his life to keep it a rich, warm, friendly, open place. I'll close with this

quote from another member of the community who addressed these remarks to Tom's spirit:

"Tomorrow I will be as unfailingly gracious and uplifting to everyone I meet as you were. Being like you tomorrow is the best tribute I can think of. Who knows, maybe it'll be contagious."