

August, 1998

Editor's View

They Said They'd Be Back - and They Were

DevCon '98 included the VFP 6 launch, lots of enthusiasm, and much more.

By Tamar E. Granor, Editor

I'm writing this column on an airplane on my way home from DevCon '98, which was a huge success. More than 1600 attendees gathered in Orlando to hear the announcement of Visual FoxPro 6 and learn about the product. One of Microsoft's lighter-hearted themes for the conference was "We told you we'd be back" complete with an appropriate video clip. In fact, all attendees received VFP 6 t-shirts with that line and a picture of the "Visual FoxPro Terminator Edition" on the back.

The mood of the conference was incredibly upbeat, more so than at any DevCon since the last time we were in Orlando in 1993. I don't think even one person asked me whether I thought that VFP had a future. The incredible technology in the new version, together with tremendous improvements in the marketing of the product, left everyone feeling secure and ready to writing amazing applications.

The keynote included an array of statistics. Microsoft did a survey of FoxPro users in February '97 and again in February '98. Between the two surveys, the number of people using VFP 5 increased from about 10% to more than 70%. At the same time, the number using FoxPro 2.x declined by about half. These figures match what I've been seeing—more and more FoxPro 2.x users are moving up to Visual FoxPro.

Another fascinating statistic reported was that about 10% of Visual Studio owners who use VFP are using FoxPro for the first time. In other words, adding VFP to Visual Studio has given it a new respectability and brought in new users.

A show of hands indicated that about 30% of those present were attending their first DevCon. DevCon '97 had a similar (perhaps even a slightly higher) rate of new attendees - many of them were back.

Most of the keynote session was devoted to the launch of VFP 6. The VFP team explained where the product fits in the Microsoft scheme of things and what had been done to improve it. Four major themes were introduced: building scalable database applications and components, enterprise application development, making VFP easier to learn and use, and providing a more productive development environment. Lots of new features were demonstrated, many of them to applause from the audience. (We'll keep telling you about them in FoxPro Advisor.) One that really impressed me was the new Application Wizard. We saw a functioning application created in about five minutes, starting with just the data structures. The application is based on a solid, extensible framework.

VFP 6 is expected to ship "later in the summer," as both an individual product and a member of Visual Studio. Microsoft also let us know that, despite the May launch (and some very good press), the main publicity blitz for VFP 6 will come after it ships.

Microsoft also announced that a new certification exam for VFP 6 is being designed, along with a 5-day course to prepare for the exam.

The keynote ended on a high note with the announcement of the dates and location for next year's DevCon. The next Fox family reunion will take place June 6-10 in Palm Springs, California. Notice that next year's DevCon will run for five days, rather than four. Mark your calendar now and keep an eye on the Visual FoxPro website (www.microsoft.com\vfox) and advisor.com for more information.

DevCon also brought the culmination of the Visual FoxPro Excellence Awards. The finalists were introduced at the keynote. Many of them offered demos of their apps in the computer lab during the conference. The winners were announced at an evening bonus session, where they briefly demonstrated their applications. I was truly awed by some of what I saw in that session.

The winner that really caught my eye was a system called Visual CAD (Computer Aided Dispatching) for handling 911 calls and dispatching appropriate help. The system can recommend which units to send as well as keeping track of whether they get there and whether they've checked in regularly. Call data can be analyzed to see where or when certain kinds of incidents are occurring and whether response is fast enough. 911 centers using the system find that the system improves response times. This application functions in a 7x24 environment and can't be taken down even for updates. Don't let anyone tell you that VFP isn't good enough for a mission-critical application.

One of the things I learned at DevCon was how much the focus of the FoxPro community has changed in a year. The break-out sessions were divided among those covering pretty much all VFP material, the ones about the development process, and those dedicated to interoperability. While almost all sessions were well attended, those devoted to COM and web technologies were overflowing. Clearly, many of you have heard the message and are starting to learn about the brave new world of component development.

I had a personal "a-ha" moment when I sat down at one of the machines in the computer lab that had a direct Internet connection. Until now, all my web experience has been across dial-up lines. At those speeds, the web is a place you visit when you need to find what you need. With a direct connection, I can see the attraction of using the web all day every day. I still think the user interface needs to improve, but I have seen the future.

Now, it's time to go home, take stock, and try to organize all the cool ideas and new things I want to try. While DevCon always recharges my FoxPro batteries, it's truer this year than ever.

Taking a Break

Everyone's entitled to a break now and then. Miriam Liskin has been writing our FoxPro Fundamentals column for nearly four years now. She's taking this month off, but be assured her column will return and Miriam will continue to teach us the basics of using Visual FoxPro.