

August, 2004

Editor's View

VFP 9: Once more with feeling

The Visual FoxPro team offers plenty of reasons to look at VFP 9

Some years ago, Robert Green, who was in charge of marketing Visual FoxPro, was asked when the Report Designer would be improved. He responded, "If you've been asking for it for three versions and we haven't done it, take a hint." He's not responsible for marketing VFP anymore, and VFP 9 features stunning improvements to the Report Designer, offering abilities that VFP developers have been requesting for far more than three versions.

In the grand FoxPro tradition, rather than just adding features, with VFP 9, Microsoft opens the Report Designer architecture. The reporting engine is still built into VFP9.EXE, but much of both the design-time and runtime environments has been extracted into VFP code, offering the opportunity to extend and replace functionality.

Reporting features you're likely to use right away include multiple detail bands, true report chaining, and zooming up to 500% in print preview. Other new features will take a while to figure out and use productively, including creating your own custom report listeners to let you manipulate a report at runtime. Two articles in the July issue focused on the changes in reporting. Expect lots more on this subject and watch the various VFP websites for people to share report listeners for common tasks.

While reporting is the main focus of VFP 9, it's not the only thing the VFP team worked on. Other enhancements include some to make your life as a developer easier and some that will make your users happier. Among my favorite productivity features are changing the font (and more important to me, the font size) in the Project Manager and having IntelliSense available inside WITH.

As with reporting, some of the productivity features are a little harder to start with, but will offer tremendous benefits once we get used to them. VFP 9 offers the ability to replace system dialogs with your own, using the IntelliSense system. So if there's a dialog called from the menu that you've always hated or found difficult to use, you can design your own form in VFP and use it instead.

Another amazing new feature lets you customize the Property Sheet. Doing so requires creating an XML string defining your customizations. Clearly, this is not for the faint of heart. However, due to the way the FoxPro community operates, it's much easier than the VFP team originally planned. As soon as he started working with an early version of VFP 9, Doug Hennig (creator of Stonefield Database Toolkit and Stonefield Query) realized that most developers would never use this functionality if they had to manage it manually. He designed a little editor to simplify the process, and shared it with other testers. The VFP team took a look at it and decided to include Doug's tool (called the MemberData Editor) with the product.

Some of VFP's enhancements are aimed at the people who use the applications you write. Among those are the ability to anchor controls so they adjust properly when a form is resized, and the ability to dock forms we create. There are lots of other little improvements that will be visible to end-users.

The programming language hasn't been left behind, either. VFP 9 includes significant enhancements to the SQL portion of the language (see my articles in the July issue and this issue), as well as several new data types and some great new functions (like ICASE(), which is to CASE as IIF() is to IF). It also removes or increases the limits for a variety of items. For example, there's no longer a maximum size for an array.

This column isn't long enough to list everything that VFP 9 has to offer. Fortunately, you don't need me to because you can get your hands on the product now and test it out even before it ships. A public beta version is available at <http://msdn.microsoft.com/vfoxpro>. Although the beta doesn't include examples of the new features, the VFP team has promised to post some at the same site.

Getting up to speed on any new version of a development product while still earning a living with the older version is a challenge. The VFP team has made it easier by offering the beta for everyone to pound on. Here at FoxPro Advisor, we started our coverage of VFP 9 with the July issue; expect each new issue to include some articles and tips to help you learn what you need to know.

In addition, I'm working with a team of VFP experts (Doug Hennig, Rick Schummer, Toni Feltman and Jim Slater) on "What's New in Visual FoxPro 9," a book designed to help you jump right in. We're talking an unconventional approach with this book; those who buy the book will get access to "beta" versions of the chapters as soon as

they're finished. We plan to release one chapter a week through the summer. For more information, go to www.hentzenwerke.com.

Whether you're currently using VFP 8 SP1 or still working with a much older version, I strongly recommend you take the opportunity to put VFP 9 through its paces now, so you can make an informed decision on upgrading. Of course, as you work with it, remember that it is a beta test version and you will encounter bugs. (The release notes tell you how to report any problems you find.) It's my guess that once you've used it, you'll be anxious to have the shipping version.