

June, 1997

Editor's View

Whose computer is it, anyway?

By Tamar E. Granor, Editor

Only days after Office 97 was released, people started sending me articles in Word 97 format. At first, I simply asked them to convert from Word 97 to Word 95 format and resend. But, after a couple of weeks, I figured I'd better be able to read the new format. I'd also heard some good things about Microsoft Outlook and wanted to see for myself.

So, one fine day, I prepared to install Office 97. Word 95 is still the standard at FoxPro Advisor and I'd heard that Word 97's "Save As Word 95" capability wasn't very good (more on that below), so it was clear that I'd need to keep Word 95 on my machine as well. I wanted to keep PowerPoint 95, too, since I sometimes give presentations using other people's computers and I can't assume that they're running the most recent version. I barely use Excel and Access, so replacing them with the new version was no big deal.

Off I went to uninstall Excel and Access. First problem: NT 4's Add/Remove Programs dialog listed only Office as a whole, not the individual applications within. That's where I made my first mistake. I didn't try uninstalling Office to see if it would let me choose which apps to remove.

Instead, I figured I'd simply install Office 97 over Office 95, being careful to point Word and PowerPoint to different directories than the Office 95 versions. Bad mistake. When the installation was done, Word 95 and PowerPoint 95 were totally wiped out from my machine. The new versions were in the directories I'd named, but the old versions were gone.

No warning. No message. No nothing. To quote Stephanie from Full House, "How rude!" The experience started me thinking about how often the software we use is rude.

The Office 97 installation also added two items (other than the actual apps) to my Start menu - New Office Document and Open Office Document. How dare they? I do use other applications than those in Office and I have no desire to treat Office differently than the others. How about asking first?

I use file extensions to indicate versions of Word documents. Unless I remember to surround the entire file name with quotes, Word insists on sticking a .DOC extension on the name I've entered, even when I've given the file a perfectly sensible extension. How rude! When I first encountered this behavior, I realized it was due to NT's long file names, so I tried turning off long file names in the registry. (Luddite that I am, I don't use long file names.) After that, when I typed a file name with an extension, Word *still* tried to add .DOC, but this made an invalid file name that couldn't be used. Word wasn't smart enough to figure out that long file names were turned off and that I'd already added an extension. How stupid!

The problem of saving Word 97 documents in Word 95 format also qualifies as rude (not to mention arrogant). When you choose Word 6.0/95 format in the Save As dialog, Word creates a file with a .DOC extension. The only problem is that it isn't a Word 6.0/95 file at all - it's an RTF file. If the document contains any moderately complex formatting, you're likely to lose it in the process.

Microsoft isn't the only villain in this piece. My favorite CompuServe auto-navigation program grabs the modem when you dial out and doesn't release it until you close the application. Perhaps this one can be forgiven since this is a DOS application (the last one I use regularly, in fact), but the product does come with an icon for use in Windows, so the developers know the score.

What's the common thread here? In all these cases, the people who developed the products forgot one key point - it's the user's computer, not the software's. Applications should behave like guests. You wouldn't move your host's furniture around (at last not without asking) and you strip the bed you used before you leave. Similarly, applications shouldn't change your configuration without asking and they should clean up after themselves.

As developers, we need to always remember whose computer it is and design our applications accordingly. Use Windows settings where appropriate (after all, the user picked them), change the environment as little as possible and change it back when you're done, ask before making systemic changes, give the user choices. In general, make your applications behave like polite guests, the kind that get asked back, rather than making your host thank goodness you've left and vow never to ask you back.

Conference Update

Plans are progressing for DevCon, to held September 14-17 in San Diego. This is the highlight of the FoxPro year as Foxfolk from around the world gather to share and learn. Last year's DevCon showcased VFP5 - this year, you can expect in depth coverage of that product, information on integration with the other Visual Studio elements and other applications, and hints of what's to come. Whether you've been working with VFP since the 3.0 beta or you're just jumping into the Visual FoxPro waters, there will be sessions and people to help you work better and smarter.

In the April issue, I mentioned several upcoming conferences. It turns out that, due to the glut of Spring conferences, the FoxPro User Conference in Minneapolis has been moved to November. In addition, the folks in Virginia Beach are planning a workshop sometime in October.

If you can't make it to DevCon, a regional conference can provide lots of useful information and interaction. Even if you do come to DevCon, other conferences give you a chance to learn more. Some members of our community attend as many as three or four conferences a year and find that what they learn and the contacts they make more than pay for expenses and time out of the office.