

September, 1995

Editor's View

Winding Down, Blasting Off

Also, certification? And the FoxPro Advisor Developers Conference

As I write this, the school year is winding down. My family's days and evenings are devoted to year-end activities - concerts, luncheons, ceremonies and so forth. The Little League playoffs are starting. And the Visual FoxPro Beta is winding down.

With so much closure in the air, it's time to share some thoughts about the beta process for Visual FoxPro. I'll start by thanking Susan Graham, the manager of the Beta program and the people on her team. The Fox community is vociferous and boisterous. Susan and her group have managed the Beta forum with a great deal of patience. The traffic on the forum has been intense - hundreds of messages a day. While a few things have slipped between the cracks, the sysops have handled thousands of messages professionally.

A few months ago, I mentioned Microsoft's responsiveness to the FoxPro community. This has been incredibly visible in this Beta. More than once, testers raised an issue and were told that it worked that way by design. When the testers explained why a different design would be better, Microsoft listened and at least reconsidered the design. It didn't always change, but we always had a sense that our opinions were taken seriously.

Who's Who?

I've heard a few people grumbling about the Beta testers being some kind of elite group where regular folks couldn't get admission. This totally false charge deserves a response.

I don't know the exact criteria Microsoft uses to choose Beta testers. But I can look at who's there and make some guesses. First, there's no question that the leaders in the FoxPro community get to beta-test. This includes both the well-known development houses and a number of independent developers. These people, who write and speak about FoxPro on an ongoing basis, have earned the right to have serious input into new versions.

The Beta group also includes a number of people better known in other parts of the Xbase community. There are a few folks who've made their reputations using Clipper or dBase or other products. There are some experienced Access and Visual Basic developers, too.

All these people turn out to be only a small percent of the Beta group. There are hundreds of other people, ranging from experienced FoxPro developers to total newcomers, and from those immersed in Windows to people who've never before worked with it.

In other words, the Beta group was chosen for its diversity. It's important for a new product to get tested on lots of different hardware in lots of different environments by people who'll try lots of different things. My personal mission in this Beta has been to ensure that Visual FoxPro will run in Windows 3.1 with 640x480 video. (Yes, it does, and I'll be buying a larger monitor real soon now.)

So, if you were turned down for the Beta, assume that it's because they had others who fit your profile, not that you didn't meet some imaginary, arbitrary criteria of elitiness.

Certification

By now, you may know that Microsoft is preparing a certification exam for Visual FoxPro. The exam will be part of the Certified Solution Developer program.

I have mixed feelings about certification in general. It's very hard to test the things that make someone a good developer. You don't want to test things that can found in the help file, like syntax, and more complex things, like development strategies, are hard to test. I haven't seen the exam yet, so I can't judge whether it tests the right things or not.

Beyond those concerns, I'm not at all convinced that the Certified Solution Developer is a good one for many of us who work in FoxPro. To become a Certified Solution Developer, you have to pass four exams. The first two are on Windows - fair enough in Microsoft's world.

But then you have to pass exams on two different development products, things like Visual FoxPro, Visual Basic, Access, SQL Server, and so forth. This is where I have a problem. The grapevine tells me you really have to know a product well to pass this exam. It's hard to imagine a solo developer knowing more than one product well enough.

Other people and I have encouraged Microsoft to offer some kind of development platform-based certification, so a FoxPro developer could be certified in FoxPro and an Access developer certified in Access. We'll see whether they come up with something.

Conference Time

Plans for the FoxPro Advisor Conference in Phoenix are progressing. You'll find an insert devoted to it in this issue.

I'll be speaking there, of course. Other speakers include lots of people familiar from our pages, industry leaders like Drew Speedie, John Hosier and Jim Booth.

Sessions will cover many aspects of Visual FoxPro, as well as integrating Visual FoxPro into the broader environment. There'll also be a few sessions on some of FoxPro 2.x's tougher problems, and some coverage of broad issues.

I've written before about the reasons for attending conferences, so I won't repeat them, but I hope to meet many of you there.