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## Interview

### Wither FoxPro?

#### **A new Program Manager talks about FoxPro's role at Microsoft and the future of Visual FoxPro.**

By Tamar E. Granor, Editor and Patrice Hartmann, Managing Editor

Although FoxPro was "adopted" into Microsoft's family of tools nearly five years ago, many FoxPro developers would say that the adjustment process for both FoxPro and Microsoft has been rocky. Even after this long, FoxPro's position in the family often seems shaky. Other tools, such as Visual Basic, seem to get the lion's share of attention from marketing and sales staffs, while rumors about FoxPro's demise circulate regularly.

But now, Robert Green, the new Product Manager for Visual FoxPro, claims that Visual FoxPro is being accepted as a full-fledged member of the Visual tools family. Green, who came to Microsoft from the Information Management Group, where he was Vice President, works with David Lazar, Lead Product Manager. Lazar and Green work in the Internet Platform and Tools Division, where they represent FoxPro. Both are key players in the effort to successfully market Visual FoxPro.

A long-time FoxPro developer, Green has written for FoxPro Advisor, spoken at many FoxPro conferences, and been involved in Chicago's FoxPro Users and Developers' Group. We sat down with him at DevCon to talk about the new marketing team and to find out how the team plans to help position FoxPro better, both within Microsoft and in the marketplace. Several times, Green said that FoxPro is an integral member of the Microsoft tools family, and a member who will play a continuing role as the product line continues to develop.

#### **A member of the family**

Green began by reiterating the Tools family strategy described in the DevCon opening session (see Editor's View Feb '97—also watch future issues for a summary of the keynote address). He didn't name specific applications for which VFP is the right choice in the Tools family because "I don't want to pigeonhole the product," he says, "You can't just say that each product is good for this one thing and bad for that one." However, VFP can be the tool to build the front-end, the middle tier, or the back end of a multi-tier application, he added.

Microsoft's present focus is on the Internet, Green says. He described a "killer app" that will be to Internet development what Lotus 1-2-3 was to the personal computer. It's a multi-tier, distributed application. Using the Internet, you don't have to worry about the client machine (a concept also known as "thin-client computing"); you don't need to know how much power it has, what platform it's running, network details or many of the other concerns developers have today. You can put the resource-intensive and process-intensive tasks on the server and let the client access data through a browser. Green

says that Visual FoxPro might be used for either the middle-tier (business rules) or the back-end (database server) in such an environment.

Green acknowledged that not every application fits that model, however. "Some applications just need FoxPro," he says. Asked to distinguish between the two kinds of applications, he used the analogy of a toolbox. "You don't need to use every tool for every job, but you do need to know which tools are required for which jobs."

Green believes that upgrading to Visual FoxPro 5.0 is a "no-brainer" for anyone using FoxPro 2.x or Visual FoxPro 3.0. He sees VFP 5 as the "best way for FoxPro developers to build state-of-the-art applications."

## Better marketing

Another sore spot with developers concerns the marketing of VFP. The FoxPro community has been extremely unhappy with Microsoft's treatment of the product. Green laid out the marketing plans and discussed the kinds of problems FoxPro developers have run into in the past. Some specific solutions he mentioned include:

- A slew of ads promoting VFP in the trade publications
- A new video called "The Power of Visual FoxPro"
- A paper on choosing among Microsoft's development tools called "Choosing the Appropriate Database Development Tool."

Ads specific to Visual FoxPro 5 will run for about three months. (They started in the fall, so may be done by the time you read this.) In general, product-specific ads are used only at the time a new version of a developer product launches, Green says. After that, each product is advertised as part of the Visual Tools family.

Other marketing tools include a video, "The Power of FoxPro," which was distributed to all attendees at DevCon and is being sent to all Solution Providers and Microsoft field representatives. The video, which features Lazar and VFP team members Randy Brown and Calvin Hsia (all three were formerly independent FoxPro developers), contains a demonstration of VFP5, showing the wide variety of tasks it's good for. The video is also available from Microsoft.

The white paper on choosing a database tool was also distributed at DevCon. A revised version is going to Solution Providers and field reps, and should be posted in the MSDN Library on Microsoft's Web site ([www.microsoft.com](http://www.microsoft.com)) by the time you read this. (There'll be a link from the Visual FoxPro page.) Also, the Visual FoxPro web site ([www.microsoft.com\vfoxpro](http://www.microsoft.com\vfoxpro)) has been revamped to offer more content, Green says.

Internally, the FoxPro team is working to let other product groups know that FoxPro is now part of a component solution and works with other tools. It's Green's view that it's easy to improve the marketing of VFP because of the product. "It's much easier to get out a message of 'use FoxPro with' other things than to say 'use FoxPro instead of' other products" he says.

As for those developers who've switched to other products because of concerns about Microsoft's attitude, Green says, "They should come back." He says that no other

product offers the features and robustness that FoxPro developers have come to rely on. With regard to attracting new developers to VFP, he states that the goal is to attract them to the Visual Tools family more than to any one tool. He indicates that all the tools have strengths and weaknesses and developers need to find out the strengths and weaknesses of each product in the family, then choose the one they need to do the job.

We raised the issue of Microsoft employees who undermine FoxPro to developer's clients or in public sessions. Green responded that he and Lazar are working to make sure other product teams understand how FoxPro fits into the Tools family, and that field representatives understand the policy of not criticizing any Microsoft products on sales calls. He pointed out that a developer who takes a field representative with him on a sales call must speak to the rep ahead of time and plan the presentation. If a field representative does undermine a developer, the developer should discuss it with the representative and, if necessary, go to the rep's boss. (He and Lazar are also interested in hearing about such cases; contact them at FoxMktg@microsoft.com.)

Green also noted that Visual FoxPro, as a database developer tool, is a difficult product to understand. The video will help field reps to understand the product better, and Microsoft's overall component strategy should make the discussion less about individual products and more about the product family.

On the issue of FoxPro being omitted from public presentations, Green reiterated that the marketing team is working to inform the other product teams to make sure all members of the tool family are included in presentations. (Again, he and Lazar want to hear about such omissions.)

Green emphasizes that he and Lazar are working to make sure that VFP gets its fair share of attention, both inside and outside Microsoft. They want people to choose a product based on what it can and can't do. Green comments that "VFP should be judged by its features."

Some weeks after our interview, Microsoft underwent a reorganization in which the VFP group moved from the Internet Platform and Tools Division to the Desktop and Business Systems division, which includes Windows NT, Back Office, SQL Server and Internet Information Server. VFP was moved in order to consolidate development of data access technology. Green emphasizes that this move does not affect the marketing of VFP as part of the Visual Tools family.

## **Key development tools**

With the emphasis on components and a family of tools, we asked Green what tools FoxPro developers who want to expand their knowledge should learn. Not surprisingly, the answer was to start with the Internet technologies: Internet Explorer and Internet Information Server. Green recommends that developers learn HTML to build browser front ends, then learn the Active Server platform for developing dynamic, interactive Web sites. After that, a developer might want to learn how to build multi-tier applications, working with client-server technologies. The other developer languages were very low on his list.

Because Office is an extremely strategic environment for Microsoft, we asked about how FoxPro developers could tie into the Office technology. Green pointed out that VFP can call Automation servers and indicated that in Office 97, all the products will be Automation servers with full object models. Going the other way, Office products can access FoxPro data via ODBC or call Visual FoxPro 5 as an Automation server.

## **The future of FoxPro**

We moved on to talk about the future of FoxPro. Green indicated that Microsoft has not yet decided whether to produce a Macintosh version of VFP 5.0. We asked if anything would be done to make cross-platform development possible for those using VFP 5.0. Green suggested that Internet Explorer could play a role, allowing a VFP 5.0 application to be run on the Mac through a browser.

Green wasn't able to say much about the much-rumored (but as yet unannounced) all-encompassing Developer's Studio. But he did note that if Microsoft were to produce a multi-tool development environment, it could be seen as analogous to Microsoft Office. Such a product would be more inclusive than exclusive and could only help the individual tools involved, not harm them.

The next major release of VFP will focus on making the product even better at being a component to be used in component-based applications. In particular, it will include support for "doc objects" - the successor to OLE in-place editing which allows you to edit an object in its native format without explicitly loading the application that created it. You'll be able to build VFP forms and host them natively in Internet Explorer.

Finally, since the FoxPro community contains some small development shops, we asked how Microsoft will help these people make the transition to the new world of the Internet. Green explained they're evolving the product gradually, so developers need not start from scratch, but can instead use existing skills. In addition, many of the Internet tools are free or inexpensive, making it affordable for small shops to get started.

On the whole, Green was positive about FoxPro's future as a member of the Visual Tools family, though he acknowledged that this view is a new one for FoxPro developers. "We're doing everything we can to show that VFP is alive and well and has a number of very compelling features that make it a great tool," he says.

Only time will tell whether Green and the other members of the marketing team reach their goal—and it will take time for them to get the message out. But if the group is able to accomplish what it hopes to, Visual FoxPro will be able to grab some of the spotlight and claim its place as a full-fledged member of the Microsoft family of development tools.