Tahoe: The Next Generation

Whil Hentzen

If you attended DevCon last year, you knew it was coming. If you attended DevCon this year, you know it's getting closer. And if you paid close attention to my April, '97 editorial, you know some of the details. I'm talking about the next version of Visual FoxPro, of course. While a ship date hasn't been announced and anyone who really knows anything isn't talking, there's a little bit of news out in public that we can discuss.

Whatcha gonna call it?

The next version – Microsoft folk have repeatedly avoided saying "VFP 6.0" – is code-named Tahoe, and you can (and should!) use that moniker when referring to the next generation of VFP. If you've been privy to earlier betas of either Microsoft or competing products, you know that code names used to be chosen from a more, er, whimsical range of names (although while "Roadrunner" and "Wiley" made it on to the list, "Daffy" and "Bugs" never seemed to surface. Wonder why?)

Due to copyright concerns, however, we'll no longer be seeing these names; the choice is now handles of locations, as evidenced by "Chicago", "Memphis", "Cairo", "Anchorage", "Tahoe", "Dallas", "Paris", "Boston", "Daytona", "Singapore", and "Cancun." (Insider's tip: The betas for "Waco", "Terre Haute", "Baghdad", "Chernybol" and "Milwaukee" will be soon starting, but if you care for your machine at all, you may want to avoid them.)

The VFP team says they chose "Tahoe" because it's where they'd like to go for their ship party, but I think it's just to confuse former Vice-President Dan Quayle. ("There's an 'e' on the end of that word?")

When ya gonna see it?

Microsoft ahs stated that it will be part of the next Visual Studio release, which is generally expected to be available "next spring." Yeah, I know, that's pretty vague, but, hey, you're in the software business too. Imagine the complexity of getting a product like Visual C++ out on time. Now try to coordinate with four or five other product teams. So while planning your day around a specific ship date is pretty much like assuming the weatherman knows what they're talking about, I would surmise that betting on a date range that's somewhere between February 1 and mid-summer would be pretty safe.

By the way, DevCon '98 has been announced and it's scheduled for May 17-20 in Orlando. Hmmmm.

What's the big idea?

The big idea – well, there are two big ideas in Tahoe. The first is "MTS" and the second is "components."

"MTS", if you've not heard the acronym before, stands for Microsoft Transaction Server. There is actually support for MTS in VFP 5.0, but it's not terribly robust. COM components use apartment model threading (that's one of those terms you can throw out at the next tailgate party when someone you don't want to talk to asks you what you do for a living), and Tahoe will also. This means that MTS will manage multiple instances of VFP COM components, significantly reducing the number of connections to a back-end server.

We're only beginning to understand the ramifications of this, and many of you may be inclined to dismiss it entirely. Look at it this way. We're playing with the big boys. It used to be that VFP fit nicely in between Access and SQL Server. Dentists and sales reps used Access because it was fast and easy to learn; if you wanted true security and transaction processing, SQL Server was the tool. VFP was used for that broad range of line of business apps in between.

But customer needs aren't as easily classified any more. It's more and more common for a customer to require simultaneous query and update capability across locations that may be widely disparate. And these capabilities might require transaction handling - multiple records being treated as a single unit. We can handle transactions, after a fashion, in VFP now, but if we're going to do it across a network (be that a LAN, a WAN or even the Internet), significantly more work is involved in coordinating and scheduling all the pieces. MTS takes care of this "plumbing" for us, just like the "USE" command in FoxPro handles a

boatload of file handling work that "C" programmers have to do manually. And Tahoe will integrate rather seamlessly with MTS.

And second (and more importantly, in my mind), this means that VFP has a significant (I didn't say dominant, but I didn't say disappearing either) share of mind in the Visual Studio strategy. It's one of the pieces you will use to build these terribly big, robust, complex applications. I'm reminded of the saying on the cookie tin I received a few months ago: "Chocolate Chip Cookies - They're not just for breakfast anymore."

VFP – it's not just for LAN applications anymore/

What's the other big idea?

As I mentioned, the other big idea is components. OK, so it's not exactly new, but as we heard last year, the days of the monolithic VFP executables sitting in a directory with 200 other files are quickly drawing to a close. (The wiseacres among you are muttering, "Yeah, we're now in the days of 20,000 .DLL files in our Windows System directory." <g>)

But, (in my best Rodney Dangerfield voice) seriously folks, even the most conservative of you are starting to dabble with the odd ActiveX control, and perhaps writing a bit of code to talk to Word. Keep it up. Our customers fully expect to be able to access Windows functionality throughout their app, and you don't want to build your own word processor or mock up a spreadsheet interface by convoluting a grid. Use stuff that other people have already written!

And you've already surmised that these components are not all going to be sitting on YOUR hard disk. Applications are going to be Distributed (what did you think the "D" in "DCOM" stood for?) all over the world. We don't know what the final shape is going to look like, but plan on the Internet model of accessing or downloading applets and placing local cookies to figure heavily.

What else is in there?

A slew of language and functional enhancements have already been announced. Here are some of them.

OLE Drag and Drop. Open up Word and VFP. Highlight a block of text in Word, and drag it into your VFP application. Yes, across applications. I swear I am not making this up.

Scrollable Forms. You've hollered, you've screamed, you've begged and whined. You got your wish.

```
Thisform.scrollbar
```

can be set to None, Horizontal, Vertical or Both.

Active Document Support. You can now run a VFP form in Internet Explorer. (I was going to ask if this same capability works with Mosaic, but I kept forgetting.)

New functions.

```
*--
*-- 1. TRANSFORM now takes any data type and
*--    automatically converts it to a string
*--

m.lcSomeText ;
  = oApp.cNameUser ;
  + " encountered an error of BLAH BLAH BLAH on " ;
  + transform(datetime())

*--
*-- 2. STRTOFILE creates (or appends to) a text file
*--    without those pesky FOPEN-style commands
*--

strtofile(m.lcSomeText, "MyFile.TXT", .t.)

*--
*-- 3. FILETOSTR creates a memvar from a file, again
*--    without those pesky LLFFs
*--

m.lcMyMemVar = filetostr("MyFile.TXT")
```

More functions.

```
*--
*-- 4. NEWOBJECT creates an object with having
*--    to mess with setting CLASSLIB TO and such
*--

m.toObject = (app, "HWAPP.VCX")

*--
*-- you used to have to write code like this (roughly):
*--

lpara toForm
if type(toForm) = 'O' and ! isnull(toForm)

*--
*-- 5. VARTYPE checks for object type
*-- 6. You can now compare two objects directly!
*--

lpara toForm
if vartype(toForm) = 'O' or toForm = _SCREEN
```

And More functions. INDEXSEEK allows you to find a key value within an index without moving the record pointer. AGETCLASS and AVCXCLASSES snare class info without having to open the class.

Other Stuff. HTML Help. No new VFP for the Mac. FOXTOOLS.FLL functions are now native to VFP – JustExt(), JustFName(). GIF and JPG file support with preview capability during file selection. System environment variable _INCLUDE eliminates the need to add an INCLUDE file to every form. Hyperlink baseclass. Every base class has an AddProperty method.

What would you like to see?

Obviously, since the Fox team has demonstrated the product a couple of times, they've got a product that's in pretty good shape, and I would venture a guess that the list of features and functions is pretty complete. However, if there are specific things that you'd like to see, don't forget the foxwish@microsoft.com alias. Alternatively, send me your ideas (whil@hentzenwerke.com or whil@compuserve.com, and I'll make sure your ideas get forwarded to the "proper authorities."

Other Questions

Yeah, yeah, yeah. "Has the beta started?" "Have you seen the product?" "Do you have the product?" "Are you on the beta?" As has oft been stated, "Those who know can't say anything, and those who are talking don't really know." So don't worry – spend the time reading up on MTS, COM and DCOM, and try to make a few bucks with VFP 5.0 before our world shifts again!