The Geeky Things We Do

Whil Hentzen

As many of you know, there were about 700 FoxPro developers in San Diego at DevCon when the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon occurred. The memories of the next couple days won't ever be forgotten, and I don't particularly care to dredge them up here. But I did want to share one story that happened as a result of Sept. 11.

DevCon ended on Wednesday evening, and there were hundreds of us with airline tickets for Thursday that weren't going to be very useful for a while – and, at the time, we had no idea how long that while was going to be. We basically had three options: sit tight and wait for the airlines to start moving again, look for an alternate carrier, such as a bus or train, or 'do it yourself' – drive home.

Seeing as San Diego was as far away from Milwaukee as you could get and not get your feet wet, driving seemed to be a formidable task. Until a few of the guys from DAFUG (Detroit Area Fox Users Group) explained that they were in the same boat, and were thinking of renting a car and driving back marathon style.

With four grade-school age kids and a wife six months pregnant, I really, really wanted to get back home, and so this sounded like… well, the best option.

We met Thursday morning for breakfast, and at 10:00, were amazingly the proud (temporary) owners of a grey mini-van (the last one on the lot of National Rent-A-Car) and a full tank of gas. We had an inauspicious start - as we each dragged our luggage out of the hotel, we said hi to Dale, the guy who picked up the van, and, independently remarked to him, "Did you have to get a GREY one?"

Naturally, as we're merging onto the freeway, four guys (except for Dale – he was driving) all simultaneous pull out their notebooks. Steve booted MapPoint to track our route, and the others started on miscellaneous tasks. And then Steve remarked, "We really need an inverter – else we're all going to run out of juice." And then Rick added, "We should get a big one. I've got a hub in my suitcase and some Ethernet cable. Why don't we set up a peer to peer network while we're driving?"

Now, it may seem silly to SOME people – a computer network in a minivan about the size of two desks – but you and I know differently. We found any number of advantages – it was so much more civilized, for example, to be able to email back and forth from the passengers seat in front to the fellow in the bench seat in row 3, instead of using that Neanderthal method of "shouting". And of course, there's nothing better for passing the time during those 500 mile Nebraska stretches of corn and farm equipment at 4 in the morning than multi-player Tomb Raider.

Funny enough, though, we've found that not everyone shared our sense of common – you know, what we considered common sense. It just seemed appropriate.

This reminds me of another story. Like many of you, I like seeing patterns in numbers and playing games with them. One typical habit is to have a 'special' phone number – one that is easily remembered – and I've been lucky to have stumbled upon a number of telephone operators who agreed to work with me to find interesting phone numbers. The best one so far is my current home number. 741-7147. As I explain it to people – "it's a 'W'!" And if they look at me puzzled, I explain – graph it – and I draw on an imaginary x-y axis – a 7, then down to a 4, then down to a 1, then up to a 7, and then down to a 1, and back up to a 7 – the shape of a W.

People generally fall into two camps at that point - they either reply, "Uh, yeah, right, Whil." Or they say, "Hey! That's Cool!"

And this reminds me of a third story… My wife and I were at one of those fancy black-tie charity balls a couple of weeks ago, and, par for the course, we were seated at a table with a bunch of people we didn't know. We get to talking about our families and kids, and I explain how my kids' ages are all interesting combinations of numbers, and one couple quizzes us a bit more on why I thought the birth dates were 'interesting.' After explaining, Chris, the husband, said, "Makes sense to me. The only way I can remember her (pointing to his wife, Jane) birthday is because it's descending 3's: 12/9/63." I nodded approvingly, and then Jane replied, "Yeah, but one year – get this – my birthday's in December. But he gives me this big

birthday present in April. What's up with this? He told me to guess, and I've never figured it out." I look at Chris for a second, and say, "You did this in 1991, right?" He nods yes, and her eyes start to open wide. I look at her, and say offhandedly "10,000 days…" And he nods yes again. And she does a double-take, stares unbelieving at me, and starts shaking her head. "How in the world did you ever figure that out?" The rest of the table, of course, quickly found another topic to discuss, but Chris and I traded knowing smiles the rest of the evening.

So what's the point of all this? Well, I guess it's that we've all taken stock in our lives over the past couple of months. And when you come right down to it, we developers have pretty interesting lives to treasure.