

Column: from the Editor

NOTE: Lead January with this story!

Figures:

What do you get when you cross a Fox with a Penguin?

Unlimited opportunities to grow your business.

Ten years ago, a well known guru in the Clipper world posited that the days of the independent developer were over – that there was simply too much to learn. Since then, we've learned... the language of SQL. The WinAPI. The Screen Builder (snippets vs desnippetizing?) Multi-user data handling. Novell. The Connectivity Kit. Bracketing code to handle cross platform applications. Connecting to SQL Server and Oracle. DDE, then OLE, then Automation, to take advantage of other applications from within Fox. Web Services. HTML. The Internet. XML. .NET interaction.

I think we've proved that fellow wrong – that we've got nearly an unlimited capacity to learn new things, wouldn't you say?

As I look out into 2003, it's no secret that the Fox on Windows market has been stagnant. Jobs are tough to find. Whatever the reason (or reasons), the net result is that in order to grow your business, you have to look outside the Visual FoxPro arena.

There are multiple areas of opportunity. Over the last few years, we've expanded FoxTalk's coverage to include other components of Visual Studio, SQL Server, Automation, .NET, handhelds, and the Internet. It's time to add one more capability to your ever expanding skill set. And that area is Linux. Linux usage is growing by leaps and bounds. In every area of the computer industry, Linux deployment is growing. And that means that there's going to a huge opportunity for business apps on Linux over the next couple of years. You have skills most developers don't – database normalization, business application design, OOP, Design Patterns, UML, etc. We don't really appreciate how much we've learned as far as proper development practices go.

Let me tell you a story. I was at a Linux User Group meeting a few months ago when the topic was PostgreSQL. The presenter had been using the back end database for a couple of years, and explained that you could connect two tables by having a field in each table that contained the same data. Doing so meant that you didn't have to keep the same data in multiple records – you could have one table with customer records and another with orders, and connect the two via a “customer number” field.

He explained how he called these fields “joiner fields”, whereupon I asked, “You mean primary and foreign keys, right?” He said, “You can call them what you want, I like to call them 'joiner fields'.”

With “experts” like this, it's obvious that there's a huge opportunity.

How do you take advantage of this coming opportunity? First of all, it is true that VFP won't run on Linux, and recent statements by the Fox team indicate that we could turn pretty darn blue holding our breath for that situation to change. So then what? Yeah, you could just dump Windows and learn Perl, Python and PHP. Or you could try to build apps with something like Borland's Kylix (roughly, the Linux equivalent of Delphi.) But there's a better way. I don't think you'll be asked to develop front ends on Linux, not at least for a while. Instead, I think the first thing that will happen is that many of you will be asked to connect to a Visual FoxPro application to a back end database running on a Linux server in the next 12 months. So you'll want to get comfortable with using Linux as a spare desktop so that you have some understanding of how it works. Then when that call comes about connecting to a back end, you'll be ready.

Here's how to get started. Pick up a copy of RedHat 8.0 – you can download the images from www.redhat.com for free, or, for those of you who don't think that capitalism is all that weird, pick up the CDs from a store. If neither of these work for you, send me an email; I've got a few copies of the CDs left over and I'll be happy to send 'em to you if you send me a self-address, stamped mailer.

The reason you want RedHat 8.0 (instead of Debian or Mandrake or any of the other distributions) is because it's the easiest to install and use. It's truly incredible. Remember the feeling of excitement you had when you first loaded FoxPro 2.0, with a non-modal command window and design surfaces? Or VFP 3.0, with so many commands, functions, and capabilities, it took you five years to get your arms around it all?

Same feeling of thrill here. Not only do you get a secure, stable operating system with a GUI to rival Windows XP, but you also get an office suite with word processing, spreadsheet and presentation software with Microsoft Office file compatibility (I've been using the office suite that comes with RedHat to produce FoxTalk since last summer) and an email/calendaring/scheduling client to rival Outlook, except without the security problems.

Next, grab a spare machine. It doesn't have to be much of a box; I used a five year old Dell 500 MHz with 256 MB of memory and a couple of clunky 7200 RPM IDE 8 GB drives. The RedHat CDs are bootable if your drive can do that (if not, it's about two minutes of work to create a bootable floppy from the first CD.) Throw the first CD into the drive, click OK a half dozen times to accept the defaults (the only time I didn't was when I assigned an IP address and a machine name instead of accepting the RedHat DHCP and 'localhost' defaults), and you've got it installed. It really is that easy. It recognized all my hardware (including the circa-1996 video card and a 17" monitor so old that I remember paying \$1200 for it, new.) One CD swap - it took about 40 minutes total. Then I spent another five minutes grabbing updates from redhat.com. I didn't have to agree to a slew of nefarious EULAs that allowed someone else unfettered access to my computer, or get held up while being forced to activate a product I've already paid for. And when I was done, I wheeled my chair over to another desk and used the same CDs for the kids' machine and then again on another machine for my wife. All without fearing that the software piracy police were going to knock down my door.

I think you'll agree that RedHat 8.0 is a jaw-dropper, and I predict it's going to make some serious inroads, including in your customer's shops. So you owe it to yourself to put yet another tool in your Visual FoxPro toolbox – so when that customer or potential customer calls up, asking you to connect your VFP app to a Linux-based back end database, you can offer them a solution, not a referral to someone else who had the foresight to prepare in advance and knows something you don't. Prepare to grow your business now.

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