

Column: from the Editor

Figures:None

Get involved. Or get dead.

OK, all of you who want to see the Fox market shrink, raise your hands. No, you readers from Microsoft don't get to play this game.

Now, all of you who want to see the market grow - raise your hands. Co'on, take your ahnds off the keyboard for jone moment.

All of you, huh?

Well, we know Microsfot won't makret Fox outside of the Fox community. They keep letting the customer base shrink by attirition. And that means that eventually the Fox market will be dead. Microsoft wants you to use .NET, which is a bad idea for lots of reasons, especcally for Fox developers, but I'll discuss that another time. (OK, you want just ONE reason right now? Well... Microsfot is also pushing millions and millions of Visual Basic, Access and SQL Server developers to .NET. Do you really want to compete with 10 million other developers for your next project? I didn't think so.)

Now, back to the Fox market. How would you like to grow the Fox market again. You can make a noticable impact yourself with very little work and no out of pocket expense, simply by getitng involved in the last growth area of application developer - custom applications on Linux, specifically, using Visual FoxPro on Linux via the Wine project.

"But I don't have time to figure out how to get involved," you say. Hey, I can dig that. So how about a step-by-step tutorial? Here's what you can do in the next ten minutes.

Step 1. Understand what Wine is.

As you know, Visual FoxPro doesn't talk directly to a computer's hardware. Like all good Windows applications, it relies on a set of common interfaces (API) in Windows to handle the communication with the hardware. Instead, VFP just has to communicate with the Windows API.

Wine, an open source software project, takes the places of the Windows API. It intercepts calls from a Windows application (like Visual FoxPro), translates them to the matching interface in Linux, and sends the result to Linux. Linux, for it's part, gets a call to its API, communicates with the hardware, receives a response, interprets that response accordingly, and sends the answer to the calling program.

In this case, the calling program is, again, Wine. Wine translates that answer so that it looks like it came from the Windows API, and sends the translation to the calling program - Visual FoxPro in this instance.

So as far as VFP is concerned, it's communicating with Windows. Wine handles the sleight of hand necessary to swap calls to Windows for calls to Linux.

It's quite an engineering feat, particularly when you consider that the Windows API is a huge, complex piece of software - and it's incompletely and inaccurately documented. And even more so when (I hope I won't shock anyone when I say this) I reveal to you that Microsoft isn't cooperating with the Wine project. That's right - the folks on the Wine project are doing this all on their own. When you consider how much trouble firms with whom Microsoft cooperates have, well, it just stuns me.

Step 2. Vote for VFP on Wine.

Given that Wine allows you to run VFP on Linux (and, as far as development goes, that activity is completely OK from Microsoft's perspective), Wine opens up a potentially huge new market for application development. But the effort of getting VFP to run on Linux via Wine isn't done - there's still a lot of work to be done.

Wine isn't a VFP-only project - there are literally thousands of Windows applications that the Wine developers are trying to make run on Linux.

So... how do they choose? Well, one factor is personal interest; when a Wine developer takes a particular application under their wing, progress will go faster, of course. And one factor that causes a developer to work on a particular application is when there is a lot of interest in that app. It might be an interesting technical challenge to get Borland's Sidekick for Windows to run on Linux, but if no one is interested in the end result, then it's probably unlikely that a lot of work is going to be done on it.

Thus, there is a mechanism at the Wine project website for folks to vote on applications. Here's how to vote for Visual FoxPro:

1. Point your browser to www.winehq.com
2. Select the "Applications" link on the left side, in the "Support" box. At the time of this writing, it was the 14th link down the side.
3. Click on the link for "Application Database" embedded in the paragraph under "Wine Application Database" at the top of the page.
4. To see VFP's rank, click on the word "voted" in the sentence "There are currently 1602 applications in the database, with Visual FoxPro being the top voted application." in the AppDB Stats box in the center of the page. Then click your Back button in order to continue to step 5.
5. Click on "login now" in the sentence "So what are you waiting for, login now. Your help in stomping out Wine issues will be greatly appreciated." under the four bullet points in the "Welcome" box.
6. You'll see a Login screen, and underneath it, a link for "Create a new Account". Click on the 'create' link, create a new account (don't be a dweeb and register 'Bill Gates' - register yourself with a legit email address.)
7. Login (<http://appdb.winehq.com>) and you'll get a "You are successfully logged in" screen.
8. Click on "App Search" on the left side (fourth link down) and you'll get a screen that allows you to search for apps several different ways. Just enter "Visual FoxPro" in the "App Name" text box in the top box, click on the "List Apps" button, and you'll get a list of matches - probably just one.
9. Click on the hyperlink to go to the VFP page, and you'll get a summary of VFP on Wine. Also (this is the tricky part), you'll see a new area on the screen - in the lower left, you'll see a "Votes" section, and there will be three option buttons, each that say "No App Selected".
10. Click on one of the option buttons, then click on the "Vote for App" button below the option buttons, and you'll see "No App Selected" replaced by "App #296"(which is VFP's number.) When you go to the vote ranking (step 4 earlier), you'll see the number incremented by your vote.
11. If you want to, you can vote for two other apps as well. For example, I voted for PhotoShop because I hate The Gimp. Navigate to the page for that app, click on one of the remaining "No App Selected" option buttons, and then click "Vote for App" again.

What good does voting really do?

Glad you asked. There are actually two separate benefits to getting involved in even this small way.

First, it shows the Wine developers that we're serious, and that they should devote resources to getting VFP running on Wine instead of, say, Monster Truck Madness 3 (much to the chagrin of the 11 year old boys in my neighborhood.) But that's sort of an obvious benefit.

The other benefit is that keeping VFP on top of the voting stack exposes Fox to other people who haven't run into Fox before. This markets Fox outside the community, and in a big way. Every person who looks at the Wine application database is going to see a lot of programs they've heard of before - Internet Explorer, Quicken, EverQuest, Monster Truck Madness 3, and so on.

And they're going to see this other program.... Visual FoxPro... and they're going to say, "What the hell is Visual FoxPro?" (Except for Microsoft employees, who are going to wonder "Haven't we killed that yet?") And then they're going to see the number of votes it has, and they're going to say, "Hmmm, this looks like a serious application. I better go find out about it!" Or perhaps they're going to be more receptive when you stop in their office and pitch VFP as a solution for their business. "Yeah, I've heard of Fox. It's a real up and comer on Linux!"

So simply by voting, you're promoting VFP to a whole new group of potential customers. Someone has to, after all, and it certainly won't be Microsoft.

Step 3... next month

So that's something you can do in ten minutes (less if you type fast.) Next month, I'll discuss another activity you can get involved in - that'll take more time, but be of even more benefit to you, your customers and the Visual FoxPro community.

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