Where to Look Up Anything: The Ultimate FoxPro Reference

Henry Ford was touring one of his plants with a group of reporters. One of his staffers remarked that the model they were watching being built had 751 parts. One of the reporters turned to Ford and asked "Is that true?" Ford replied, "I haven't the faintest idea. If I need to know information like that, I know where to find it."

So it goes with the business we're in. There's too much information to keep in one's head anymore. Language Reference: 1100 pages of syntax. Tools and Utilities: Over 350 FoxPro-specific products. Vertical Market Applications: Nearly 500 programs written in FoxPro. Printed matter - a half-dozen periodicals as well as over 80 books in print. And the list goes on and on.

As a result, it's not only impossible to "know it all" anymore, it's a task and a half just to keep straight "where to find it."

That's why I assembled The Ultimate FoxPro Reference ("TUFR") a couple of years ago. TUFR (pronounced "too-fer" on the East Cost, "tuff-ir" in the Midwest, and "tee-eff-yoo-arr, dude" on the West Coast) is a set of databases that collectively contain the most comprehensive list of FoxPro-related resources available in one place.

[Screen shot: TUFRMAIN: The main TUFR screen]

The Resource Guide

The Resource Guide table contains listings for over 3500 products and services of interest to FoxPro developers. Books, Courseware, Custom Software Developers, Events, Periodicals, Software (Tools and Utilities), Trainers, User Groups and other Organizations, Vertical Market Apps, Videos, and, of course, Stuff That Didn't Fit Anywhere Else.

[Screen shot: TUFR_RGP: The Resource Guide popup allows you to select a subset of records belonging to a single category.]

Some listings just contain names and addresses; others include additional information. For example, a listing for a vertical market application might contain price, version, supported platforms, copy-protection, and a detailed description of functionality. The listing for a book might include the author's name, publisher, price, number of pages, whether or not a disk is included, the intended audience, where the errata file (if any) is located, and a table of contents.

Exactly how much information, past the basic name and address data, is supplied is strictly a function of whether or not the vendor or associated party responded to my requests for updated fact sheets.

The Bibliography

The Bibliography table contains a list of articles that have been published on FoxPro-related topics in all the generally available publications over the past three to four years. Each record contains the name of the article, the publication, the issue and page number, the author, and, in most cases, an abstract of the article. There are over 1400 articles referenced.

[Screen shot: TUFR_BIP: The Bibliography popup allows you to select a subset of records belonging to a single publication.]

I have found the Bibliography useful in two different types of situations. The first is the common "I just read this excellent article by Nancy Jacobsen - the topic had to do with color sets. But I can't remember which publication or when it was." How many of you have paged through a year or better of back issues, looking for a specific article - and forced to give up after an hour or two of fruitless searching? And of course, the article jumps out at you a week later - in the **one** issue you didn't look through?

[Screen shot: TUFRNJ_A: A typical entry in the bibliography contains information about the article and a brief abstract.]

Sure, most publications have their own list of articles, published once or twice a year - but some don't. And some that do - don't include abstracts, or the ability to search on any word in the database. And, of course, you can't search across publications.

The second situation is when I have to become an "instant expert" on a subject. For instance, a customer calls up and wants me to come in to discuss the possibility of implementing a bar-coding system with FoxPro. Ordinarily when faced with this situation, you'd scan through an article or two that you recently read, and then hope to wing it in the meeting.

By searching on "Bar Code" in the Bibliography, you can dig up a list of a half-dozen or more articles in all the FoxPro publications. Now it will only take a half hour or so to become a "pseudo expert" by quickly scanning those articles, and you'll also have a better comfort level that you're acquainted with all the major published papers on the topic.

TUFR Search Interface

Naturally, all the information in the world isn't going to help if you can't find it. TUFR comes with an interface that allows you to select either the Resource Guide or the Bibliography, and then to select all or a subset of resources in either of those tables. For instance, you could select just the Videos entries in the Resource Guide, and then do a search from that subset of records. Searches in the Bibliography table can be narrowed down to a single publication.

In addition, you can also search on the existence of any phrase or combination of phrases within the records selected above. For instance, suppose you remember hearing about this product called Foxfire! but you can't put your hands on the phone number. You could select the Tools and Utilities option in the Resource Guide, and then search on "Foxfire!"

[Screen shot: TUFRFF_1: You can select on any word or phrase, on the entire database, or in a subset of records.]

Then, of course, if you wanted to look up a review on it, you could search on "Foxfire!" and "review" in the Bibliography.

[Screen shot: TUFRFF_2: Looking for an article that reviews Foxfire! can be done by entering multiple phrases.]

[Screen shot: TUFRFF_3: If multiple records quality, all will be listed.]

TUFR is updated quarterly, and you may decide you just want to see what's changed since the last edition. You can select the "Show Only Updated Entries" checkbox. And you may decide that you don't need to have TUFR search the entire memo field for each record - the title field that contains the name of the product/service or article name would be sufficient. Selecting the "Search Titles Only" checkbox will speed up your search considerably.

Developer's Help

TUFR was initially designed to be an aid for developer's and this goal has not changed. In my travels, however, I've created a couple of other utilities that tie into TUFR's mission - cataloging information in a central location.

Are you tired of having hundreds of yellow Post-Its cluttering up the margins of your monitor? I've found even a 21" monitor isn't big enough to hold all the little scribbles that accumulate. Developer's Help is a variation on "User-Defined Help" that many of us provide in our applications for our users - a central source to place all those tips and tricks that can't seem to get filed correctly.

To access Developer's Help, you can select it from the TUFR menu (see Installing TUFR later on in this article) or press F2 - the default hot key. Note that you can change the hot key to suit your personal needs in the install process.

Developer's Help will display in two side-by-side windows. The left window is simply a Browse of all the topics in the TUFRDEVH table; the right window displays the contents of the memo field of the current record in the left window. As you move through the records in the left window, you'll see the contents of the right window change. Note that Developer's Help remembers which topic you were last in. When you call up Developer's Help again, the record you last accessed will be the current record.

[Screen shot: TUFRDEVH: Selecting Developer's Help provides "User-Defined Help" functionality for developers.]

You can add records to TUFRDEVH as you would add to any Browse - with CTRL-N. Type in a new topic, and then switch to the right window to add as much text as you like. And note that you can change the order of the topics in the left window. Use your TAB key to display the Order column, and enter a number from 1 to 9999 in order to place the newly added topic in the location you want. TAB again to return to the Topics column.

TUFR Tip of the Day

If you've used Microsoft Word, you can't but help fall in love with the nifty "Tip of the Day" and I just had to have one for FoxPro. This utility is more whimsical than useful, but I thought some of you would get a kick out of it. You can call it up from the TUFR menu as well as have it display automatically every time you load FoxPro.

[Screen shot: TUFRTIPS: TUFR Tips mimics the wonderful Tip of the Day found in Microsoft Word.]

The tips contained in TUFR Tips have been culled from a variety of sources, and include a set of full-length articles that were included in the first editions of TUFR - back when I thought I could create an "encyclopedia" of articles. Since that time, the FoxPro publications market has exploded, making this concept a little dated, but I still remain indebted to the authors who helped kick off TUFR.

You might want to adopt the mechanism for use in your own applications. Would your users find a "Tip of the Day" handy when learning to use a new application? Note that, like Word, you can toggle the "Show Tips at Startup" to suit your preference.

Installing TUFR

What good is having all this information if you can't get at it easily? Toward this end, TUFR comes with an installation routine that will allow you to add a TUFR menu pad, and choose which TUFR functions to be placed on the menu pad, or to add those TUFR functions on the System (DOS) or Help (Windows) menu popup.

[Screen shot: TUFRMENU: You can place TUFR on it's own menu pad, and choose which functions to place in the TUFR popup.]

First, you'll need to place all the TUFR files in a TUFR directory. This directory can be located anywhere and named anything. Then, you'll need to set your default directory to this location. Running TUFRINST will present you with a dialog that allows you to make a number of selections to customize the installation of TUFR functions as you desire.

[Screen shot: TUFRINST: The TUFR Installation program prompts you to customize your installation of TUFR.]

The selections you make are stored in a table called TUFRPARM, and this table is located in the TUFR directory. If you open TUFRPARM up, you'll see that TUFR Install creates separate records for each platform, so that you can have unique configurations of TUFR for different platforms without having to install TUFR multiple times.

TUFR Install also creates a file called TUFR_SET which looks up information in TUFRPARM and sets up TUFR as you've specified. TUFR Install modified your CONFIG.FP/W so that TUFR_SET is automatically run when you start FoxPro. Since the source code is included, you can change this if you'd like.

Where to find it

TUFR5.EXE is included on this month's Companion Diskette, and can also be found in Library 10 of FoxForum. It's a self-extracting file that decompresses into a "read me" text file and a ZIP file that includes the goodies. The "read me" file has explicit instructions on installing TUFR. There's about 6 MB of files, all told. And the best news about TUFR is that it's free. Not shareware - you can use it without any payment or feelings of guilt. It's not public domain - I retain the copyright - but feel free to use it and distribute it to your friends and associates.

Obviously, TUFR has been more of a labor of love than anything else - and I'd be interested in hearing what you have to say about my "kid." Please contact me via email or on the FoxForum, CompuServe ID 70651,2270.