Help for Creating Help: Help's Angel

By Whil Hentzen

There are two types of people, the saying goes - those who divide people into two groups, and those who don't. I'm reminded of this line each time I think of the two types of programmers: those who write a piece of code and then never touch it again, and those who can't help but continually mess with it.

I must confess that I'm one of the latter, and I suspect that many of you are as well. Unless I'm completely satisfied with something, I have to keep tweaking it, adding a function here, adjusting a feature just a little bit there. And high on my list of "Never been satisfied with" is Help. I'm not talking about the help that comes with the packages that I use - haven't we all given up on that? I'm referring to the Help that goes along with my custom applications.

The satisfaction level around the office here was pretty low when FoxPro 1.0 was introduced, until we finally settled on the same look and feel of FoxPro's own help facility, and just used it as our own. It was easy, and remarkably functional for something that required essentially no work. After seeing Tom Rettig's multitude of help facilities in TRO around release 0.43, however, things got glum again. We struggled with user-defined help, and finally got that shaped up. Life was good.

Then, FoxPro 2.5 was released, and our 'sophisticated' help facilities looked pretty stupid in Windows. Add in the difficulties with the Help Compiler back then, and we decided that perhaps the best application was one that didn't require Help after all. How many of your users would rather look it up than call you? The bottom line was that creating nice Windows-style help was a serious impediment to putting the final touches on an application - it was much more trouble than it was worth.

Our troubles are now over.

This month's Cool Tool, Help's Angel, is a shareware FoxPro application that converts a .DBF style FoxPro help file to a Windows-style .HLP file, complete with customizable fonts, styles, colors, and hypertext links. I love it! It's easy, it's fast, and there is now no reason for you not to have Windows-style help in your Windows applications.

Using Help's Angel

Using Help's Angel is one of those 'no-brainers' that we all long for - you issue the DO HLPANGEL command from the Command window and a handsome tabbed dialog (courtesy of Steven Black's TABS GENSCRNX driver) appears.

9510ha01.bmp: "All of Help's Angel's functionality is available in a single dialog via the tabbed pages."

Help's Angel comes with a sample .DBF help file that is set up so as to take advantage of the various features available in the utility, but it's just as easy to grab one of your own help tables. You can go straight to creating an RTF (Rich Text Format) file, after which Help's Angel will offer you the option of immediately creating the .HLP file, or you can use the options found on the various tabs to customize the output.

The DBF Styles tab allows you to specify what the Page Title and Headings, Bullets, Sub-Headings and Emphasized text look like in your DBF file, so that Help's Angel can correctly convert items it finds to the appropriate style in Windows. For example, if you used diamonds as the bullet character in your DBF help

files, you can earmark the diamond as the bullet character, and Help's Angel will convert those items to bulleted items in the Windows help file.

The Styles tab allows you to specify the size, font, and color of Page Title, See Also, Headings, Sub-Headings, Emphasized Text and Regular Text. The Window and Contents tabs allow you to set some global settings for your help file, and the See Also tab allows you to identify how See Also hypertext links work. You need to look at this tool just to see how the interface works - there's an awful lot of functionality packed into a compact area.

Once you've set the options as desired, select the Create RTF pushbutton, and Help's Angel is off the to the races. After a short pause, the RTF file is created, along with a batch file, and you're asked if you want to create the corresponding HLP file now or not. The batch file calls HC31.EXE or HC35.EXE (available with the FoxPro/Windows Professional Version) in order to create the HLP file from the RTF file. If you tell Help's Angel that you want to create the file immediately, it will run the batch file for you, and a few moments later, you'll have a .HLP file ready for your use. To try it out, issue the SET HELP TO <filename> command and then press F1 or issue the Help command. Your very own Windows Help file will be brought forward.

Upcoming Versions

Help's Angel is written in FoxPro/Windows 2.6, but the files it creates work equally well under Visual FoxPro. I've used it in Windows 95 and have had no problems. Julian Ransom and the gang at Prototec are working on versions that will run on VFP and the Mac.

Where to find Help's Angel

Help's Angel, version 1.1 for FoxPro/Windows 2.6, is included on the companion disk and is also available in library 9 of CompuServe's FoxUser forum under the name HLPANGEL.ZIP. It's shareware, so after you've tried it out, register it for $45 (U.S.) with Prototec. Instructions are in the help file (accessed through, you guessed it, F1.)

--- SIDEBAR

Book of the Month

At the risk of alienating those readers who don't want to see anything but reams of FoxPro code in these pages, I suggested to Bob Grommes that we mention, albeit briefly, a book of the month in the same breath as our Cool Tool. As he and I have been following the same reading path over the past few months, he agreed, and here's the result. The purpose of this sidebar is to bring to your attention each month a book related to the software development arena. The one type of book I'm going to stay away from is FoxPro-specific books; rather, we're going to visit books that will broaden our reach from "coding cowboy" to software development professional. Please give this sidebar a few months, and then let either Bob or myself know what you think.

This month's "must-have" is Code Complete, by Steve McConnell. (Microsoft Press, ISBN 1-55615-484-4.) Old news to some, this book should be required as a core text by every software-related degree program as well as an entrance requirement for every software development shop. McConnell has created a handbook that describes quality software engineering practice in logical and thorough fashion. As you read through it (I challenge you to look through it at the bookstore and then leave without buying it!), you'll find

yourself nodding in agreement with some items and then turning over the corners on other pages. I stopped turning the corners when I had marked 50 pages by the third chapter.

While the examples are mostly in C, every programmer - including us FoxHoles - can understand the concepts he espouses and follow the code well enough to internalize his ideas. He includes over two dozen checklists, anyone of which is possibly worth the price of the book - self-documenting code, requirements, architecture, conditionals, data creation, test cases, and so on. Plagiarizing Ken Levy: "Read it. Live it. Be it."

- Whil Hentzen