The Developers Are Revolting

Whil Hentzen

OK, that's what you secretly think your customers to be saying about you behind your back, right? Well, I meant something a bit different <g>.

I'm writing this on New Year's Eve (all together now: "Whil, you need to get out more.") watching a fight (and occasionally seeing a bit of hockey being played). I've spent the last month poking around the various nooks and crannies of a suite of development tools from one of the major software manufacturers. Actually, I've spent a month just installing this suite - and it wasn't because I had difficulties. It just took that long to install and configure these tools - 800 MB worth. That's not a typo - and it's not an inefficient use of disk space - it's just a lot of software.

Given what I've been through, let me paint a scenario that you might find yourself in shortly.

Given that a tool like VFP takes between 50 and 100 MB, and you could spend a year or more just getting reasonably proficient with it - it looks like somewhere between a five and ten year investment to get reasonably proficient with this suite. OK, yes, that's unreasonable. No one would need to get really good at all of the pieces - just some of them, right? And not all development tools could be that complex as VFP, right? So let's say that you could get reasonably proficient with the necessary pieces in a year. Ambitious, optimistic, maybe even naïve. But let's just assume., OK? (Com'on, work with me on this…)

So, here we are. We've spent a year mastering a very large, complex suite of tools. Guess what? The whole suite will be updated with a new rev in somewhere between 12 and 18 months. So about the time you've gotten good, a new stack of two dozen CDs will land on your desk. So now it's time to learn all over again. A new set of tools. New features, functionality, abilities, capabilities - it's exciting and invigorating to be able to do what you were trying to do a year ago but the tools just didn't quite allow you to.

What's wrong with this picture? When do you get a chance to ship some apps? When do you get a chance to make money? When do you get a chance for some payback on the financial, temporal, and emotional - yes, the emotional - investment you've made over the last year?

How many years do you think you'll go through this routine, making a huge investment in time only to have it vaporize about the time you're ready to capitalize on it? Yeah, me too.

At this point, you're probably thinking two things. First, you may be wondering when you're going to face this situation. It is possible that you're already tired from the transitions from FoxPro 1 to FoxPro 2 (Power Tools, SQL, and so on), and then FoxPro to Visual FoxPro. Do you really want to face that with several or a half-dozen tools?

And the second thing you're possibly thinking is "Well, what's the magic solution? Whil seems to have some pretty good ideas for the issues he brings up - how's he going to wrap this one up by the end of the show?"

Unfortunately, I'm stuck. I don't have a solution for you. Or for me, for that matter. So, instead, I'm making a prediction. I believe that the developer community will splinter into four factions. The first will ignore the issue, and continue to develop in Clipper Summer '87 for another five years. The second will decide to skip generations - trying to wangle some life out of an investment and then make two jumps instead of one. The third will try to keep up, grabbing each new rev with gusto and living on Jolt Cola and adrenaline. And the last will simply revolt. What form is this revolution going to take? I think it depends on how large the contingent is.

Stay tuned - the complete story - at eleven!