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Oh, The Hoops You'll Jump Through!

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"I'm having an unpleasant Microsoft computing experience today."

I recently received an email that led off with this quote from someone who'd probably rather I not mention their name. This has quickly joined my favorite movie lines that can be applied to software development: "I'm a little unclear about this 'Good'-'Bad' thing", "When they ask you 'Have you paid your dues', tell them the check is in the mail", "Be afraid - be very afraid", "But then there's running - and screaming..." and, of course, "I have a very bad feeling about this."

And I'm sure many of you are carrying a knowing smile as well - except for the few of you who are actually living that experience *right now*. But my intent is not to complain or whine; I'll save that for another time. Rather, I wanted to cover some ideas about what to do when you're in this situation. Specifically, when you're faced with "anomalous behavior", what should you do? It's an emasculating experience - booting up your machine just like you have for the past two months - but today, boom, clicking on any desktop icon produces a near-instantaneous GPF. Or perhaps, after you added a tag to a table in a form's DE, the last combo box now misses a refresh the first time the form is opened. Or maybe you're getting an error message that explains "Invalid OLE code returned" and the form just won't instantiate anymore. What avenues do you have open to you?

I was faced with this same situation recently, battling with a number of bugs in Visual FoxPro's Setup Wizard. I've been working on a project that is, by some accounts, sizable enough - about 15 megabytes of source code and about 30 heavily overloaded tables. As a result, the build and setup time was not inconsequential. Creating a new EXE took several minutes - no big deal in and of itself - but then running the Setup Wizard took another 15.

Then, of course, installing from the result of the Setup Wizard took another 30 - because I had to clean off the machine from the last install attempt, copy the files over (about 50 MB), run the install, do the configuration, and see if everything worked.

Alan Schwartz once posited that the goal of rapid application development was to keep the iteration time shorter than the attention span of the developer. Well, for me, with an attention span of 30 to 35 seconds, an iteration time for the build/setup/install process of an hour wasn't even in the same universe. Nonetheless, I had no choice.

So when I ran into bug after bug with the Setup Wizard, and had to repeatedly iterate to find workarounds that would solve the problems, it became very frustrating. Having to spend an hour between iterations reminded me of submitting jobs to the mainframe guys, knowing that I'd be able to come back tomorrow - only to find three typos in the deck of punch cards. Hence my own "unpleasant Microsoft computing experience."

What do you do when you run into what pretty clearly looks like a bug? How do you report it? If you were on a beta, you know the drill - but when that avenue is shut down, what's next?

First, you'll do yourself - and Microsoft tech support - a favor if you are meticulous about recording what it is that is happening. You've probably heard the drill, even if the current bug reporting tool used in betas, MSREPORT, doesn't follow this format. Create a title for the issue. Document the explicit steps to reproduce, and indicate whether the issue is reproducible on demand. Explain what happens - and what you expected to happen. Describe the environment - computer make and model, operating system and version, product name and version, other software currently running, and so on. Finally, include any other information that could be conceivably be related the issue.

Second, go to www.microsoft.com. The rumour is that Redmond has 900 people dedicated to maintaining this web site - and if you've spent much time up there, you're probably thinking that 800 of them spend their time moving things around since the last time you logged on. Nonetheless, at the main page, in the left window, there's a link under services for "Technical Support." Use it. If you've already been there, you'll get there automatically. If not, you'll be asked to register.

Next, check the Knowledge Base. You can do a search on a specific product, using keywords if you like. You can also check popular topics and frequently asked questions. There are a ton of articles in there,

and I've been pleasantly surprised by how many times there's been relevant information that I could use. It's not a panacea, of course. However, if the issue you're dealing with has already been documented, your job is done - they know about it and are either working on it or not, depending on how important an issue it is.

But what if you've come across behavior that isn't documented either in online Help or the knowledge base? I also check the Hacker's Guide to VFP 6 - because there isn't a more comprehensive place for identifiable issues - both in terms of behavior that isn't quite expected, or identification for bugs. If a behavior is discussed there, then, again, Microsoft undoubtedly knows about it, and your job is done.

If not, though, the next step is to contact MSFT technical support. Follow the links from the knowledge base page (there seem to be about a dozen links before you actually get a phone number). If you're just reporting an issue and don't need to talk to a human being, you can report your findings via Web Response.

You may be leery of calling - everyone has heard a story of being charged \$95 and ending up training the tech support rep on the product. However, if you're reporting a defect - that actually is a defect (that's why you have to do your homework, as described earlier) - then you won't be charged for the call.

Furthermore, I've found the tech support folk to be aggressive and concerned about getting these issues taken care of. Just remember - they spend all day talking to people who are having problems. As overwhelming as your particular issue may seem, they're probably not going to call Bill Gates at home to explain that a new release Visual FoxPro should be sent out to every VFP user on the planet - next week. Work with them as a professional instead of whining and bitching.

This may seem to be a lot of work, but it really isn't, once you get used to it. And I'll let you in on a couple of secrets. First, it works. The defects I was encountering have been addressed and fixed in the new Setup Wizard that showed up near the end of October. Cool, eh? And second, I make my customers go through the same process. Good for the goose, good for the gander, or something like that. Anyway, it's made my life easier as a developer - giving my customers a rigorous process to follow when dealing with supposed defects in the applications I deliver.

Yeah, you'll jump through a few hoops - but take heart - it's worth it.