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Whither Our Fox – Part II

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In 1994, as VFP 3.0 was being released, Lisa Slater, the editor of FoxTalk at the time, wrote an editorial entitled “Whither our Fox”, and in it, wondering where we were heading. Microsoft had purchased Fox Software a couple years previous, and the developer community was using FoxBase, FoxPro 1.0, FoxPro 2.0, and FoxPro 2.x (for Windows, DOS, Mac and Unix).

Today, we’re at another turning point. In case you haven’t heard, VFP 7.0 has been pulled from Visual Studio.NET and will be a separate product, developed, marketed, and shipped on its own. So, what does that mean?

First, the facts

Fact One. Visual FoxPro 7.0 Beta 2 was released in early March. Fact Two. Most people on the beta so far have said that Beta One was so stable that it could have been shipped as the final release. Fact Three. Visual FoxPro 7.0 will ship this spring, by itself.

Fact Four. VFP 7 will be included in MSDN, as it always has. Fact Five. VFP 7 will continue to reside in the Developer Tools division at Microsoft. Fact Six. Robert Green will cleave his duties, heading Fox marketing as well as Visual Studio.NET. And Ricardo Wenger will continue to lead the product team.

Fact Seven. There have already been discussions about the feature set in VFP 8. Fact Eight. The folks who have been claiming that Microsoft was going to kill FoxPro – since 1992 – have now been doing so for *nine* years. (You just gotta sort of pity them, sort of like Cubs fans, don’t you?)

That said, there’s still a lot of white space here. You’re probably wondering where VFP “fits” nowadays. Here are the official words from Microsoft (paraphrased ever so slightly):

“Visual FoxPro is an extremely powerful application development tool. Its data-centric, object oriented language offers developers a robust tool set for building database applications deployed on the desktop, client-server front-ends, and on the Web via components. Visual FoxPro is optimized for building fast database applications and components.”

What does it all mean?

Based on the email and phone calls I’ve received over the past few weeks, you’re also wondering what I think. What effect does this have on the developer in the trenches?

I’m pleased. I’m really pleased. And I think you should be, too.

First of all, Visual FoxPro again has its own identity. As part of Visual Studio, there was always a lot of family bickering – the VB guys ragged on us, and we sniped at them, and the C++ guys all wondered when both Fox and VB guys would turn into ‘real’ programmers.

We won’t have to worry about “being left out of this ad” or “not being mentioned in that set of slides.” The VFP team has their own marketing budget and focus. That doesn’t mean that you’re suddenly going to start seeing full page ads in the Wall Street Journal for VFP that slam every other tool in the Microsoft stable – politically and practically both that would be stupid.

But we’ve got our own identity back. Remember “Nothing Runs Like the Fox”?

Second, Visual FoxPro is nicely positioned as a distinct member of the Microsoft developer tools group. There’s .NET, which you’ll use to build Web Services and distributed applications. There’s Visual FoxPro, which you’ll use to build desktop apps and client-server front-ends. There’s Access (strictly, not part of the developers tools group, but don’t say that too loud at an Access conference!) for quickly and easily managing and reporting on existing data.

Sure, you can use any of these tools to accomplish, eventually, any of these goals, but if you’re a professional, you use the tool that’s best for the job.

Third, it’s déjà vu all over again. Remember Fox in 1991? There were alternative tools (Ashton-Tate was the 900 lb gorilla with a bloated but still well selling dBASE IV, Nantucket had released Clipper 5.0,

and Paradox was a favorite of some), and Fox, although the superior tool in many ways, was often the underdog when it came to visibility and marketability in major corporations.

Where are those others guys now?

dBASE is history. Clipper is history. Delphi has come – and gone – in that span of time. And Paradox? We all chortle. But Fox is still being used for major applications worldwide, and has the support of the largest independent software company in the world. Sure, we'd love for Chairman Bill to do a four-hour demo of VFP at the next Comdex. But I'd say the guys in the executive suite in Redmond have more important things on their mind – like how to keep a \$10 billion company with 90% share in all of its major markets growing at 30% a year. Fox – like SourceSafe, PhotoDraw, Magic Schoolbus, the optical mouse, Money, and Bookshelf – aren't going to make major impacts in that issue.

Where do we go from here?

First of all, we're looking at a release date for VFP 7 “this spring”. Second, I can't say anything about 8.0 – how about giving the development team a bit of a rest after shipping 7? Of course, you'll hear about VFP 8 first here.

Now, and here's the fun part – let's fantasize for a minute. What would I do if BillG called up and made me king?

First, I'd set an audacious goal and write it on everyone's forehead. Let's suppose Fox is a \$50 million business right now. I'd set out to quadruple revenues in five years – to \$200 million by 2006. That's a 35% growth rate – even the bean counters in Redmond would have be happy at that growth for a ‘mature’ product line.

But that's a hefty chunk of money. How are we going to do it?

Marketing, marketing, marketing

First, let's attend to marketing. I'd steal Robert Green from the Visual Studio team so he could spend all of his time on VFP. Many of you don't appreciate the incredible job he's done over the past five years. The marketing behind 3.0 was disastrous, and it's been a long, tough climb back from the dead since then. Competition in the database market is brutal – even when the playing field is level. But Robert and the Fox team started on their own 1 yard line, with fourth and 70 to go, and beat the living daylights out of – who were those other guys, again?

Yes, even now, the major complaint of Fox developers everywhere has been a mixed, and often missing, marketing message, as the rest of Microsoft has downplayed or simply ignored Fox's marketing team. But consider where we were five years ago – and that, as much as you'd wish otherwise, the \$10 billion Microsoft juggernaut doesn't revolve around one tiny software company spirited from Toledo.

We'd create a yearlong campaign featuring regular ads in most of the major trade pubs that discuss Visual FoxPro's features and position. (That's an expensive undertaking, by the way – but we'll get to that in a minute.) In combination with this, we'd announce a new partnership with major vendors in the Visual FoxPro arena who will be featured in these ads – demonstrating time and time again what types of applications are using Visual FoxPro.

We'd work with trade pubs as well as regular newspapers to propose stories about how Visual FoxPro-based applications were running the businesses that people rely on every day. Yeah, the New York Times might not be knocking down the doors, but there are lots of smaller papers that are hungry for content about local businesses and companies – like Fox developers and consultants.

The Visual FoxPro website at msdn.microsoft.com/vfoxpro has a lot of great material – success stories, white papers, the Excellence Awards. We'd assign one of our marketing people to put the arm on the developer community to increase the content, and put the pressure on you developers to keep it updated.

In the next 12 months, every IS manager in the world will know that nothing runs like the Fox, and except for a few cretins who also believe that the moon landing was faked in the Arizona desert, the rumours that Fox is dead would finally be put to rest.

We'd also add a couple of marketing folks, and take the show on the road – contacting every user groups throughout the United States and Canada, and the big groups overseas – demonstrating specific applications and providing proof of concept materials, benchmarks and position papers for applications that should be using Fox – and demonstrating where Fox fits into the larger Microsoft world. And given that the

user group division at Microsoft change personnel faster than *\\need comparison///, we'd take it upon ourselves to grow the user group community again.

There are four major Visual FoxPro conferences in North America this year – we'd help grow that number to include a smaller number of regional shows, as there had been in the mid-nineties. And we'd resurrect the FoxPro resource guide that helped you find a developer, a video, or a training company anywhere in the world.

Product features

You may think that Visual FoxPro is a mature tool – one that needs no further enhancements. Well, that's half right – it is mature. The code base has been the same for the better part of a decade – and generally, that's good, because you don't end up with a new batch of bugs each time the product gets rewritten. But we're not done, not by a long shot.

The first job of the product team would actually be outside the product itself – working with teams throughout Microsoft – and outside of Redmond – to achieve and retain 100% integration with other products. For example, most samples you see in product documentation use Visual Basic, Access, or, occasionally, dBASE. We'd make sure that Visual FoxPro is on the pick list of choices every time that a tool can communicate with another one, and that the documentation for showing how to use VFP is complete.

This means merges in Word, conversions with Excel, integration with Visual SourceSafe and HTML Help, drivers that talk to Adobe, OLE DB providers, Automation and ADO object models, communication with Linux via Samba, and ActiveX controls – you name it, it'd be on the list.

This is a lot of work, obviously, but it's doable. And again we'd rely on the developer community to help. We'd collect a list of 25, 50, or 100 developers – each of whom would take responsibility for one connectivity issue, and work with the development team to test and document.

Over the next two years, Visual FoxPro would be come omnipresent - the best connected product on the planet.

The Fox team has made some serious inroads on the bug count over the past year – Service Pack 3 of Visual Studio 6 and the Visual FoxPro 7 betas have both nailed a tremendous number of bugs. But there's no such thing as a perfect product. As soon as Visual FoxPro 7 ships, we'd reexamine the open issues, and, as with the connectivity hit list, work with individual developers to identify, reproduce and exterminate bugs left on our list.

We'd going to need the help of the development community – the folks that whine about bugs but never put up the evidence – reproducible steps that we can use to track these issues down – they're useless. But developers who want to roll up their sleeves with us – well, we're not going to let them rest!

The third part of our product enhancement plans would have to do with the product itself. Now that Fox is not part of Visual Studio, we can improve the product to stand on its own two feet, instead of having to kowtow to some foreign standard that didn't always make sense for VFP but served a greater good. Menus and reports are the two most-oft mentioned holes in VFP, of course. We'd sit down with developers at each user group meeting, taking a fresh look at the entire product for Visual FoxPro 8, and then post a public list of Enhancement Requests so the developer community would know where their wishes stood. Right now, it seems to many developers that their ERs disappear, never to be heard from again.

The final phase of our product plans would be to provide a visible upgrade path to Visual Studio.NET. As much as we'd like it to be, Fox is not the be-all and end-all of development tools. We'd create a set of examples, based in large part on third party tools that have already been released, that show Visual FoxPro developers how to use their VFP knowledge to build Web Services in VFP. Once the concepts and mechanisms make sense, it'll be easy for a VFP developer to accomplish the same things in Visual Studio.NET, and, if desired, how to migrate and upsize those applications to Visual Studio.NET.

Now for the bad news. This isn't going to come free, folks. We can't have a successful business without revenue – and we'd depend on you developers to buy Visual FoxPro. And the best way would be to buy the MSDN Mega-Galactica edition – for a couple of grand a year, you get every operating system, server and development tool that Microsoft makes – plus monthly and quarterly updates automatically shipped to you so you're always current. And you'd need to get your customers to buy it as well. This is a business, and the developer community is the customer base that supports that business.

Conclusion

So that's what I would do. I think we'll see some of these things come to pass over the next couple of years – probably not all, but there's no harm in wishing. But in any case, the spinoff of Fox from Visual Studio is a good thing, folks. 2001 is, again, an exciting time to be a Visual FoxPro developer.