

# Girding for the Client/Server Wars

*"FoxPro is Microsoft's database development tool."*

—Dr. David Fulton, V.P. of Microsoft, at Fox DevCon, Oct. 13, 1993

*"You can buy Access or Visual Basic, but once you get these things deployed, the maintenance will kill you."*

—Phil White, CEO, Informix, as quoted in *Upside*, pg. 53, June, 1993.

I was impressed by three trends I observed during three VBITS '93 conferences our magazine co-hosted with Microsoft, and also during Seybold's Windows Solutions conference. One trend is already obvious to many: Visual Basic is slowly but surely moving from being the leading general-purpose programming language to a major protagonist in the client/server wars.

The second trend is only recognized by a few leading MIS managers: Microsoft's positioning of Visual C++ as the language for building components, and VB as the language for gluing those components together to build custom applications, is starting to fundamentally change the demand for programmers. At a panel session I ran during Seybold's Windows Solutions, I asked an MIS manager who is among the leaders in employing this strategy, "Does this mean you'll hire 10 VB programmers for each C programmer?" His response, "Absolutely."

The third is that everything is merging. Because I look at the world through the lens of publishing, and I was the founder of DBMS magazine, the leading magazine for database development, I'm intrigued by the way once-clear delineations are now blurring. What's the difference between a general-purpose language and a database development environment? Or from another perspective, if VC++ adds class hierarchies, custom controls, and programming through reuse of OLE objects, does the pedal-to-the-metal handcrafting of every line, the *raison d'être* for C programmers, become as obsolete as the tight and fast 16-kilobyte machine-language programs that Dr. Dobbs' Journal extolled when it was a nonprofit publication with the tag line, "Running Light Without Overbyte?"

At Q&A sessions and panel discussions during VBITS '93 in Los Angeles and Boston, MIS managers and consultants frequently commented on their struggles to choose between focused client/server tools such as Gupta's SQL Windows or Powersoft's Powerbuilder, and Visual Basic, the only general-purpose tool with a serious presence in this category.

VB is increasingly winning because it is more flexible, it can create excellent user interfaces, and it is inexpensive. The latter belies the frequent argument that MIS managers don't care about runtime fees because PCs and PC software are so much less expensive than mainframe software. Every MIS manager I have talked to finds free runtime distribution to be a major asset of VB. One VAR who works with the United States Navy told me, "The Navy point-blank will not pay per-site fees."

It is an open secret that Microsoft is considering the enhancement of VB's client/server development capabilities as a major focus for its next release, 4.0. Already, the big boys are starting to quake. How else can you explain the quote atop this column by Phil White, CEO of Informix, the Avis to Oracle's Hertz position in minicomputer DBMSs. Increasingly, these \$250,000 DBMSs will be differentiated by their front-end tools, and teaching minicomputer companies to deal with user friendliness and programmer productivity is like the cliché about teaching an elephant to dance.

This clash of PC and minicomputer cultures should be entertaining. You'll note, though, that while the Informixes and Powersofts of the world pay VB the ultimate compliment by dumping on it, they never mention dBase, FoxPro, or Paradox.

If the implementation of the next version of VB is done well, it will cement the ultimate trend that is important to our readers: VB has clearly become the language of choice for custom application development, and because that's where the bulk of software development is occurring, VB is both displacing C in one camp and threatening to unseat the combination of Xbase and specialized, proprietary DBMS languages in another. Look for the number of classified ads and headhunters' calls to start reflecting this trend.

But please, please, don't tell the other programming magazines. I'd prefer they keep to their religious position that C is the only real programming language, that you really want to develop client/server OLE-enabled Windows applications in Xbase, and that VB is cute, for something derived from Basic. And then they'll settle down to write their annual issue on FORTH, Smalltalk and the definition of inheritance. Let's keep this our secret for a while longer <g>. ■

Jim Fawcette, Publisher and Editor

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THE ULTIMATE COMPLIMENT  
FOR VB IS THE CRITICISM  
OF LARGER CLIENT/SERVER  
SOFTWARE VENDORS.