by Robert W. Sacks

ORIGINAL BASIC HERO HONORED

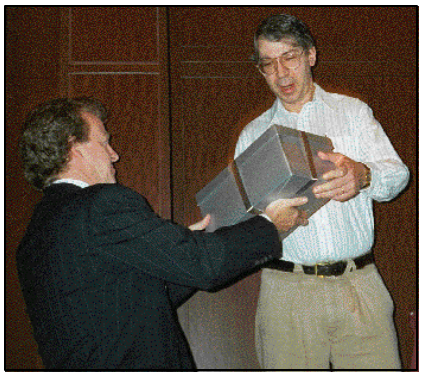
When discussion turns to who or what helped make Basic the successful language it is today, the name Ethan Winer comes up. As the founder of Crescent Software, one of the first and most successful developers of Basic programming utilities, Winer is considered by some to be the quintessential Basic Hero. Winer himself wrote the code for QuickPak, one of a handful of developer's utilities that helped widen the market for Basic. Winer's involvement doesn't stop there: he is a prolific writer of magazine articles and columns, and he is a fixture on the CompuServe MSBASIC user forum. He has also written two books about using Basic.

Visual Basic Programmer's Journal and Microsoft honored Winer's achievements with an award presented at the Boston Visual Basic Insiders' Technical Summit in early October. Winer was toasted at the presentation by friends and colleagues.

"Ethan is one of the people who kept (Basic) alive and viable as a professional development tool in a long period during which it languished before the introduction of Visual Basic. We owe him a debt of gratitude," said Jim Fawcette, Publisher and Editor of *Visual Basic Programmer's Journal*.

"Ethan and archrival Mark Novisoff, founder of MicroHelp, are the two people outside of Microsoft who did the most to help me get *Visual Basic Programmer's Journal*, then *BasicPro* magazine, launched back in late 1990," Fawcette said. Along with Novisoff, Winer was a charter contributing editor of the publication and remains a contributing editor of *VBPJ*.

Microsoft's Tom Button, group product manager for Applications Programmability, praised Winer for his willingness to help programmers on CompuServe and his involvement in proselytizing Basic to programmers. "We really appreciate his contribution to our industry," Button said.



Basic Hero Rewarded: During the VBITS '93 conference in Boston, Visual Basic Programmer's Journal publisher James Fawcette presented Ethan Winer with an award for his contributions to the success of Basic.

PHOTO BY MARK NOVISOFF

Unfortunately, the award marks Winer's retirement from his formal post as founder and president of Crescent Software. Winer is now pursuing his original interest, music. He plays cello full-time in two orchestras and in a trio as well.

Music was the motivation that launched Winer's programming career. In the early 1980s he was running a 16-track recording studio that he thought would benefit from computerization. But there was no such software available at the time. He bought an Apple II+ (which he later replaced with an IBM PC) and a few friends showed him how to get around, enabling him to write the programs he needed. "Ultimately I found that I enjoyed programming more than I enjoyed audio," he said.

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COMMERCIAL VB APP BITES OFF BIG SUCCESS

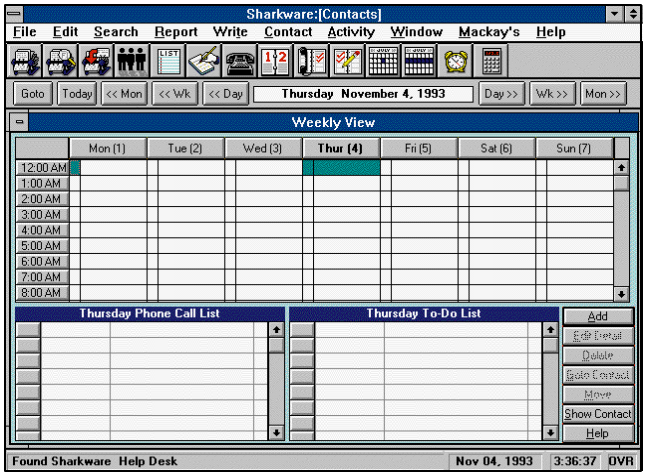
Before Cognitech Corporation connected with author Harvey Mackay, the company had just another contacts-management program that was losing market share to shark-like competitors in the battle for more features. Three and a half years after bringing Mackay onboard to sponsor its Sharkware product, Cognitech has a marketing strategy and a product that may inspire Visual Basic programmers to start humming the theme from "Jaws." Seven million people are familiar with Mackay's philosophy on getting ahead: that's the number of copies sold of his motivational tract, *Swim with the Sharks Without Being Eaten Alive*. He is also the author of *Beware the Naked Man Who Offers You His Shirt*.

Sharkware is based on Mackay's philosophy that knowing your contacts well is the most important thing you can do to get ahead. His approach seems to be working for Cognitech. The company is selling 750 copies a week of Sharkware at its $99 street price, says Butch Howard, manager of product development for Cognitech.

Cognitech courted Mackay, CEO of a large envelope-making company in addition to bestselling author, for more than three years before he lent his name, philosophy, and input to the project. He's now a Cognitech stockholder and receives royalties.

While Cognitech's Howard admits that much of Sharkware's success lies with its unusual sponsor and name, he adds that Sharkware also shows that successful products are being coded using off-the-shelf components sold by third-party software vendors.

The Visual Basic-produced application includes more than 100 forms, a 2.4 MB executable file, 3000 subroutines, and 270,000 lines of code.



Visual Basic allowed Sharkware to get to market in a fraction of the time it would take to develop it entirely in C, according to Howard. Development started in September of 1992 and the product was on the market in early June 1993. "Visual Basic lets you prototype a user interface and do cooler stuff with it faster than you could with C or C++," Howard says.

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ORIGINAL HERO...

"I was ready for a change anyway." He dug right in, learning Basic and assembly language well enough to put out a shingle as a consultant, initially attracting large clients such as Lawn Doctor and later the New York Stock Exchange.

Through his consulting work, Winer built libraries of subroutines written in Basic and assembly language. For a time he considered selling his subroutines as shareware, as a way to help other programmers get started. But business realities soon overrode his altruism. "I realized that shareware was really nowhere," he says. "I couldn't make a business by doing shareware." Thus Crescent Software was born, operating from Winer's home.

While writing the code for QuickPak, Crescent's first product, Winer also began his first editorial venture, writing articles about programming for *PC Magazine*. Winer attributes much of his early business success to having just such a forum for sharing ideas with other programmers. "Early on in my learning I really appreciated good magazine articles," he says. "I've always believed in that philosophy of sharing what you know." In keeping with that philosophy, Crescent included the source code in its products. Winer says that Crescent was the first company to do so. "Other companies that didn't include source code with their products are gone," he says. "My favorite customers were those who took the source code and fixed a bug or enhanced a routine," Winer adds. "A lot of stuff in QuickPak Pro got written that way."

Crescent Software's sales promptly eclipsed Winer's expectations. "I remember thinking if I could sell a thousand (QuickPak packages) at $60, I'd have it made," he says. "I have always been astonished at the success of the business. The orders just keep on coming." His happiest memory, Winer adds, is of the party the company threw after selling its thousandth QuickPak.

By the time Visual Basic hit the market in 1991, Crescent had five employees and had outgrown the Winer home. That year, Crescent Software moved into the business offices where it would continue to produce many popular Basic programming utilities.

Meanwhile, Winer's other writing project, his book, *Basic Techniques and Utilities*, was selling as fast as QuickPaks. "It made eleventh on the Waldensoft Top 20 list," Winer says. "My publisher said that was phenomenal for any programming book. It is available in four languages."

Winer himself started the two traditions that Crescent is best known for, a daily 5 p.m. Scotch party and employee music jam sessions. He started the Scotch parties to help employees wind down after a tough day. "It took me six months to stop drinking once I left the company," he says, laughing. "It was all in moderation of course, and the company provides the Scotch. It is a real Crescent tradition."

Scotch parties with Winer are history, but it looks like Winer won't be quick to separate his intermingled interests of music and programming. As Winer enters the world of professional music, Crescent employees continue their informal jam sessions at Winer's recording studio, which is equipped with a high-end MIDI setup run by a 486 and several Windows-based music programs. Best of luck, Ethan. ■

TRADE PROFILES
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BIG SUCCESS...

Computerm knew that it didn't want to write all the code itself, so it went to the local software house and bought virtually every third-party tool it could find. As a result, Sharkware's copyright statement reads like a who's-who list of third-party VB tool makers: SpyWorks from Desaware; FMTech's Compression Plus; Crescent Software's common dialogs and meters; MicroHelp's 3-D Gizmos and VBTools; Q+E's MultiLink/VB for the database; and Sheridan's listbox are all in there.

The team also uses Sheridan's VBAssistant to aid in designing user interfaces, according to Howard. And there's more to come: Howard is shopping for a data-aware listbox and other data-aware controls.

After getting past the first screen—a quote of the day from Mackay—Sharkware asks you to enter information on each contact. Reflecting Mackay's philosophy of knowing as much about your contacts as possible, the program asks up to 66 questions about each contact—including requests for information about birthdays, hobbies, children's interests, and similar personal data—and stores the results for future use. Users can override the requests for detailed information if they don't buy into Mackay's principles.

Most VB programs take quite a while to load their forms, especially if they are loaded with icons and controls. Sharkware had this problem too, but the company found a unique way to hide the fact that on a 486/50 with 8MB of RAM the program takes almost 20 seconds to load the main form.

"You can literally go to lunch while our product is loading," Howard says, adding that this was the most pressing problem from a programming standpoint. The difficulty motivated Howard to put a C programmer to work on an unconventional task. "We finally resorted to writing a C program that puts a splash screen up," he explains.

Howard says the screen gives Sharkware users the perception that the program is quick, because it takes only about a second to pop up and hides the fact that VB is in the background loading up the main form.

Once over the initial form-loading problem, Howard and his four-person programming team had other hurdles to jump. He needed to subclass Windows messages, but Visual Basic doesn't allow that kind of professional control. The team faced other form-loading problems specific to Visual Basic that they had to hide from users, and they also had to fit dozens of files, including the VBRUN300.DLL, onto only two disks.

Using FMTech's Compression Plus, Howard achieved 20 percent greater compression of the many files that Sharkware needed to copy during setup than he would have achieved using Windows Compress/Expand that comes with the standard setup kit.

Howard says he is also indebted to SpyWorks-VB from Desaware, which let him subclass Windows messages. "We couldn't have done this product without SpyWorks-VB," he says.

During the trickier stages of learning and subclassing, Howard says, Desaware founder Daniel Appleman and others offered their help on the MSBASIC forum on CompuServe. "Several of the (third-party) controls didn't work just the way we wanted them to," Howard says. "We used SpyWorks to customize those controls. On some of the grids' list boxes, we wanted to have a virtual list box with a separate scrollbar and subclassed it to handle pageup and pagedown manually."

"I was very proud to have my stuff in his package," Appleman, creator of SpyWorks-VB, says of Sharkware. Subclassing, he says, lets you get at the messages that Windows

passes around underneath VB. "You can modify them or you can even discard them, which means you can dramatically change the control that is sending or receiving messages."

During user testing, Cognitech found that some of the forms appeared to come up very slowly because intensive database access was taking place while the forms were redrawing. Howard says his team found a way to hide the form until the database access was complete, and then quickly paint the form. "Doing that made it feel like it was happening immediately," he says.

Several of these types of performance problems were underlined during the beta test phase. They spent three sessions in a formal usability lab in Atlanta to find areas of Sharkware that they could improve. "After seeing the info we got from the usability lab we made some drastic changes (in the user interface)," Howard says. "We are firm believers in usability testing."

Now Cognitech is building wizards into the product to will help beginners get started, and they are also rewriting some parts in C. "The programming team has done quite well considering that they had never even seen VB before a year ago," Welborn says. ■

NEW PRODUCTS

Editor's note: Please send product information to New Products Editor, c/o Fawcette Technical Publications, 280 Second Street, Suite 200, Los Altos, CA, 94022-3603; fax: 415-948-7332. CompuServe: 71732,3233. America Online: RobertVBPJ.

NEW PRODUCTS
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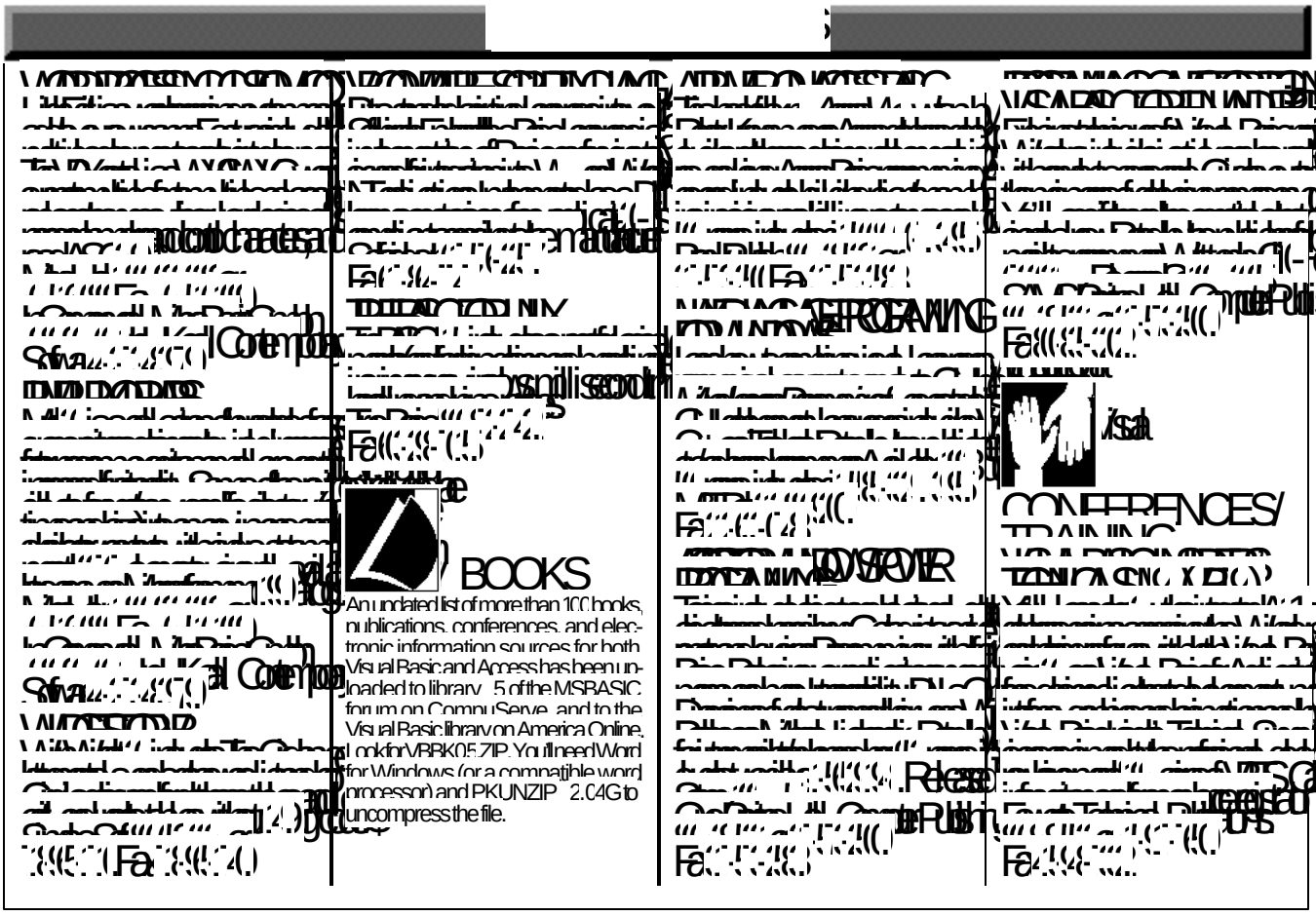
UPDATES



BOOKS

An updated list of more than 100 books, publications, conferences, and electronic information sources for both Visual Basic and Access has been uploaded to library 5 of the MSBASIC forum on CompuServe, and to the Visual Basic library on America Online. Look for VBBK05.ZIP. You'll need Word for Windows (or a compatible word processor) and PKUNZIP 2.04G to uncompress the file.

CONFERENCES/