

Today's FileMan

by Catherine N. Pfeil and Maureen Hoye

Welcome to this inaugural column. We are especially pleased to have the opportunity to keep you informed of events and techniques which focus on FileMan. This column will vary in content from issue to issue, but it is our objective to keep you interested and to heighten your skills and curiosity about our product.

To kick off, it seems best to give a bit of background and to let you know what is happening today. Then in subsequent issues we can get technical.

First, we want to clarify that we will be discussing VA FileMan. There seem to be increasing varieties of FileMan (surely a signal of success). VA FileMan is a product of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. It is a nonproprietary database management system available either via the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) or through the M Technology Association. Either way, it's a bargain. Notice that we will occasionally just call it FileMan, but don't be confused—we always mean VA FileMan!

As a database management system, FileMan is the environment upon which all of the VA's Decentralized Hospital Computer Program (DHCP) applications depend. As a generic tool, FileMan supports the definition and manipulation of many forms of database structures, including relational, hierarchical, and object-oriented. And, even though FileMan is a relatively mature product, ongoing structural development continues to

support current and emerging database management standards, interoperability, availability, and flexibility.

Version 19 Is Still the Latest

The current release is version 19, which introduced the long-awaited support for screen-oriented data entry. Two modules address this support. With ScreenMan, developers design forms for input and display screens. Data within a form are managed and updated as transactions (and are expected to be truly transactional as the M standard adopts transaction processing). With Screen Editor, users edit word-processing data with cursor and function keys. This editor is a second native editor for FileMan and complements the previously existing line editor.

FileMan version 19 also includes new tools for checking the structure of data dictionaries, merging data, checking M code for compliance with the VA's programming standards (to ensure portability), documenting the cross references online, and many more features.

Next Release: Version 20

Version 19 was released just a few months ago. Close on its heels is version 20 with a targeted release for the spring of 1993. Version 20 concentrates on archiving and exporting data from FileMan files. This release will enhance the archival features first re-

leased with version 18 in 1990. Version 20 will include a new archival method, which will support the creation of an archival that can be maintained online in a data structure. The data structure is fully compatible with other FileMan data dictionaries and thus can be searched and queried as any other file. Developers can use this archival method as a general extraction tool as well because of its generic function design. Data extracted via version 20 will be independent of source/reference files with all pointers, variable pointers, computed and set-valued fields being resolved to their external values as they are moved into the extract/archive file(s).

Another primary feature of version 20 is the ability to export data to a foreign file. This can be done today, but it generally takes an expert user of FileMan. Moreover, the expert also must be knowledgeable about the foreign format requirements of the target environment (e.g., LOTUS, EXCEL, SAS). Using the options provided with VA FileMan V.20, any user will be able to select fields and simply declare the target environment and FileMan will format automatically.

As you can imagine, we are very excited about VA FileMan version 20!

Other Enhancements on the Way

In addition to developing version 20, the VA FileMan team has numerous other active projects. We are working on enhancements to ScreenMan, in-

cluding a forms-design tool to ease the design and format of a screen-display layout. The print module is "under the microscope" with development of a new output option to increase the flexibility and performance of data searches and reporting. We are also overhauling FileMan's package export tool DIFROM to improve the flexibility and performance of installing FileMan-based applications.

It is also time to undertake a strategic analysis of VA FileMan, comparing it to commercial products and to current database management system research. We are working closely with academic consultants to ensure that VA FileMan benefits (and we benefit) from the wealth of experience and information within the university environment.

Share Your Ideas

To repeat, this column does not have a rigid format. With each issue, the depth of technical discussion will vary. We want to use this column to communicate with our ever-increasing community of users. If you have a topic or question you would like us to address, please don't hesitate to let us know. You can forward your ideas to the mail group FILEMAN on the VA's FORUM system, or drop us a note at the San Francisco Information Systems Center, 301 Howard Street, Suite 600, San Francisco, CA 94105 (attention of Maureen Hoye). We look forward to hearing from you! ❖

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