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## FROM THE EDITOR

# M Looks Out



Richard F. Walters

*by Richard F. Walters*

Once again, I am writing this editorial (late again) as I sit in the MTA office, where I have just met Pam McIntyre, the new managing editor for *M Computing*. We will all miss Marsha Ogden, who did a superb job of keeping me in line and at the same time upgrading *M Computing* to a first class journal. I can tell already, though, that Pam is going to keep me in line and follow Marsha's lead in the continuing upward path of the journal. Welcome, Pam, and thanks for joining us!

The theme of this issue is "Tools," and you will find several articles related to that topic, beginning with the lead article by Steve Popkes, who undertook the formidable task of modifying a truly massive "legacy" system: COSTAR, the Computer STored Ambulatory Record. His suggestions for ways to approach this critical problem in the life cycle of M packages is timely and should be useful to many of you facing similar tasks. A second tool-related article describes how to generate Windows Help files using M, a task that is once again useful and pertinent to the M programmer today.

The Windows article opens the door to the other main theme of this issue, which in fact mirrors the evolutionary process that M, MDC, and MTA are going through today: how M interacts with the rest of the world. I would like to focus on this topic, and offer some thoughts that perhaps will tie together this "outside world" theme to our general perception of M in the closing years of this millennium.

M was never intended to serve all purposes, but it has led the pack in several categories for all of its twenty five plus years of service (string handling and persistent, shared data to name a couple of the most important). Today, the range of "needs" of the modern programmer are so great that it is even more unlikely that a language like M would be able to serve them all. Fortunately, the leaders of MDC have not attempted this approach. Instead, they have concentrated on adding some important features that will continue to place M in a leadership position in selected areas (internationalization, for one). As for all those other areas, M is learning how to interface with the rest of the world, both formally and informally, and this issue gets at some of the hidden aspects of this problem.

An important necessity for M is to communicate with the outside world. Communication is a two-way street, requiring not only that we learn about the other side of the world, but that they learn about us. A key to that process is to involve representatives of the news media in ongoing M activities. We were fortunate to have John Dvorak, well known columnist for personal computer publications, present the keynote address at the June, 1995 MTA meeting in Chicago. Mr. Dvorak also graciously agreed to moderate a question and answer panel later in the meeting.

The panel discussion was lively and informative, and the first half of that discussion is reprinted in this issue. (The second half, dealing with M's role in the forthcoming March MTA Conference in conjunction with Database and Client/Server World, will appear in the November issue.) His insights into M's role, its strengths and its opportunities, provide food for thought for all of us. Another facet of our outward look is understanding the "competition." In this regard, the paper by George Weis, winner of this year's Distaso student paper competition, provides some important performance comparisons between Oracle and M. George's paper summarizes the first half of his M.S. thesis research; the second half will be presented in the 1996 meeting. However, this initial study already provides some important insights into basic characteristics of relational vs. hierarchical (M-based) databases, and puts you, the reader, in a position to make more informed judgments on the merits of each.

This evolutionary path we are now treading represents important changes from our old, inward-looking ways. Each of us has an obligation to study this trend and contribute to it. It has been said that if we're not growing, we're dying. M is certainly growing, and we need to share in that growth as individuals, each in our own way. I hope that the articles in this issue will help you on that path. Reading them myself has given me new ideas as to how I might personally take part in that process. ■

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Richard Walters is a professor at the University of California, Davis, and the executive editor. Write to him care of MTA's managing editor.

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**We're  
Changing  
With  
the  
Times**

The 1996 MTA Annual  
Conference  
will be held in conjunction  
with  
Database & Client/Server World  
March 24-28, 1996

**See you in Boston!**

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