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FROM THE EDITOR

M Programmers in a User-Oriented World

Kate M. Schell

by Kate M. Schell

The world is changing about us. The number of M vendors is shrinking; the number of systems employing M Technology alongside of other technologies is slowly growing. There are now two commercial implementations of object technology in M.

What kind of future do these changes spell for the M programmer? Definitely a different future than the character-cell-based one many of us have experienced over the past twenty years. These changes create a great opportunity to learn:

- New programming languages
- New approaches to system design
- New tools

I know that I'm somewhat more privileged than the average M programmer in the array of tools (or toys) at my disposal. Since I run my own technology company, the main consideration before acquiring new technology is "Can we pay for it?" If we can pay for it, and we have an opportunity to use it, the new technology shows up on my computer, or on a colleague's computer. In the past year we've worked with Java, HTML, Visual Basic, PDQ Web, MSM Workstation, RE/m, RE/2000, VC/m, Check 2000, Visio and Dragon Naturally Speaking. Last week we acquired the object version of Caché, this time for "free," for attending a Caché training course at MTA-Europe.

What do these tools have in common? In common, they have the learning experience involved in using them, and the realization that they are all focused on a user-centered approach to computer systems. The user-centered approach to programming is still fairly new and is probably still news to some M programmers.

Back in the era of punched cards, limited memory and small disks, programming was system-centric. Programmers worked to obtain a result within the confines of the system capabilities. Bits and bytes were precious. Later on, programmer time became more valuable than system resources, and we moved to the era of programmer-centric programming. Programmers controlled the flow of the code, and each option opened to the user was a direct result of a decision coded by a programmer. "Escapes" that allowed a user to leave the current procedure and accomplish something else, and then to return to the previous task, were rare. The Windows paradigm changed all of that.

Windows programming leaves the decisions on what will be done, and when, up to the user. In a windowing system, I can write half an editorial, leave the editor to check my email, move to the accounting program to prepare an invoice for a customer, and then pick up writing where I left off. We take this functionality for granted, but can you program successfully for this approach? If not, if windows interface programming and web interface programming are unfamiliar to you, it's time for a skills update.

One of the M programmers in the Caché seminar in Brussels was totally unfamiliar with Visual Basic. That made it pretty hard for him to understand what was going on in the course. He was similarly lost in the Weblink section of the discussion as well. I'd like to believe that he left the course determined to learn new technologies so that he'll be able to use them, but since he left muttering about how hard it was to use the technology, I rather doubt it.

If you're going to keep your programming skills up-to-date, you need to consider adding a few new technologies to your skill set:

- Windows programming (Visual Basic, Delphi ...)
- HTML
- Web and network theory
- Object technology

These skills can be learned at expensive week-long professional seminars, or through local high school and college extension programs. Some folks will be fortunate enough to have their employers pay for courses, but the rest of us will pay for it out of pocket, or will risk being left behind. Do you want to be on the maintenance team or the development team?

Perhaps these technologies aren't required skills at your workplace yet. They are, however, probably in use there. Almost everyone has email, which requires networking capabilities. Most serious corporations have a web site which uses HTML and perhaps Java, and most PCs have one or more Microsoft or Apple products that have windows-based user interfaces. Soon someone will be asking "Why can't our system look like that?" "What would it take to ...?" Be ready with an answer. Be one of the people in your shop who's ahead of the curve. **M**

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