

VO to Vulcan, My Experiences (2006 - 2009) :

I have to confess, I did not think I would ever make this journey, the one to dotNet enlightenment.

I sat at DevFest, and just saw an interesting product, and some entertaining sessions, and had no idea how I would go about 'moving over'. I did not know where to start, thought about it a lot, and still didn't know...

In those days, getting into Vulcan and .NET was not as easy as it is now, since many of the necessary tools etc. were either not in place, or did not work well enough to allow a standard VO guy to make a start.

If VIDE had not been around in those days, I would not have got going when I did. So my path into the world of dotNet back then, was through VIDE and Vulcan. I had not used C# or VS, just seen a bit of them at DevFest.

Now another BIG confession, I started with a goal, which I probably set for myself knowing I would not achieve it. Maybe I wanted an excuse so I did have to bother? Was I scared of failure? Most probably yes!

My large VO network app I had taken from Clipper into VO, over years of development, did all its own printing - signatures from files, the whole caboodle. Letter and document printing was a speciality. If I could not get this to work in Vulcan, then I was going no further - what would be the point? That was how I saw it then.

So armed with VIDE, which I did not really know how to use, I got going - also supported with some sketchy notes from Chris, which came on the DevFest CD - oh! and loads of his support and helpful encouragement.

To cut a story as short as possible, I was amazed that after three and a half days, I had recoded my "Document Printing" class and it worked. Yes, I had had some useful pointers from Chris about the way to get Windows printers. Only a handful of lines - which I now understand. The rest was my converted VO code, still looking very much like VO.

From me not being able to force an excuse on myself, I just had to keep going with learning more dotNet using the Vulcan syntax which I loved, and still do. Chris did warn me that I would eventually 'get hooked' on dotNet - and he was right. Okay, I had later to rewrite the printing class again, in dotNet and not "VO in Vulcan", but it did work as planned, and this time without support DLLs from VO colleagues around the world - it was all there in dotNet, for me to tap into. 'Magic'.

I spent a lot more time finding things out than is necessary today, simply because there was so little working Vulcan code to guide a 'rooky'. I needed everything, spelled out clearly, even how to fill a combobox box. What had been an automatic task in VO became a stumbling block, but that's not the case now - so there's another excuse out of the way.

Of course now things are quite, quite, different. Example code is available from a number of VOPS colleagues, and my deal with Team friends and colleagues helping me, was that I make my notes available to others - a bit of a 'boot strapping' situation! At least they would not need to keep telling the same stuff, over and over, to new guys - even they would start to lose their enthusiasm if that were the case.

The filling of a combobox box is quite a good way of judging how far you have come, towards enlightenment. I think I am now at my fifth different way, each time things getting easier and more powerful. Now I use Data Binding which is a doddle, needs little code, and is extremely flexible - problem was, how to find out for a standard programmer guy. Now it is available to you from the start - lucky you. So don't start at level one, with VO loops and assignments ;-) ... go for the "max"!

What I can say about my years of 'experience', some would say 'painful trial and error', is that I feel much stronger professionally, and now look out for every opportunity to apply modern software technology to problems my customers and clients have. I positively went to my clients and advised them to move into the world of dotNet and SQL, and all the related bits to go with it. It told them to do something about their situation before they were too far behind. Improve their situation before it 'bit them'.

I made my 'big worry' into a strength and selling point, and now believe I did my clients a professional favour. They listened, and supported me, because since Clipper days, I had always told them the truth and also always delivered the goods.

Oh, and now I earn a 'reasonable reward' each month, and now only use Vulcan 100% of the time in doing so. No VO coding, although I still do a lot with my old DBFs - as my two main customers move over to a modern system some time after Christmas 2009. I have written a DBF to SQL transformer application which shows how well DBFs perform under x64 technology, and recently Windows 7 too. So I still earn money from DBFs, but not from VO - well there's a thing. My money would have been on the reverse situation - how wrong can you be?

Vulcan does not only work, but works well, and I have never hit any issues with expected code not working. Any temporary problems were all of my own stupid doing. In fact I feel quite the opposite, it has surprised me just how well all the stuff 'just works'. Okay, these days I have moved away from writing new code in a VO style, but all that older stuff does work, I know, I used to use it in Vulcan - even dynamic VO arrays - and I mean arrays of arrays - much to Don's disgust and mutterings about usuals etc. Now I like objects and data sets.

So what of anyone wishing to follow in my footsteps? Well, things are easier and have changed a lot along the way. I now use Visual Studio 2008 for all my Vulcan coding, and moved over to it about six months ago. This is now very useable and is getting better and better as GrafXsoft improve the Vulcan integration. Using VS is a rewarding experience, and I would go so far as to say "it rocks!". However, I do feel I am gaining the rewards from putting aside time to become familiar with the VS shell, and then the Forms Designer, and code editor too.

The VS development environment is a totally different experience to using the VO repo, but I now know it will take me professionally well into the next decade, and possibly further. For this, I am glad I made the effort, but an effort and a commitment it was - difficult it was not, and accessible to all, it certainly is. I prove that. Oh! And as a bonus my object coding and GUI design has dramatically improved - who said "better tools, better results!"?

One unexpected development is that my customers have expressed a concern that I teach them VS and provide them with VS support. They need to use it with Management Studio for SQL Server, and reporting too. So I now make a positive effort to promote VS on-site to help with their SQL and network related issues. Never thought, or dreamed, that that would ever happen. So get out of bed tomorrow, and see VS as a way of earning money by supporting you clients, and not a threat because you can't figure it out in five minutes at the end of a busy day.

So don't look for those excuses, get Visual Studio up and running, and familiarize yourself with VS as I suggest, I am EXTREMELY glad I did. Funny, I seem to sleep better each nigh these days too.

Good Luck,
Phil Hepburn.