

New

Products

No More Boring Buttons



Henry Ford once said you could buy his cars in any color you wanted—as long as it was black. Similarly, VB allows you to have any kind of button you want—as long as it's rectangular. While rectangular buttons work fine for most purposes, some applications require other shapes, such as triangles and circles. FarPoint Technologies' ButtonMaker lets you create the buttons of your dreams for those visually pleasing applications.

Buttons created in ButtonMaker have all the standard button properties and events, so they can easily replace existing VB buttons. You can set each button to act as an on/off toggle, or regular click and release. Each button can have a separate bitmap and/or text for the normal, depressed, and disabled states. Buttons can be grouped together and set to behave like radio buttons, if desired.

Buttons are created using segments to define the button shape. Buttons can be defined with up to 256 segments, and segments (the lines between the segment's end points) can be straight or curved. An ellipse, for instance, may consist of four segments, each defining a quarter-circle. Each segment may be

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Roll your own data control in VB



Less, they say, is sometimes more, and on a few occasions I've found that to be true with the Jet engine at the core of Visual Basic's database handling. It is a prodigious piece of work—rock-solid, mature, flexible, willing to take on just about any task. But it's also big. I've often wanted to roll my own data control, for example, to take advantage of a DBF library I wrote years ago. I was willing to sacrifice speed and capacity for an app that would fit on one disk, but I didn't have the means to make that decision. With VB4's collections the possibilities doubled—imagine an in-memory data control based on collections. My prayers were finally answered by Apex's MyData control. MyData looks and acts just like the Visual Basic data control, with one minor exception: it's an empty shell, waiting for you to fill in a few events and manage a couple of data structures. What you end up with is a data control looking suspiciously like VB's but using your own database engine, with virtually all the same events and some well-chosen bonus events and properties.

I must first caution you that this evaluation was based on an

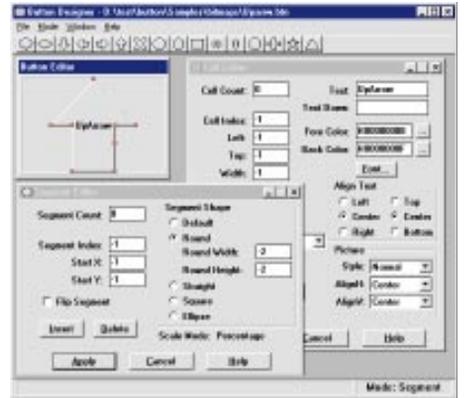
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defined at design time or run time. In addition, the included Button Designer allows WYSIWYG button design, and comes with 16 predefined button shapes.

Cells define rectangular portions of the button's interior, and you can use them to divide a button into multiple clickable hotspots. Each cell can contain its own text or bitmap in any color or orientation, and the number of cells is limited only by the usability of the resulting button. A two-cell button could act as an up/down channel changer button would on your TV's remote control, for instance. You can change cell definitions at design time or run time, or from the Button Designer.

The included buttons are decent, but ButtonMaker really shines when doing complex shapes, such as a hand. The 3D effects are stunning. Buttons can have the apparent height of Windows 95 buttons, or Windows 3.1 buttons (which are taller). The light/dark shading works well on complex shapes. Because each cell on a button can have its own bitmap, you could make buttons that provide visual feedback to the user.

ButtonMaker also contains a control that can provide help balloons, commonly known as Tool Tips, for any control. Help

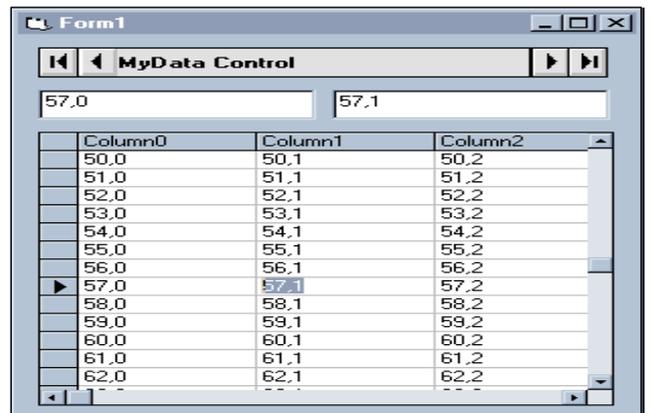


Setting Button Properties is a Snap. Set most properties from the button control's property sheets.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 18.

early alpha version that was missing some crucial documentation. While I was unable to finish the DBF engine I was able to scrutinize Apex's sole example, which supported only integers, but which used an array for the database—even more rudimentary than a collection. Still, it was easy to see that the possibilities are limitless. Reading the sample program's code I got the same sense of excitement I had when I first used Desaware's SpyWorks, which let me write VB code that responded directly to Windows messages, bypassing C altogether. Being able to write a database engine in VB is just as thrilling. The early documentation I saw implied that Apex will make their internal API available to control developers. I hope

CONTINUED ON PAGE 18.



Use Any Data With Bound Controls. MyData control displays a Visual Basic array in bound text boxes and DBGrid.

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No More Boring Buttons...

balloons can be round, rectangular, elliptical, or cloud shaped. Balloons can have one of several different kinds of tails, and you can determine where the balloon appears in relation to the control it documents.

ButtonMaker

FarPoint Technologies
133 Southcenter Court, Ste. 1000
Morrisville, NC 27560
919-460-4551
Fax: 919-460-7606

Quick Facts: A replacement for the standard boring Windows buttons, these can be any shape with separate internal cells. Supports both 16- and 32-bit development using VBXs, OCXs, and DLLs.

Price: \$99

Availability: now

All flavors of ButtonMaker (VBX, OCX, and DLL) contain the button and balloon controls and range in size from 135K to 270K. A 356-page manual explains all properties and events in detail, and contains a tutorial to allow you to develop buttons quickly and easily. I would have preferred the Button Designer to be more intuitive in how it manages button segments: I was hoping for an interface more like a drawing

program. Overall, this product looks to be a welcome addition to my toolkit. **x**

Roll your own...

they make it part of the commercial release.

Creating your own data control is pretty straightforward. On startup, an event called ReadMetaData is fired. This is where MyData learns about the database schema. In that event you write some values to the Columns collection in the MyData control. The Columns collection has an automatically updated Count property and, of course, column objects. Columns describe the field names, their data types, the maximum number of characters that can be typed into them, and whether they are read-only fields. If you loop through the Columns collection the ReadMetaData event takes less than 10 lines of code.

Then you write handlers for a few events such as ReadData,

MyData control

Apex Software Corporation
4516 Henry St.
Pittsburgh, PA
412-681-4343
Fax: 800-858-2739

Quick Facts: MyData control fires special Visual Basic events that let you provide your own data.

Price: \$149.95

Availability: February 1996

WriteData, DeleteRow, and so on. The most challenging part is the code for bookmarks, and even that's a snap. A minimal data control takes only 100 lines of code or so, but the more data types you handle, the more (largely duplicated) lines you write. I would guess that a full control with robust error handling wouldn't set you back more than 1000 lines. All ODBC data types are there, and

there are also lots of bonus events, such as AddData, DeleteRow, WriteData, etc. Likewise there are many new properties, but no Database property. (You're replacing it, after all!)

Hopefully, the finished documentation will have step-by-step tutorials for creating both disk- and memory-based controls, and I hope they document the C/C++ API. MyData is well designed, and if it works as advertised, it will exceed my fondest hopes of being able to create my own database engine. **x**