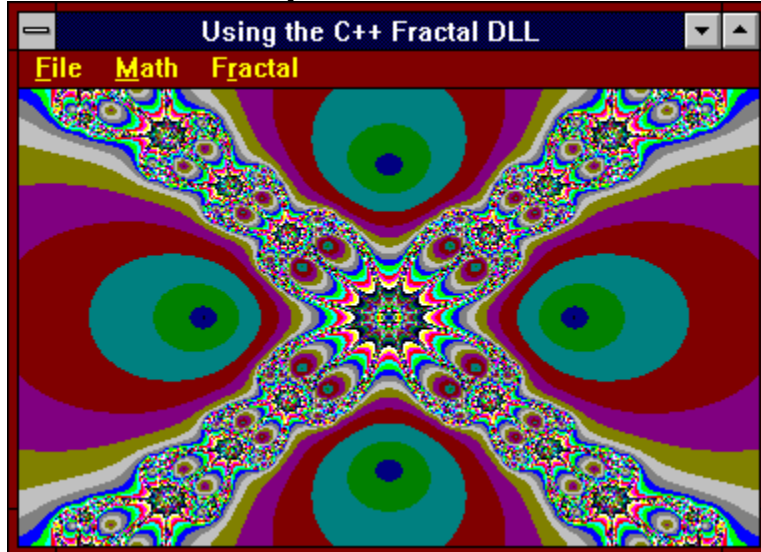




By Barry Seymour

Book Review:

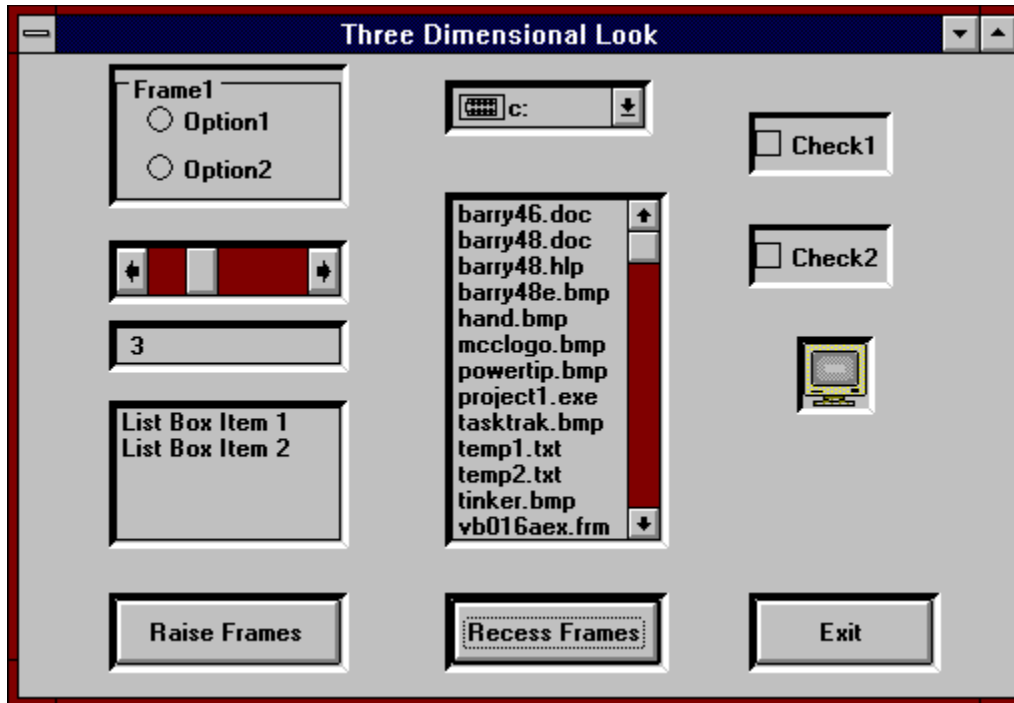
"The Waite Group's Visual Basic How-To"



Visual Basic is the simplest, most powerful way to get into Windows programming fast. The system can be pretty straightforward to learn and comes with an pretty good tutorial right in the box -- namely, the Visual Basic Programmer's Guide. However, once you've mastered that it's time to move on to bigger and better things.

The Waite Group's "Visual Basic How-To" is packed with bigger and better things. This is not a book for those who want to learn Visual Basic; it's one for those who already have a firm grasp on the fundamentals and are ready to move up to a higher level to tap into VB's hidden power. A lot of the tips are clever reworkings of capabilities VB already has; others provide an informative look into Visual Basic's most powerful feature, the ability to tap directly into the Windows API (Application Programmer Interface) and other DLLs (Dynamic Link Libraries). A programmer armed with these tricks is like the sharp mechanic who really knows how to 'hot rod' a car for maximum performance.

As I said, this isn't a book for the beginner, but it's clear and concisely written. Chapters are broken up into well-defined topics, starting with controls, forms, text and scrolling and ending up talking about using Visual Basic with DLLs. An extensive section is also devoted to third party custom controls. Each chapter in turn is divided into subtopics with a short descriptive title, such as how to "make a file dialog box using APIs" or how to "make a brushed aluminum NEXT-like interface."



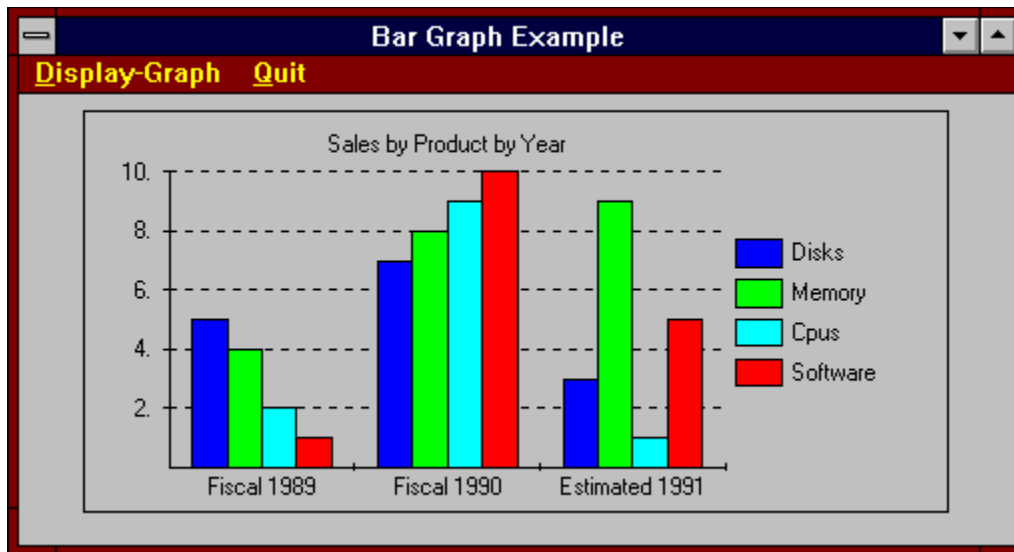
This isn't a book you have to go through from cover to cover; scan the table of contents, pick the title you want and go to that chapter. The answer there is explained completely and clearly.

All code is included on the diskette that comes with the book, so you don't have to do a lot of typing to put these solutions to work in your own code. This is a great tool for learning, but it's also an incredibly handy grab-bag of useful bits that can really add vital functionality and a polish of professionalism to any VB program.

When loading the software from the source code diskette, the installation process matches the level of expertise expected throughout the book. Rather than providing an all-inclusive SETUP routine, the book's opening chapters describe the process of using XCOPY to just copy the source code onto your hard disk (anyone out there running VB from floppies? Give me a call).

There are more than 250 files and over 200 solutions to various problems included on the diskette, a tribute to the amazing amount of creativity that went into the book. The source code doesn't take up much hard disk real estate, and since the directories are organized by chapter and section it's easy to find any given project described in the book.

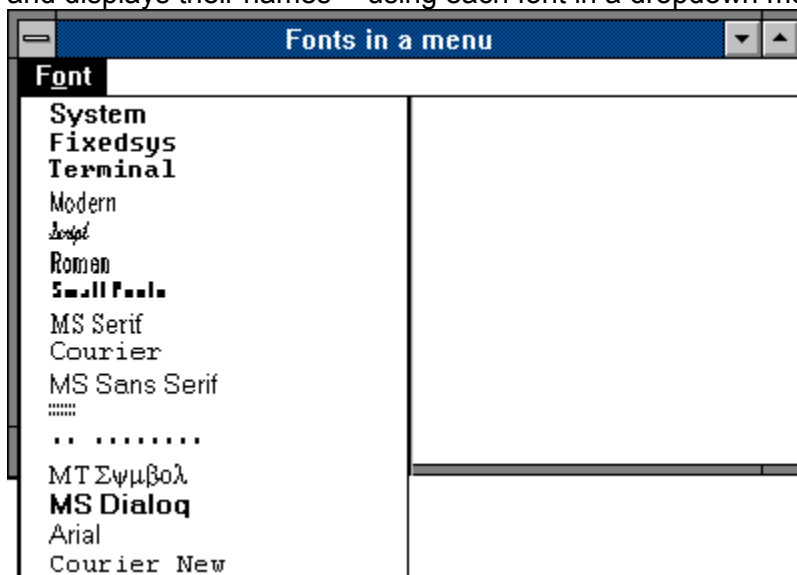
I found three types of tips in the book; pro tips, hot rod tips and cool tips! The Pro Tips are concepts I consider to be essential for any professionally produced Windows program. These tips cover user interface issues, reading/writing INI files and graphics techniques for pie, bar and line charts.



The "Hot Rod" tips make Windows (and DOS, for that matter) really jump through hoops to get things done for you and your application. Here you'll find a lot of API calls explained, including special Windows graphics and messaging routines, special menu tricks and running internal DOS commands from Windows.



Then there are the tips that are tremendously COOL. The fractal DLL included on diskette is a joy to watch, and a lot of the third party custom controls and functions add extra spice to your life. Special mention has to go to the routine which gets a list of all system fonts and displays their names -- using each font in a dropdown menu !





My only negative comment on the book is the inclusion of the "free" custom controls. I wasn't looking for 'em when I got the book, but there on the cover in big letters bursting with promise was the legend "Includes FREE Controls!" Sure enough, they were only **demo** versions of the controls and won't compile to an EXE file -- you have to buy the full versions of the software for that.

This sort of thing can give a black eye to an otherwise reputable and respected publishing company. I can only hope they'll change the legend to "Includes Free DEMO Controls" or some other such thing in a later printing to make it a little less misleading. I didn't base my decision to acquire the book on the 'free' controls, but if I had I would've been **sorely** disappointed.



Aside from that, the book is highly recommended. The solutions are many, varied and incredibly valuable. The book was a little hard to find; evidently several versions are out, the only difference being the title; some are listed in bookstore inventories as "Microsoft Visual Basic How-To", which can be misleading if they're looking under "V" for Visual Basic or "W" for Waite Group Press. If you end up getting hooked on one or more of the custom control demos, order forms are included in the back of the book to make it easy for you to order the real things.

In short, if you're into Visual Basic, GET THIS BOOK. You'll be challenged and enthralled for hours on end running the examples and incorporating them into your own code, and you'll find enough hot tips to make you a legend in your own shop.

"The Waite Group's Visual Basic How-To"

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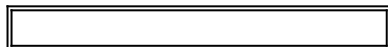
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