ZD JOURNALS

December 1999 Volume 5 Number 12
www.zdjournals.com/sun US $9.00

Inside Solaris™

Tips & Techniques for users of Sun Solaris

Cross-platform development made easy with MetaCard 2.2

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Those of us who are given the dreaded cross-platform development assignment can now breathe a little easier. We have a new weapon at our disposal. With the release of MetaCard 2.2, cross-platform development has become an easy, all-inclusive, and affordable reality.

At first glance, MetaCard appears as many other application development tools. As you can see in **Figures A** and **B**, it appears much like Visual Basic on the Windows platform, as it contains a GUI IDE, scripting language, script editor, and script debugger. It includes built-in support for databases such as Sybase, Access, and Oracle, has multimedia abilities comparable to products like IMSI Multimedia Fusion or Macromedia Director, and hypermedia support like a dedicated Web development environment.

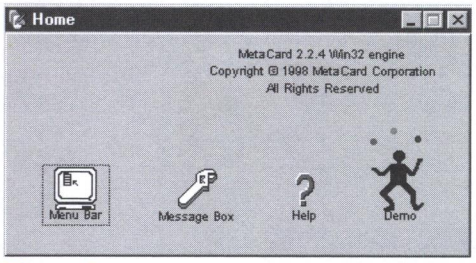

Figure A: *Home is the basic element of the MetaCard IDE.*

Figure B: *An additional part of the MetaCard IDE is the MetaCard Menu Bar.*

When we first began looking over the package, we were concerned that maybe too many things were placed into one product. We've all seen instances where a product has been given too many features instead of focusing on its main function. This isn't the case with MetaCard. Although the IDE is very vanilla-looking, it flawlessly integrates all of the tools into one seamless development environment. **Figures C** and **D**, on page 2, demonstrate the context sensitive documentation and examples that we felt were particularly pleasing.

The MetaTalk language, which is compatible with the HyperTalk and SuperTalk languages used with HyperCard and SuperCard, respectively, is the easiest, multipurpose scripting language that we've ever used. Along with the basic functions, additional extensions built into MetaTalk include HTTP support, arrays, and regular expression pattern matching.

MetaCard also supports a full range of features required for User Interface development. **Figure E**, also on page 2, shows a simple example of some of these controls, which include the basics such as buttons, comboboxes, or tabs. There's also built-in support for pop-up menus, dialog boxes, and floating palettes.

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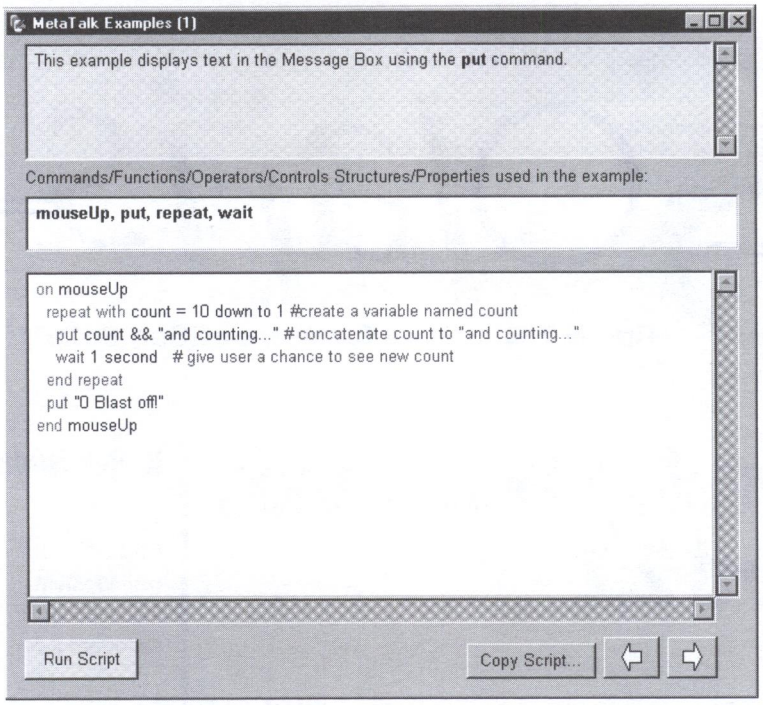

Figure C: *Here's a MetaTalk example script from the context Help system.*

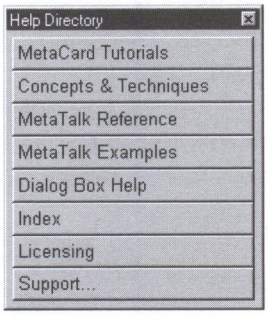

Figure D: *The Help Directory is part of MetaCard's excellent Help system.*

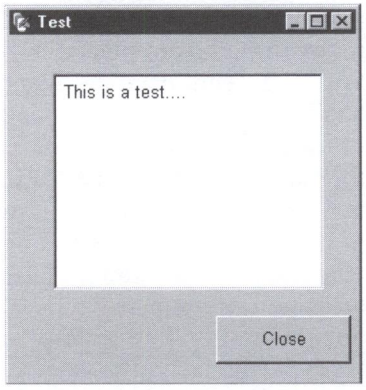

Figure E: *Buttons and text boxes are just some of the built-in MetaCard components.*

The language itself is much easier to learn than conventional programming languages such as Visual Basic or Delphi, but is also powerful. In fact, the development environment has been written entirely in MetaCard itself.

MetaCard applications are distributed with MetaCard engines that are comparable in performance to Java virtual-machine-based applications. All OS-specific routines are contained in these separate modules enabling the easy porting of applications. Because the product has been developed with cross-platform abilities in mind, it either lacks support completely or has very basic support for COM/OLE/ActiveX.

Although this product is more than sufficient for development, MetaCard isn't complacent about the future. Future releases are planned with Internet-related improvements like email support for POP3 and SMTP and FTP file transfer. The already powerful MetaTalk language will also be receiving some upgrades. The extended commands will provide a more full-featured object-oriented programming environment, which will allow development of larger-scale applications. OODBMS features, such as multi-user access, version control, and distributed data management, are currently being designed as well.

Conclusion

For those of us who are given the task to develop something for many platforms, MetaCard (**www.metacard.com**) is definitely a product that's up to the challenge. With a $995 price tag for a single user, any-platform environment, you'll definitely want to consider this package for your development needs. ZDJ

Coming up...

- The /proc file system
- The /etc/system file
- Developing Solaris knowledge bases
- Priority paging