DB/C Newsletter

News and Comment

We have not yet started beta testing of DB/C DX 14.0. Hopefully, we will get the process going in August. If you are interested in participating in its beta testing, please contact us at support@dbcsoftware.com.

Every few years I get out my crystal ball to help me make some prognostications about future technologies that might impact readers of this newsletter. It's interesting (and humbling) to look back and see how my prior forecasting has fared. Nine years ago I wrote that these three technologies would be successful: computer speech, DVDs and ISDN. DVDs were a big success and ISDN was a big failure. Computer speech is somewhere in between - it is just now starting to be widely deployed. I'll be generous and give myself a score of two right and one big wrong in those forecasts.

This month's newsletter article is an overview of another technology that I believe will have major impact on our industry in the near future.

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RFID Technology

Radio frequency identification (RFID) technologies have been used for several years in certain applications. Most multi-tenant buildings in large metropolitan areas now use RFID smart cards for building access. In the US, Mobil Oil has been pushing their Speedpass point of purchase credit card replacement for several years. Speedpass is an RFID gadget that goes on your key chain. These are typical of today's RFID implementations - simple, passive RFID applications that have immediate benefits.

However, today's applications are just the tip of the iceberg. The use of RFID is about to explode. A few years from now RFID will be found in lots of surprising places.

The most important near term application for RFID is the replacement (or at least augmentation) of bar codes. Believe it or not, bar codes have been in use for 30 years. Remember when the cashier at the grocery store

actually punched in the prices on the cash register? That was a long time ago! As successful as they've been, bar codes have some limitations that don't exist for RFID tags. Bar codes must be visible to the reader. Bar codes are easily tampered with. Bar code data is permanent. RFID tags do not have these limitations.

Walmart has mandated that its largest suppliers must ship their products to Walmart stores in boxes or pallets that contain an RFID tag; smaller suppliers have a year or two before they are required to do the same. Being the largest retailer in the world, Walmart can pretty much dictate this change. Printer companies like Printronix and Zebra have responded with printers that both print bar codes and write data into an RFID tag that is encased between the layers of the paper label. Labeling will become a standard use of passive RFID technology.

Passive RFID has certain limitations. The distance between the tag reader and the tag itself can only be a few feet. Reading a passive tag through liquid or metal is problematic. Active RFID tags minimize these issues.

The difference between passive and active RFID tags is that an active tag has a battery. Active tags can be read up to 100 feet from the reader and in more electrically noisy environments. Movement of goods and people that are tagged with active RFID tags can be monitored 100% of the time in controlled spaces.

Two companies in this field are Axcess and WhereNet. Their web sites provide many examples of active RFID technology in use today.

The primary impediment to implementing RFID tags today is the cost of the tags themselves. As the price of RFID tags comes down, they will start to show up in all sorts of places.

Here are web sites of companies mentioned in this article:

http://www.printronix.com
http://www.zebra.com
http://www.axcessinc.com
http://www.wherenet.com

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                    DB/C DX Class Schedule

    Class:     DB/C DX Fundamentals
    Date:      September, 2005
    Location:  to be determined


For information, send email to admin@dbcsoftware.com.
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