Acknowledgments

Thanks to Martin Nally, chief architect and lead designer of VisualAge, for the extensive help in developing this presentation.

What this talk is

- About visual programming tools like Visual Smalltalk* and VisualAge**
- From a user’s perspective
- About deploying real applications
- About current products

*Visual Smalltalk is a trade mark of Digitalk
**VisualAge is a trade mark of IBM
What this talk is not

- An academic talk
- About future directions
- A sales pitch for VisualAge
- Totally objective

Some questions to answer about these tools

- What are they good for?
- Do they scale?
- How do they fit with Smalltalk?
- Who should use them?
- How do they fit with existing tools and code?
- How do they fit with existing designs and methodologies?

History of visual programming

- Mainframe screen painters (e.g. ISPF)
- GUI-builder tools (e.g. Smethers-Barnes Prototyper)
- NextStep
- Visual Smalltalk and VisualAge
Some simple examples of uses of visual programming

- GUI
- Simple Applications
- Simple Database Applications

Example 1: building a GUI layout

GUI layout: why does this work?

- Because the GUI layout is inherently visual (WYSIWYG)
- Because the GUI layout is a static arrangement of subparts
Example 2: building a minimal application

A minimal application: why does this work?

- Because the processing components are a static arrangement of subparts
- Because the behavior can be expressed as an interaction between subparts
A simple database application: why does this work?

- Because we designed a set of database parts for VisualAge
- Because the database components are a static arrangement of subparts
- Because the behavior is expressed as an interaction between subparts
- Because the query part integrated a custom visual programming environment

Advantages of visual programming

- Much higher level of expression
- Allows domain experts to do part or all of application development
- Allows an incremental adoption of OO and skill-building
- Very powerful for many aspects of application development
  - GUI, Reports, Database access, Transaction invocation, many others

Who should use Visual Programming Tools?

- Teams who want higher-level tools and productivity
- Companies looking to bridge to OO technology
- OO Teams looking to involve non OO specialists
  - UI or graphics designers, Domain experts, Database experts, Prototypers
What should they use Visual Programming Tools for?

- Prototyping
- JAD
- Deployment of production applications

Difficulties of visual programming

- Not effective for every problem
- Tendency to skip design
- Scaling of complexity
- Debugging and performance tuning

Example 4: complexity explosion
Complexity explosion (cont’d)

- Visual spaghetti code is easily created
- Fundamental questions:
  - Does this example illustrate problems with Visual Programming, or does Visual Programming illustrate problems with this example?
  - Can Visual Programming scale?

Complexity explosion: why does this not work?

- Design problems
  - Poor factoring: many low-level objects and connections should be encapsulated
  - Poor design of custom processing elements
  - View is entire application
- Sub-optimal use of visual programming techniques
  - Many objects and connections for simple initialization

The 3 Most Effective Solutions

- Design
- Design
- Design
Refining a simpler example

Techniques for managing complexity
- Writing custom model parts in the Smalltalk language
- Writing simple scripts in the Smalltalk language
- Building reusable visual programs and using them as subparts
  - Visual Parts
  - Non-Visual Parts

Example 5: building a custom part in Smalltalk
Example 5 (2): building a custom part in Smalltalk

Example 6: building a reusable Non-visual part
Example 8: building a reusable Visual Part

Putting it together

Writing a script

- First level of integration with Smalltalk
- Scripting skill level, not arbitrary Smalltalk design and implementation
When to write a script

- Initializing variables
- Complex Boolean conditions
- Complex cross-field input validation
- Iterations

Building a reusable Visual or Non-Visual Part

- Can be performed entirely visually
- Usually the first step towards an object design
- Teaches a number of OO concepts: an object, its external interface and usage, and its implementation without requiring any OO language skills

When to build a reusable Visual or Non-Visual Part

- Whenever there is a chance of reuse (almost always)
- Whenever a logical entity can be extracted to reduce complexity and facilitate maintenance
Building Custom Parts in Smalltalk

- Second level of integration with Smalltalk
- Key feature distinguishing Smalltalk-based tools from many other RAD tools
- Allows limitless flexibility while retaining benefits of Visual Programming
- Allows implementation of arbitrary designs with Visual Programming
- Allows mixed skill levels on teams

When to build a custom part in Smalltalk

- If the part is not easily decomposed into a static arrangement of subparts
- If the behavior of the part cannot be expressed easily in terms of interactions between its subparts
- If the part has many complex logical decision points or iterations
- If the part requires ‘low-level coding’ (e.g. calling system services)

Examples of custom parts in Smalltalk

- A domain object (customer, bank account, oil well...)
- A spell-checker
- A loan interest rate calculator
- A wrapper of a set of system APIs
VisualAge choices for custom parts implementation

- Inherit from Object (VisualAge will create a generic wrapper at runtime)
- Inherit from Object but implement VisualAge part protocol
- Inherit from AbtPart
- Write custom wrapper

Custom parts that inherit from Object

- Essentially free integration
- Some performance overhead and flexibility restrictions
- Works well for existing classes
  - Currently used in VisualAge for OrderedCollection, Dictionary etc.

Custom parts that implement part protocol

- Requires a little more implementation
- Gives best flexibility and performance
- Works well for existing classes
Custom parts that inherit from AbtPart

- Essentially free integration
- Gives best flexibility and performance
- Works best for new implementation targeted to VisualAge
  - Currently used in VisualAge for many standard parts

Custom part wrappers for existing parts

- Gives excellent flexibility
- Requires maintenance of wrapper
- Small performance overhead
- Used to enhance VisualAge integration of existing classes
  - Currently used in VisualAge for all GUI parts

Integrating non-Smalltalk code

- C and COBOL DLLs can be integrated as parts
- Network connections can be integrated as parts
- CICS transaction objects can be integrated as parts
Integration with Smalltalk Tools

- Configuration Management and Team Programming
  - Each vendor provides integration with its tools

- Debugging
  - High-level debugging tools available
  - Still sometimes necessary to debug at the Smalltalk level (VisualAge)
  - Smalltalk debugger pops up for some Visual Programming errors (VisualAge)

Integration with Smalltalk Tools (cont’d)

- Performance profiling
  - Works with existing Smalltalk profilers.
  - Still necessary to profile at the Smalltalk level (VisualAge)

- GUI Builders
  - WindowBuilder/Pro screens can function as VisualAge parts

How do they fit with existing designs and methodologies

- Mapping existing design elements to Visual Programming concepts
  - In VisualAge each part is a class
- Model-View separation
  - VisualAge variable parts allow models to be passed to views.
- Control Objects
  - VisualAge gives support for deferred update operations, objects that implement changes
Summary of Visual programming tools

- Good for prototyping, JAD and production applications.
  - Allow a broad range of specialties and skill levels
  - Provide an incremental adoption path for OO
  - Can provide a significant productivity gain

Summary of Visual programming tools (2)

- Can scale to large, sophisticated apps
  - Attention to design and training avoid incomprehensible, unmaintainable programs.
  - It helps to have expert Smalltalk programmers to create custom parts
  - Learning to create simple, well-designed, reusable parts with Visual Programming is a key to success, especially as applications grow

Summary of Visual programming tools (3)

- They integrate smoothly with Smalltalk
  - They allow scripts in the Smalltalk language to supplement Visual Programs
  - They allow custom parts to be created in Smalltalk
Summary of Visual programming tools (4)

- They integrate well with existing tools and code
  - They provide a powerful integration environment for existing code
  - They complement existing skills in Smalltalk
  - They integrate with existing debuggers, profilers and team and configuration management tools

Summary of Visual programming tools (5)

- They can be used with existing designs and methodologies?
  - Designs created with existing methodologies can be implemented or partially implemented with Visual Programming.
  - Pieces of a design that don’t lend themselves to Visual Programming can be implemented in straight Smalltalk (or a 3GL programming language) and easily integrated with Visual Programming.

Summary of Visual programming tools (6)

- Everyone should use them