FROM PROGRAM TO PRODUCT

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TURNING YOUR CODE INTO A SALEABLE PRODUCT

Rocky Smolin

Apress®

From Program to Product: Turning Your Code into a Saleable Product

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To my first wife

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Foreword

From Program to Product: Turning Your Code into a Saleable Product is a book that could have saved me about ten years of pointlessly doing the same thing over and over. More to the point, it might just save you from the same career mistake.

Let me explain.

Every professional programmer in this industry—whether they freelance from project to project or work from job to job—sooner or later arrives at the point when they have to ask themselves, "Is this all there is?" You've gotten to the point when you no longer stumble talking to potential customers, when the earth doesn't necessarily move for you every time the technology advances, when you fit comfortably in your skin as a professional programmer.

Then what do you do? How do you get from the local max of being a competent and proficient programmer for others to being something else? What else is there?

Now there's nothing wrong with doing what you're good at, year after year, project after project. It's fun, you learn new things, you meet interesting people, you may get paid to go to foreign places, and it pays the bills. But it doesn't get you excited anymore.

What Rocky does in this book is explore another way to go than down that predictable career path of freelancing or salaried work: he shows you step by step, issue by issue, how to go from developing software applications for other people to developing something better—a product.

From Program to Product lays out the mental and educational process you need to follow to go from software developer to product developer. It is not necessarily an easy transformation. You won't be the same programmer you were after you finish Rocky's book because you'll have learned how to see your software in an entirely different way.

From the bare beginnings where Rocky invites you to see what you're doing in a new and different way, he takes you through defining a product, not just an app; learning how to see your product from the outside in instead of

from the inside out; thinking about how to price your product and understanding the core economic reality of selling software; dealing with the legal aspects of selling intellectual property without being mugged; and coping with some of the other tasks you need to master such as internationalization and documentation to get your product truly ready for the market.

By the way, I should make clear here that while I see Rocky's book through code monkey–colored glasses, this is a book not just for programmers. If you've hired a programmer (and Rocky has some great advice on doing just that) to implement your vision of a software application, this book will help you with both the big picture of just how to direct your project into a commercial product and the small but important details, like End User License Agreements (EULAs), you need to get right to protect your investment.

One of the things I really like about this book is that while Rocky shares his experience and insight as someone who has successfully gone from program to product, he goes beyond that to interview others who bring their own insights and experiences to the buffet you get to feast at.

In a lot of ways, Rocky has written the perfect prequel to my book, *Micro-ISV: From Vision to Reality* (Apress, 2006). Where I focus mainly on what to do after you've gotten your product to sell, Rocky covers the hard ground of getting to that point. That's why I said at the top of this foreword I'd wished Rocky had written this book a decade ago—it would have immeasurably helped me go that first step from developer to micro-ISV.

And that's why I recommend Rocky's book to you now. If you've been doing what you do for too long, if you're looking for a clear path to break free from being just a programmer, Rocky is offering you what you need.

It's time to take the red pill.

Bob Walsh
Sonoma, California
February 11, 2008

About the Author

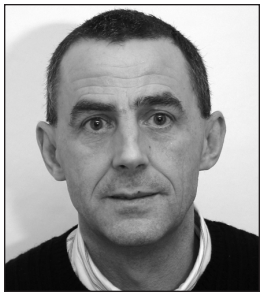
Rocky Smolin wrote his first computer program in 1964 at the age of 16 using computers at the Illinois Institute of Technology in Chicago. He developed and sold his first commercial product three years later while studying for his degree in business administration at Bradley University in Peoria, Illinois, and went on to earn an MBA at San Diego State University in 1974.

After serving as director of information systems for several companies, he started his own small business systems consulting operation in 1980. At the start of the personal computer revolution, he codeveloped PMS-II, the first successful critical path project management system for PCs, and went on to develop and market E-Z-MRP—a manufacturing system for small manufacturers.

Today as owner of Beach Access Software (`www.bchacc.com`), Smolin provides custom databases and applications exclusively in Microsoft Access, as well as continuing to market the E-Z-MRP system.

Smolin lives with his wife of thirty-one years and two sons, 17 and 11, in Del Mar, California.

About the Technical Reviewer



Martin Reid is an analyst with The Queen's University of Belfast and has been working with relational databases for more than fifteen years. Martin is currently working with Microsoft SharePoint Office Server 2007 on a large-scale enterprise deployment. Martin has been technical editor on several Apress titles and is the author of *Pro Access 2007*, also published by Apress.

Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge the invaluable assistance over the years of what is possibly the most generous, friendly, and knowledgeable group of programmers it has ever been my pleasure to work with—the worldwide community of developers at `www.databaseadvisors.com` and particularly those on the AccessD list, who have saved my bacon numerous times and continue to do so to this day.

I would also like to thank those whose interviews are included in this book. They gave freely of their time and experience to help others like themselves become more successful software entrepreneurs, and their contributions are invaluable.

And finally, I would like to express my deep appreciation to everyone at Apress who had a hand in this project—particularly those who made the decision to take the risk of going ahead with this project based solely on the sketchy outline and résumé I submitted to them. I hope their confidence in me was not misplaced.

Introduction

Programming . . . it's the most fun you can have with your clothes on. At least for a propeller head like myself. And making a pile of dough doing it—well, what could be better?

But getting from an idea and bit of code to a polished product ready for market takes more than great enthusiasm and a couple of cases of high-octane cola.

Through hard experience, sometimes expensive and often painful, I have learned what one needs to do to turn an idea for a software product into reality. And that is what this book is all about. The book begins with your idea for a great program and ends with you at the starting line, product in hand, ready for that first day of business and that first sale.

I'd like to say that this is a top-down cookbook for success—as orderly as a well-written subroutine. But it isn't. The software game is simply not that neat.

So this book is more of a checklist, covering a wide range of topics—from systems analysis, to legal matters, to how to make your program look good to the customer. You'll read about the economics of software—pricing, license arrangements, and the like. And get advice on what makes an effective manual, how to test your software, and many other topics you might not have thought about.

Interspersed among the chapters are interviews with folks just like you who have been successful at turning their ideas into programs, turning the programs into products, and turning the products into profitable businesses. They'll tell you how they did it—what they did right and what they did wrong.

If you have questions or comments about program design, product development, packaging, or any other topics in this book, please contact me through the Beach Access Software web site: `www.bchacc.com`. Really. I would like to hear from you.

A word about color: you'll note that the figures and illustrations in this book are printed in black and white. However, some of these figures are better off seen in color, and for a couple of them, seeing the colors is essential to understand the point I'm trying to make. All of the figures in this book are

available in color on the Web as a download, and I would urge you to download these figures and have them handy when reading the book. To download the figures in color, point your browser to `www.apress.com/book/view/1590599713` and look at the "Book Extras" section.