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Introducing C#

WHAT YOU WILL LEARN IN THIS CHAPTER

- What the .NET Framework is and what it contains
- How .NET applications work
- What C# is and how it relates to the .NET Framework
- What tools are available for creating .NET applications with C#

Welcome to the first chapter of the first section of this book. This section will provide you with the basic knowledge you need to get up and running with C#. This chapter provides an overview of C# and the .NET Framework, including what these technologies are, the motivation for using them, and how they relate to each other.

First is a general discussion of the .NET Framework. This technology contains many concepts that are tricky to come to grips with initially. This means that the discussion, by necessity, covers many new concepts in a short amount of space. However, a quick look at the basics is essential to understanding how to program in C#. Later in the book you will revisit many of the topics covered here, exploring them in more detail.

After that general introduction, the chapter provides a basic description of C# itself, including its origins and similarities to C++. Finally, you look at the primary tools used throughout this book: Visual Studio 2010 (VS) and Visual C# 2010 Express (VCE).

WHAT IS THE .NET FRAMEWORK?

The .NET Framework (now at version 4) is a revolutionary platform created by Microsoft for developing applications. The most interesting thing about this statement is how vague it is — but there are good reasons for this. For a start, note that it doesn't "develop applications

on the Windows operating system.” Although the Microsoft release of the .NET Framework runs on the Windows operating system, it is possible to find alternative versions that will work on other systems. One example of this is Mono, an open-source version of the .NET Framework (including a C# compiler) that runs on several operating systems, including various flavors of Linux and Mac OS. In addition, you can use the Microsoft .NET Compact Framework (essentially a subset of the full .NET Framework) on personal digital assistant (PDA) class devices and even some smartphones. One of the key motivations behind the .NET Framework is its intended use as a means of integrating disparate operating systems.

In addition, the preceding definition of the .NET Framework includes no restriction on the type of applications that are possible. That’s because there is no restriction — the .NET Framework enables the creation of Windows applications, Web applications, Web services, and pretty much anything else you can think of. Also, with Web applications it’s worth noting that these are, by definition, multi-platform applications, since any system with a Web browser can access them. With the recent addition of Silverlight, this category also includes applications that run inside browsers on the client, as well as applications that merely render Web content in the form of HTML.

The .NET Framework has been designed so that it can be used from any language, including C# (the subject of this book) as well as C++, Visual Basic, JScript, and even older languages such as COBOL. For this to work, .NET-specific versions of these languages have also appeared, and more are being released all the time. Not only do all of these have access to the .NET Framework, but they can also communicate with each other. It is perfectly possible for C# developers to make use of code written by Visual Basic programmers, and vice versa.

All of this provides an extremely high level of versatility and is part of what makes using the .NET Framework such an attractive prospect.

What’s in the .NET Framework?

The .NET Framework consists primarily of a gigantic library of code that you use from your client languages (such as C#) using object-oriented programming (OOP) techniques. This library is categorized into different modules — you use portions of it depending on the results you want to achieve. For example, one module contains the building blocks for Windows applications, another for network programming, and another for Web development. Some modules are divided into more specific submodules, such as a module for building Web services within the module for Web development.

The intention is for different operating systems to support some or all of these modules, depending on their characteristics. A PDA, for example, would include support for all the core .NET functionality but is unlikely to require some of the more esoteric modules.

Part of the .NET Framework library defines some basic *types*. A type is a representation of data, and specifying some of the most fundamental of these (such as “a 32-bit signed integer”) facilitates interoperability between languages using the .NET Framework. This is called the *Common Type System* (CTS).

As well as supplying this library, the .Net Framework also includes the .NET *Common Language Runtime (CLR)*, which is responsible for maintaining the execution of all applications developed using the .NET library.

Writing Applications Using the .NET Framework

Writing an application using the .NET Framework means writing code (using any of the languages that support the Framework) using the .NET code library. In this book you use VS and VCE for your development. VS is a powerful, integrated development environment that supports C# (as well as managed and unmanaged C++, Visual Basic, and some others). VCE is a slimmed down (and free) version of VS that supports C# only. The advantage of these environments is the ease with which .NET features can be integrated into your code. The code that you create will be entirely C# but use the .NET Framework throughout, and you'll make use of the additional tools in VS and VCE where necessary.

In order for C# code to execute, it must be converted into a language that the target operating system understands, known as *native code*. This conversion is called *compiling* code, an act that is performed by a *compiler*. Under the .NET Framework, this is a two-stage process.

CIL and JIT

When you compile code that uses the .NET Framework library, you don't immediately create operating-system-specific native code. Instead, you compile your code into *Common Intermediate Language (CIL)* code. This code isn't specific to any operating system (OS) and isn't specific to C#. Other .NET languages — Visual Basic .NET, for example — also compile to this language as a first stage. This compilation step is carried out by VS or VCE when you develop C# applications.

Obviously, more work is necessary to execute an application. That is the job of a *just-in-time* (JIT) compiler, which compiles CIL into native code that is specific to the OS and machine architecture being targeted. Only at this point can the OS execute the application. The *just-in-time* part of the name reflects the fact that CIL code is compiled only when it is needed.

In the past, it was often necessary to compile your code into several applications, each of which targeted a specific operating system and CPU architecture. Typically, this was a form of optimization (to get code to run faster on an AMD chipset, for example), but at times it was critical (for applications to work in both Win9x and WinNT/2000 environments, for example). This is now unnecessary, because JIT compilers (as their name suggests) use CIL code, which is independent of the machine, operating system, and CPU. Several JIT compilers exist, each targeting a different architecture, and the appropriate one is used to create the native code required.

The beauty of all this is that it requires a lot less work on your part — in fact, you can forget about system-dependent details and concentrate on the more interesting functionality of your code.



NOTE You may come across references to Microsoft Intermediate Language (MSIL) or just IL. MSIL was the original name for CIL, and many developers still use this terminology.

Assemblies

When you compile an application, the CIL code created is stored in an *assembly*. Assemblies include both executable application files that you can run directly from Windows without the need for any

other programs (these have a .exe file extension) and libraries (which have a .dll extension) for use by other applications.

In addition to containing CIL, assemblies also include *meta* information (that is, information about the information contained in the assembly, also known as *metadata*) and optional *resources* (additional data used by the CIL, such as sound files and pictures). The meta information enables assemblies to be fully self-descriptive. You need no other information to use an assembly, meaning you avoid situations such as failing to add required data to the system registry and so on, which was often a problem when developing with other platforms.

This means that deploying applications is often as simple as copying the files into a directory on a remote computer. Because no additional information is required on the target systems, you can just run an executable file from this directory and (assuming the .NET CLR is installed) you're good to go.

Of course, you won't necessarily want to include everything required to run an application in one place. You might write some code that performs tasks required by multiple applications. In situations like that, it is often useful to place the reusable code in a place accessible to all applications. In the .NET Framework, this is the *global assembly cache (GAC)*. Placing code in the GAC is simple — you just place the assembly containing the code in the directory containing this cache.

Managed Code

The role of the CLR doesn't end after you have compiled your code to CIL and a JIT compiler has compiled that to native code. Code written using the .NET Framework is *managed* when it is executed (a stage usually referred to as *runtime*). This means that the CLR looks after your applications by managing memory, handling security, allowing cross-language debugging, and so on. By contrast, applications that do not run under the control of the CLR are said to be *unmanaged*, and certain languages such as C++ can be used to write such applications, which, for example, access low-level functions of the operating system. However, in C# you can write only code that runs in a managed environment. You will make use of the managed features of the CLR and allow .NET itself to handle any interaction with the operating system.

Garbage Collection

One of the most important features of managed code is the concept of *garbage collection*. This is the .NET method of making sure that the memory used by an application is freed up completely when the application is no longer in use. Prior to .NET this was mostly the responsibility of programmers, and a few simple errors in code could result in large blocks of memory mysteriously disappearing as a result of being allocated to the wrong place in memory. That usually meant a progressive slowdown of your computer followed by a system crash.

.NET garbage collection works by periodically inspecting the memory of your computer and removing anything from it that is no longer needed. There is no set time frame for this; it might happen thousands of times a second, once every few seconds, or whenever, but you can rest assured that it will happen.

There are some implications for programmers here. Because this work is done for you at an unpredictable time, applications have to be designed with this in mind. Code that requires a lot of memory to run should tidy itself up, rather than wait for garbage collection to happen, but that isn't as tricky as it sounds.

Fitting It Together

Before moving on, let's summarize the steps required to create a .NET application as discussed previously:

1. Application code is written using a .NET-compatible language such as C# (see Figure 1-1).

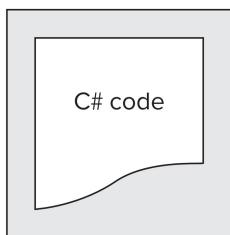


FIGURE 1-1

2. That code is compiled into CIL, which is stored in an assembly (see Figure 1-2).

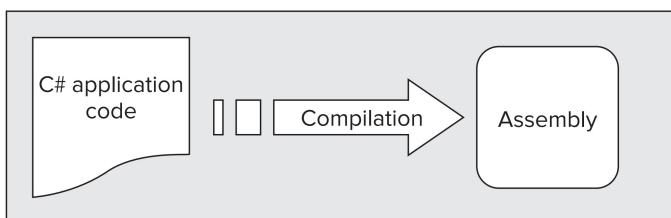


FIGURE 1-2

3. When this code is executed (either in its own right if it is an executable or when it is used from other code), it must first be compiled into native code using a JIT compiler (see Figure 1-3).

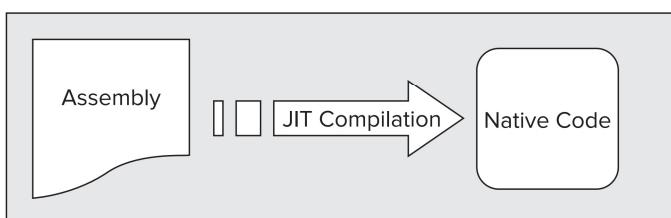


FIGURE 1-3

4. The native code is executed in the context of the managed CLR, along with any other running applications or processes, as shown in Figure 1-4.

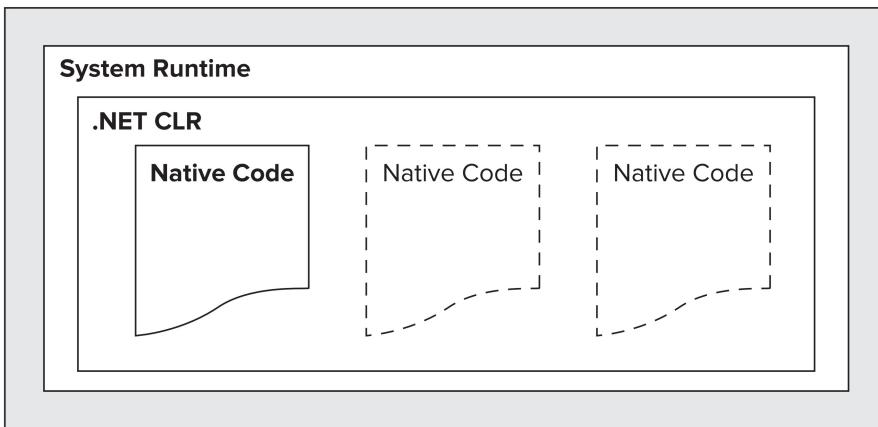


FIGURE 1-4

Linking

Note one additional point concerning this process. The C# code that compiles into CIL in step 2 needn't be contained in a single file. It's possible to split application code across multiple source code files, which are then compiled together into a single assembly. This extremely useful process is known as *linking*. It is required because it is far easier to work with several smaller files than one enormous one. You can separate out logically related code into an individual file so that it can be worked on independently and then practically forgotten about when completed. This also makes it easy to locate specific pieces of code when you need them and enables teams of developers to divide the programming burden into manageable chunks, whereby individuals can "check out" pieces of code to work on without risking damage to otherwise satisfactory sections or sections other people are working on.

WHAT IS C#?

C#, as mentioned earlier, is one of the languages you can use to create applications that will run in the .NET CLR. It is an evolution of the C and C++ languages and has been created by Microsoft specifically to work with the .NET platform. The C# language has been designed to incorporate many of the best features from other languages, while clearing up their problems.

Developing applications using C# is simpler than using C++, because the language syntax is simpler. Still, C# is a powerful language, and there is little you might want to do in C++ that you can't do in C#. Having said that, those features of C# that parallel the more advanced features of C++, such as directly accessing and manipulating system memory, can be carried out only by using code marked as *unsafe*. This advanced programmatic technique is potentially dangerous (hence its name) because it is possible to overwrite system-critical blocks of memory with potentially catastrophic results. For this reason, and others, this book does not cover that topic.

At times, C# code is slightly more verbose than C++. This is a consequence of C# being a *type-safe* language (unlike C++). In layperson's terms, this means that once some data has been assigned to a type, it cannot subsequently transform itself into another unrelated type. Consequently, strict rules must be adhered to when converting between types, which means you will often need to write more code to carry out the same task in C# than you might write in C++. However, you get two benefits: the code is more robust and debugging is simpler, and .NET can always track the type of a piece of data at any time. In C#, you therefore may not be able to do things such as "take the region of memory 4 bytes into this data and 10 bytes long and interpret it as X," but that's not necessarily a bad thing.

C# is just one of the languages available for .NET development, but it is certainly the best. It has the advantage of being the only language designed from the ground up for the .NET Framework and is the principal language used in versions of .NET that are ported to other operating systems. To keep languages such as the .NET version of Visual Basic as similar as possible to their predecessors yet compliant with the CLR, certain features of the .NET code library are not fully supported, or at least require unusual syntax. By contrast, C# can make use of every feature that the .NET Framework code library has to offer. The latest version of .NET includes several additions to the C# language, partly in response to requests from developers, making it even more powerful.

Applications You Can Write with C#

The .NET Framework has no restrictions on the types of applications that are possible, as discussed earlier. C# uses the framework and therefore has no restrictions on possible applications. However, here are a few of the more common application types:

- **Windows applications:** Applications, such as Microsoft Office, that have a familiar Windows look and feel about them. This is made simple by using the Windows Forms module of the .NET Framework, which is a library of *controls* (such as buttons, toolbars, menus, and so on) that you can use to build a Windows user interface (UI). Alternatively, you can use Windows Presentation Foundation (WPF) to build Windows applications, which gives you much greater flexibility and power.
- **Web applications:** Web pages such as those that might be viewed through any Web browser. The .NET Framework includes a powerful system for generating Web content dynamically, enabling personalization, security, and much more. This system is called ASP.NET (Active Server Pages .NET), and you can use C# to create ASP.NET applications using Web Forms. You can also write applications that run inside the browser with Silverlight.
- **Web services:** An exciting way to create versatile distributed applications. Using Web services you can exchange virtually any data over the Internet, using the same simple syntax regardless of the language used to create a Web service or the system on which it resides. For more advanced capabilities, you can also create Windows Communication Foundation (WCF) services.

Any of these types may also require some form of database access, which can be achieved using the ADO.NET (Active Data Objects .NET) section of the .NET Framework, through the ADO.NET Entity Framework, or through the LINQ (Language Integrated Query) capabilities of C#. Many other resources can be drawn on, such as tools for creating networking components, outputting graphics, performing complex mathematical tasks, and so on.

C# in This Book

The first part of this book deals with the syntax and usage of the C# language without too much emphasis on the .NET Framework. This is necessary because you won't be able to use the .NET Framework at all without a firm grounding in C# programming. We'll start off even simpler, in fact, and leave the more involved topic of OOP until you've covered the basics. These are taught from first principles, assuming no programming knowledge at all.

After that, you'll be ready to move on to developing more complex (but more useful) applications. Part II of this book looks at Windows Forms programming, Part III tackles Web application and Web service programming, Part IV examines data access (for database, file system, and XML data), and Part V covers some other .NET topics of interest.

VISUAL STUDIO 2010

In this book, you use the Visual Studio 2010 (VS) or Visual C# 2010 Express (VCE) development tools for all of your C# programming, from simple command-line applications to more complex project types. A development tool, or integrated development environment (IDE), such as VS isn't essential for developing C# applications, but it makes things much easier. You can (if you want to) manipulate C# source code files in a basic text editor, such as the ubiquitous Notepad application, and compile code into assemblies using the command-line compiler that is part of the .NET Framework. However, why do this when you have the power of an IDE to help you?

The following is a short list of some Visual Studio features that make it an appealing choice for .NET development:

- VS automates the steps required to compile source code but at the same time gives you complete control over any options used should you wish to override them.
- The VS text editor is tailored to the languages VS supports (including C#) so that it can intelligently detect errors and suggest code where appropriate as you are typing. This feature is called *IntelliSense*.
- VS includes designers for Windows Forms, Web Forms, and other applications, enabling simple drag-and-drop design of UI elements.
- Many types of C# projects may be created with “boilerplate” code already in place. Instead of starting from scratch, you will often find that various code files are started for you, reducing the amount of time spent getting started on a project. This is especially true of the “Starter Kit” project type, which enables you to develop from a fully functional application base. Some starter kits are included with the VS installation, and you can find plenty more online to play with.
- VS includes several wizards that automate common tasks, many of which can add appropriate code to existing files without you having to worry about (or even, in some cases, remember) the correct syntax.
- VS contains many powerful tools for visualizing and navigating through elements of your projects, whether they are C# source code files or other resources such as bitmap images or sound files.

- As well as simply writing applications in VS, you can create deployment projects, making it easy to supply code to clients and for them to install it without much trouble.
- VS enables you to use advanced debugging techniques when developing projects, such as the capability to step through code one instruction at a time while keeping an eye on the state of your application.

There is much more than this, but you get the idea!

Visual Studio 2010 Express Products

In addition to Visual Studio 2010, Microsoft also supplies several simpler development tools known as Visual Studio 2010 Express Products. These are freely available at <http://www.microsoft.com/express>.

Two of these products, Visual C# 2010 Express and Visual Web Developer 2010 Express, together enable you to create almost any C# application you might need. They both function as slimmed-down versions of VS and retain the same look and feel. While they offer many of the same features as VS, some notable feature are absent, although not so many that they would prevent you from using these tools to work through the chapters.

In this book you'll use VCE to develop C# applications wherever possible, and only use VS where it is necessary for certain functionality. Of course, if you have VS there is no need to use an express product.

Solutions

When you use VS or VCE to develop applications, you do so by creating *solutions*. A solution, in VS and VCE terms, is more than just an application. Solutions contain *projects*, which might be Windows Forms projects, Web Form projects, and so on. Because solutions can contain multiple projects, you can group together related code in one place, even if it will eventually compile to multiple assemblies in various places on your hard disk.

This is very useful because it enables you to work on shared code (which might be placed in the GAC) at the same time as applications that use this code. Debugging code is a lot easier when only one development environment is used, because you can step through instructions in multiple code modules.

SUMMARY

In this chapter, you looked at the .NET Framework in general terms and discovered how it makes it easy for you to create powerful and versatile applications. You saw what is necessary to turn code in languages such as C# into working applications, and what benefits you gain from using managed code running in the .NET CLR.

You also learned what C# actually is and how it relates to the .NET Framework, and you were introduced to the tools that you'll use for C# development — Visual Studio 2010 and Visual C# 2010 Express.

In the next chapter, you get some C# code running, which will give you enough knowledge to sit back and concentrate on the C# language itself, rather than worry too much about how the IDE works.

► WHAT YOU LEARNED IN THIS CHAPTER

TOPIC	KEY CONCEPTS
.NET Framework fundamentals	The .NET Framework is Microsoft's latest development platform, and is currently in version 4. It includes a common type system (CTS) and common language runtime (CLR). .NET Framework applications are written using object oriented programming (OOP) methodology, and usually contain managed code. Memory management of managed code is handled by the .NET runtime; this includes garbage collection.
.NET Framework applications	Applications written using the .NET framework are first compiled into CIL. When an application is executed, the JIT compiles this CIL into native code. Applications are compiled and different parts are linked together into assemblies that contain the CIL.
C# basics	C# is one of the languages included in the .NET Framework. It is an evolution of previous languages such as C++, and can be used to write any number of applications, including both web sites and Windows applications.
Integrated Development Environments (IDEs)	You can use Visual Studio 2010 to write any type of .NET application using C#. You can also use the free, but less powerful, express product range (including Visual C# Developer Express) to create .NET applications in C#. Both of these IDEs work with solutions, which can consist of multiple projects.

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