Book Review: Secrets of Delphi 2 by Ray Lischner

You might be forgiven for feeling that it's possible to read a different Delphi book on every day of the year and still have a few to spare: there are a lot of Delphi programming titles out there. What sets this book apart is its emphasis on undocumented aspects of Delphi (it is subtitled *Exposing Undocumented Features of Delphi*). The author's definition of the word "undocumented" doesn't always agree with mine; for example, he explains that it's possible to allocate memory blocks larger than 64Kb from Delphi 1.0 by directly calling the `GlobalAlloc` Windows API call, something that you can't do using `GetMem`. Well, maybe if you define "undocumented" as "not in the VCL", but most people wouldn't.

The above example notwithstanding, the book covers both Delphi 1.0 and Delphi 2.0 and *does* contain plenty of information that genuinely is undocumented. One of my project ideas was to reverse-engineer the Delphi .DFM form file format and provide a way of converting to and from other file formats. It turns out that the author has done this already and devoted a chapter to an explanation of how it all works.

Other chapters deal with topics such as Delphi's Run Time Type Information, the format of Virtual Method Tables and more. There's plenty of information relating to the creation of Experts and the Delphi 2.0 Open Tools API, and there's guidance on how to put together custom component and property editors. The author also documents the hitherto undocumented property editors contained in Delphi itself and describes the secret internal component messages that are used within the VCL architecture.

Despite the emphasis on undocumented issues, Lischner finds plenty of outlet for creating useful and practical code examples such as a bitmap viewer which uses Delphi 2.0s, multi-threading to perform grey scaling in the background while allowing you to load other bitmaps in the foreground. A complete test-bed application is provided to quantify the performance of Delphi's heap manager: the list of goodies in the book just goes on and on. The price includes a CD-ROM containing source and compiled code from the book, together with on-line documentation in HTML format.

All in all, its a fascinating book which will appeal both to the dedicated "Delphi anorak" and to those who want to make full use of what Delphi has to offer. I wouldn't recommend it as a beginners title, but it definitely deserves a place on the bookshelf of every serious Delphi developer.

Reviewed by Dave Jewell. 831pp, published by Waite Group, UK price £46.95