

One Last Compile...

Getting by (with a little help from my friends)

People are frightened of different things. Some won't walk under ladders. Some won't travel on the London underground late at night. I always think it's a bit alarming that people will pay money to go to Jean Michel Jarre concerts, but what really scares me is the WINAPI.HLP file.

Every now and again, when I'm staring mournfully at a line of code which stubbornly refuses to lose that attractive red line which Delphi keeps painting across it, or when I'm pleading with a component to do what *I* want rather than what *it* wants, I hit F1 to go into the help. I know I'm in trouble when the list of subjects includes some with those fateful words (WINAPI.HLP) after them. It's like proudly showing off your new Manchester United scarf and suddenly realising you're in the middle of a group of grumpy Wimbledon fans. If I'm feeling particularly bullish, I'll try and bluff it out and click confidently on one of the topics, but the sad truth is, I've never yet understood a single thing that the WINAPI.HLP file has told me. I usually just hit the Cancel button, smartish, and get the hell out.

I like help files, as a rule. Reading them is much, much nicer than working. They're quiet, friendly places, full of odd snippets of information which you're never likely to use but which make you feel a more rounded, well-balanced, and potentially higher-paid individual. DELPHI.HLP is an old friend, for example. I feel we understand each other. Although it has certain shortcomings, like some fairly woeful examples and some baffling omissions, I feel its heart is essentially in the right place. It's like a rather elderly history professor, full of enthusiasm for its subject and eager to share that enthusiasm, but also rather forgetful and eccentric. You may not get the answer you want, but you certainly

feel it's eager to please. I'm fond of it, and I like to think it speaks highly of me.

WINAPI.HLP, on the other hand, is like an unpleasant physics teacher, aggressively filling the screen with lots of stuff that looks like Urdu or a particularly nasty strain of quantum physics and daring you to admit that you don't have the faintest clue what's going on. Ask the WinApi help file a question and it looks at you menacingly for a bit, before scowling and muttering something unintelligible under its breath about `wm_Handle`. It's deeply humiliating. And I always half expect to get dragged to the back of the bike shed and have my knees rearranged with a cricket bat.

I'm sure I'm in a minority. I usually am. I'm sure there are people out there who read the WINAPI.HLP file for fun and who fill up acres of CompuServe forums discussing the finer points of its prose style. Me, I read stuff like

The Throw function is similar to the C run-time function longjmp. The function that calls Catch must free any resources allocated between the time Catch was called and the time Throw was called. Do not use the Throw function across messages.

and I wonder if maybe it's just Microsoft trying to be funny.

What I don't want to face up to is that for all the struggle I've had learning Delphi, Delphi is a modest summit compared to mastering the full-blown Windows environment. Perhaps one day I too will confidently talk of Throws and Catches and Backward-SomersaultsWithATwist (and won't the girls come flocking then). WINAPI.HLP is a daily, sneering reminder that I've still got a long, long way to go.