
One Last Compile...

Psst! Wanna know a secret?

Did you know that if you turn to the contents page of this magazine, tap the title three times and then turn the whole thing upside down, a picture of Chris Frizelle in his swimming trunks magically appears on page thirty-three? No, of course you didn't. And, before you hastily thumb back, I have to reluctantly tell you it's not true [*I'm getting very worried here... Editor*]. But it's that kind of completely pointless 'feature' which programmers like yours truly devote a large part of their waking hours to devising and implementing.

I'm not quite sure what the appeal of these Easter Eggs is for other people, but I can tell you why I think I like doing them. It's all the Famous Five's fault. Them and the Hardy Boys. I read a lot of those kind of adventure stories when I was a kid and I think it's left me with rather a melodramatic view of life: no sooner had Dick or Julian or George leant against a panel in some deserted mansion, than it would slide open, an evil villain would pop out, and before you could say 'pass the ginger pop' they'd be up to their necks in a dastardly plot. Inspired by their adventures, I spent a large part of my youth forming secret societies and detective clubs with reluctant friends ("Why can't we just go and play football?"), but no matter how many times I tapped hopefully on wooden panels, not a single secret passage did I find.

As I grew older I had to sadly accept that adventures simply didn't happen like that. The world wasn't full of secret codes and mysterious hieroglyphics waiting to be deciphered. The world was full of things like tax returns, spinach, Kenny G records and ReportSmith. But I never forgot the thrill of reading about those children and their explorations, the feeling that I was in on a secret, something that I knew that nobody else did, and the feeling of power that it gave me. I'm never

going to own a lonely windswept house with a hidden labyrinth underneath it (a studio flat in Brentford is about the limit of my aspirations) but I can build programs with secrets in them. In fact, thanks to Delphi, I can even build programs with sliding panels in them.

All of which is good fun and usually far more absorbing than writing the program itself, but I do come a bit unstuck when it comes to thinking of something interesting that's actually worth hiding. My programs are littered with gems such as "Help! Help! I'm being held prisoner against my will in Cubicle 37 on the east wing of the third floor. Please bring donuts immediately!" which appears if you hold down the NumLock key and then type in the alphabet backwards. "Hey: it's my birthday today!" appears, surprisingly enough, on my birthday, but only if the user has a log-in ID which includes the letters Q, Z and Y. My all-time favourite is a dialog box saying "Ugh, you're the most incompetent user I've ever met! I'm going to have to kill you immediately" with a large button marked "Okay" underneath it: this appears in the case where the user name is the same as my boss's and the system date is set several thousand years after my likely death.

Freud would no doubt have a field day with somebody like me, but I don't care. A world with secrets in is a more interesting place, even if they're silly secrets. And we're in danger of leaving a boring world behind us for the next generation: after all, we're creating the digital houses and labyrinths of the next century. It's nice to think of the 21st century version of the Hardy Boys excitedly hacking through my code to get to the secret data. "Look Frank: a clue! This hidden memo field says that the spare conservatory key is hidden underneath the third jam jar on the kitchen shelf!" "Sheesh Joe, can't we just go and play football?"