

One Last Compile...

Interface Issues

Buttons are a big problem for me. I look at everybody else's applications, and I think, yeah, nice buttons. And I resolve that this time, I'm going to really make my interface a visual harmony of cute, intelligible graphics.

Two things trip me up every time. Firstly, I have no sense of visual harmony (or, as my old teacher used to tell me, I draw like a blind alcoholic). Secondly, Borland don't want us to create nice interfaces. At least, that's the only conclusion I can reach.

Tell me something honestly. Have you ever created an attractive interface using only Borland's default icons and the contents of the delphi\images\buttons directory? Oh, you have? Sorry. Don't believe you. Or maybe you just have very low aesthetic standards. I bet you do exactly what I do, which is scroll miserably through the contents of that directory, looking for something which is the least unlike what you actually need.

Take Delete, for example. It gets me every time. I've got a nice big button which screams **Delete** in large text, and I want a graphic to go with it. Something restrained and subtle, like a foot squashing a bug. What do Borland offer me? Something with lots of dots and lines and a mysterious blue arrow. Users could stare at that for thousands of years (while my bubble sort routine is running on their 386, for example) and still not figure it out. I can marginally improve things by using Erase and show them a picture of somebody about to throw a dart at themselves.

You'd think Find would be pretty straightforward, until you load it up and get a picture of a hand pressing a button in a lift. You could try Query, except it looks like a man with a question mark perched on the end of his nose.

No 1 for surreal brilliance goes to the BitButton component. Make it an Ignore button and you get (of course!) A Picture Of A Bright Green Alien. What are Borland trying to tell us? I've spent many hours staring out of the window pondering this, but I still can't quite my head around it. Never mind. I have the same problem with iterative loops.

I really hope that this isn't upsetting some highly-strung graphic artist in Borland, outraged at my suggestion that their work isn't up to scratch. I've got to admit it: some of those glyphs are pretty nifty. I

applaud their artistry. I just wish I could use find an excuse to use them. MailHot, with its sinister blazing envelope, is a particular favourite (*"You have a new email from Satan. Do you wish to read it now, or leave it until you're burning in hell for eternity?"*). And FirstAid, with its speeding ambulance, is sure to come in handy one of these days (*"The Application has finished searching the document. 3 changes were made. Would you like to call an ambulance?"*).

I suppose if we all use them for long enough, these little icons will become the standard. They'll become part of our everyday lexicon. I'll call across the room, "Are you sure you want to erase this?" and mimic stabbing myself with a pencil to make sure they understand what I mean. But I'm worried about what those little green men are going to think when they get here and find out that their image is used as the global shorthand for 'Nah, forget it.' I think Mulder and Scully are going to have a tough job explaining that one, I really do.

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