

ICon 98: Conference Report

by David Baer

It's midday Sunday, the plane's in the air heading for Denver, and I'm excitedly on the way to this year's big event. I'm not certain just what I'm going to, though. Is it the Inprise Conference or the Borland Conference? The Inland Conference, maybe? [*BorPrise is the favourite in the Editorial Suite here. Ed*]

Like Mike Orriss's report last year, this will be a recounting of my own experiences rather than an attempt to portray the proceedings across the board. Mike's schedule did not permit his attendance this year. On the other hand, I was present at the "White Water Rapids" amusement ride incident at last year's conference. Are you sure it's really a scheduling conflict, Mike?

As I read through the session list, I'm delighted to find a *must-see* event in nearly every slot, with no major conflicts over which to agonize. I fully expect that last minute session rescheduling will disrupt this harmony. I'm also fully aware that the next few days will be long and exhausting, especially having committed to providing this report. Readers may not appreciate what a taskmaster Our Esteemed Editor (OEE) can be (whoossh-Crack!).

The flight arrives in Denver without incident, or more precisely arrives at Denver International, which seems like it's about 50 miles from Colorado's Eastern state line. Eventually I arrive in the city, check into the hotel and make my way over to the Denver Convention Center a short walk away, and find myself at ICon 98 (of course!).

Registration is quite efficient and I'm handed the conference package in a tote bag containing: a large conference workbook, a conference CD probably not worth perusing (the final one is to be

issued some time around next February, if history is any indicator), the conference T-shirt (the big prize, of course), and miscellaneous promotional materials. Hey, wait a minute: there's no AOL signup kit!

The names on the conference badges are once again impractically small. ("No Miss, I was actually just trying to see if I knew your name from the newsgroups, honest!".) This year, all tracks share the same badge color... integrating the enterprise, I guess.

I've got about an hour to kill before the kickoff session, so I use the time to visit the vendor exhibition. Stopping by the TurboPower booth, I have a chance to chat with Julian Bucknall (of *Algorithms Alfresco* fame). Contrary to OEE's claim, his head seems not the slightest bit larger than last year. I also get a chance to see Ray Konopka demo a new debugging tool, CodeSite, which looks most useful.

The opening ceremonies are about to start, and the crowd amasses in the huge ballroom. With over 3000 registrants, this is the biggest conference to date. Things begin with the customary mini-movie. This year's theme is the Arthurian legend, and the production is extravagant, although not quite as funny as in previous years. It's also noticeably free of any MS-bashing. Next comes a surprisingly thoughtful address by Del Yocam, in which he takes several moments to particularly express his appreciation of the Delphi developer community. Del is followed by Rick LeFavre, giving us an overview of the new Inprise Application Server.

Now comes the welcome reception in a large, noisy, dim hall with throngs of attendees queuing for drinks and food. The décor follows



the Arthur theme. The buffet food is actually pretty good. Having exchanged my two drink vouchers for small glasses of wine, it's time to pack it in for the night. Tomorrow's going to be a long one.

Monday Morning

Morning sure comes early in these parts. The first session is the usual Delphi product address. This session is in the same hall as was the opening event, and from the relative sizes of the audiences, it seems evident that Delphites comprise a significant majority of conference attendees.

For the next session, I decide to sit in on the talk "Developing Business Object-based Applications in Delphi." It's mobbed and there's not even standing room. Oh well, Charlie Calvert is giving a presentation on CORBA. No seats! I end up listening to Dr. Bob discussing Delphi optimization. It's a good talk, but there's little new information for me.

Now it's time for the first Industry Keynote address, today being given by John Landry of IBM. His topic is electronic commerce. Personally, I have no great interest in the subject, but Mr Landry is a thoroughly captivating speaker who could probably hold my attention discussing just about anything. If his vision of the emerging "e-world" is correct, we're in for a most interesting decade (not necessarily as technologists, but certainly as consumers). Time for lunch.

Monday Afternoon

I'm quite looking forward to the next session, the first of a two-part presentation of Delphi and COM given by John Lam. I'll attend the second on Tuesday afternoon, and will provide the details later.

The final regular session of the afternoon is a case study presented by John Howe of BP Shipping (and also of Triplex++ and Merlin fame). In it he reveals some innovative solutions in porting an existing Delphi application to the Web. The content is quite interesting, but I particularly enjoy John's droll delivery.

The afternoon concludes with another keynote, a state-of-the-technology speech by Inprise's Rick LeFaivre. I'm cynically expecting some self-serving marketing pitch, but I'm prepared to be pleasantly surprised. What I'm not prepared for is a most *extraordinary* demonstration: in the middle of an amusing little theater piece, Chuck Jazdzewski, Delphi chief architect, types `delphi32j` on a command line, compiles a Delphi unit into Java byte code, and executes the program in a JVM! The remainder of the session is just a blur.

Monday Evening

Knowing I'd be writing this report, I'd previously contacted Inprise, brazenly requesting press credentials. Happily, they were granted. These give me access to the press lounge, of which I have no time to take advantage. They also get me invited to a press dinner with the top Inprise executives. I opt to neglect my duties in reporting on the Monday pizza dinner in the vendor exhibit and attend (cunningly disguised as a journalist).

This is a fairly small crowd, and I have an opportunity to chat with Rick LeFaivre for a bit; he seems to be quite a nice fellow. At dinner (and with no conniving on my part) I find myself seated next to Del Yocam. I had planned to duck out early to attend the Meet the Delphi Team session, but... I'm sure you understand.

The final session of the day (it's 9pm) is another I've been looking forward to: Marco Cantù's "The

Fun Side of Delphi Strikes Back." And fun it is. Those familiar with Marco only through his books and articles would hardly be surprised at his erudition. But many would be amazed at what a charming and delightfully whimsical speaker he is.

Tuesday Morning

The first regular session of the day is a talk by Inprise's Steve Teixeira on new Delphi 4 IDE features. This is my first look at D4 in action, and I'm impressed, particularly with several of the new debugging features.

For the following session, I choose a talk by Inprise's Alain Tadros. Alain presents an introductory explanation of the MS Transaction Server. As I've had little opportunity to learn about this technology, this proves to be a most valuable 75 minutes.

Today's keynote speaker is Dr Alan Baratz, JavaSoft's president. His delivery is excellent, but, as to content, it's just another Java talk from which little is learned.

Tuesday Afternoon

Once again we again have Alain Tadros, this time presenting "Developing Active X Controls with Delphi." The talk turns out to be bigger in scope than the title would indicate, and it's an extremely good session. Actually, I get to the session 20 minutes late. A small group of us have Check Jazdzewski to ourselves in the corridor. I get a chance to pitch my pet enhancement wish: "Haven't any of you guys ever thought that a hot key to toggle break-on-exception would be *really* convenient". Chuck: "No, but now that you mention it..." Yes!

Next comes a session on the amazing Decision Cube component that shipped with Delphi 3. This flashy piece of technology has intrigued me ever since I first saw it. I've had no idea how one would practically employ it in an application, but it makes for one heck of a piece of demo-ware. Martin Rudy of Para/Matrix Solutions shows us in an informative and well-organized talk. I leave with all kinds of ideas percolating in my mind.

The final Tuesday session is part two of John Lam's COM presentation. I first heard Dr Lam talk at last year's conference (like this year, he discussed Delphi/COM), and walked away wondering if he was perhaps the smartest individual I'd ever been in the same room with. Unfortunately, much of what he covered then went right over my head. Having spent considerable time studying the COM technology since the last conference, I hope to fare better this year. I'm not disappointed. In the first session he covered some basics that readers of Dave Jewell's recent series would find themselves right at home with. The second session is the real payoff. In it, he explores the abstruse topic of COM threading and the Apartment Model. The presentation is superb.

Tuesday Evening

Done for the day! Now it's time for the big conference entertainment event. This year, we all climb into buses that shuttle us to Elitch Gardens, which proves to be a large, state-of-the art (or so I'm told) amusement park. I immediately spot some water rides to the right, and knowingly walk the other way.

The event is sponsored by (are you ready for this?) Microsoft. The food is simple fare: burgers, hot dogs and (thoughtfully) veggie-burgers. I hook up with John Howe, roller coaster enthusiast, who talks me into riding a diabolical mechanical monstrosity called MindEraser. Subsequently, after wiping my shoes off I'm really none the worse for wear.

After the ride, I decide it's an excellent time to spend one of my two drink vouchers, but I find that someone skimmed on the beer supply: there's none left! I don't think this would have happened had IBM been the sponsor... As much as I'd like to risk a heart attack on some of the other rides, I feel compelled to head back to the hotel to spend some time working on this report (whoossh-Crack!).

Wednesday Morning

Four sessions and one keynote to go. The first of these is Xavier

Pacheco of XAPWARE Technologies, who's speaking on Delphi Packages. He does a nice job of not only covering the basics, but also bringing up more subtle issues like versioning.

Next is a dilemma: to hear Ray Lischner, author of *Secrets of Delphi 2* (a book I highly admire), talk about Delphi Open Tools API, or to listen to a talk on using Delphi with TP monitors. Being an old TP guy, I opt for the latter. The material is a bit dry, but it does provide some insights on the ways in which Inprise is positioning itself as a supplier of enterprise level technologies.

Today's keynote is given by the well-known "futurist" John Naisbitt. It's rather a rambling, occasionally jerky affair, and the content is basically the same high-tech/high-touch message he delivered in his first book, *Megatrends*, many years ago.

Wednesday Afternoon

Next up, a real treat: hearing Danny Thorpe of Inprise discuss future

DBGrid directions. Danny is the author of my most-valued Delphi book, *Delphi Component Design*. He proves to be as excellent a presenter as he is a writer. DBGrid users have some wonderful features coming their way. He also reveals a Delphi purchase option that Inprise is considering for future releases in which customers may be able to select features a la carte style, paying for only those things selected.

In the final session, I once again get to attend a presentation by Xavier Pacheco, this time on building custom data sets from the TDataSet component. I'm surprised by the large number of people who apparently have an interest in this topic. Although I attended an excellent presentation at last year's conference of a similar nature, revisiting this topic is valuable.

Wrapping Up, Heading Home

Well, that's it for this year. I need to put in a full day at the office tomorrow and must skip the closing ceremonies to catch my flight. Based on

last year's experience, this is no great loss, unless David I. has concocted another of his "home movies", which can be wickedly funny.

I believe that one valid measure of the worth of a conference is one's exhaustion level at the end. In that regard, this one has been first-rate. Space limitations have necessitated a number of omissions in this report (several enlightening "Birds of a Feather" sessions, for example). But I hope I've been able to convey how rewarding an experience this annual event can be.

The flight's in the air, and I can at last relax for a few hours (whoossh-Crack!)... or maybe not. Anyway, sleep is for wimps.

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