One Last Compile...

Rolling back the frontiers

Do you know what a Stream is, and what it does? I don't. Every now and then I find an article about them, or come across them in the help file, and I start reading, determined that this time the light will dawn. But by the time I get to the end my mouth is hanging open and I'm making a drawn-out 'Uhhhh' sound while dribbling into my keyboard. Some things affect me like that.

I mention this because Streams are on my list of things to learn about in the coming months. I decided I needed some new challenges, you see. Ever since I moved most of my development work to Delphi 3 life has seemed too easy. In Delphi 1 you felt like you'd wrestled an alligator if you managed to do everything the client wanted without running out of resources. In Delphi 3 you feel like one of the early North American Settlers, gazing around the rolling plains of open prairie, thinking to yourself, 'Sheesh, all this is for me?'

Looking around the Delphi 3 palette, leafing through the fine pages of this very publication, surfing the newsgroups... the range and depth of stuff that I don't know about Windows programming continues to stagger me. I can console myself with the thought that I've now reached the point where I can produce in Delphi what it is my clients want, but what I haven't had for a while is that flushed feeling of success where you figure something out for the first time. Discovering that I could disable events by setting them equal to 'nil' was a proud moment, for example. Previously I'd done it by setting them equal to a non-assigned event, usually with an apologetic comment alongside it saying that I was sure there was a better way, but I just hadn't found out what it was yet.

If I can figure out Streams, the next goal is to write an ActiveX component. I did do this on a course once, but at the time I was more interested in getting the phone number of the girl sitting next to me, and much of the essential detail has passed me by. To write something as a reusable form is good, to write it as a reusable Delphi component is better, but to write it as an ActiveX component is to move ever further up the ladder of code goodness. It moves us one step closer to that mythical world where we bolt together fully functional applications in a matter of seconds. Complete twaddle, I know, and I suspect that the process may make your Rolls-Royce Delphi component more akin to a Reliant Robin with faulty brakes, but we'll see. Then I'll write an ActiveForm, because anything to do with web browsers always looks cool.

I'd also like to figure out packages. I know the theory, and it seems straightforward enough, and certainly very appealing. I have a gut feeling that using packages will enforce a discipline on my free-wheeling coding-style (ie, I make it up as I go along) which will probably be a 'good thing'. Bloated .exe files are becoming very passe, and it would be nice to feel fashionable again.

The next one is more practical. I'm going to master a report writer. I don't know about you, but writing reports is the bane of my life. Every client wants something different, but no client knows what they want. Designing and modifying reports is right up there with Brighton & Hove Albion and the ReportSmith Appreciation Society when it comes to things which are boring, drawn-out and unprofitable. I've flirted with lots of report writers, but now I'm going to fix on one, master it, and, with luck, herald in a new era of resuable, easily-customisable paper output. Trees may not thank me, but to me a happy client is worth several acres of forest.

There, I've finished. You can close your mouth and please, wipe up that dribble.