One Last Compile...

Into the IUnknown

I'm sorry, but I cannot get my head around COM. This is not through lack of trying. Every Delphi book I own has had its COM chapters scoured repeatedly. I have worked patiently through the examples. I can, without supervision and only peeking at my notes once or twice, create Automation Objects, embed them in DLLs, and call them from other applications. I am familiar with creating type libraries, interfaces, `IUnknown`, and I am even familiar with that weird editor where you can elect to add new drawing pins or little armless people to your library: you know, the one where you flick into the code by accident and every other line is a GUID. And yes, I know about GUIDs too, and no, I don't trust Microsoft's ability to generate unique numbers either, particularly when I am trying to fix our NT Server and trying to work out which sequence of removing and re-applying Service Packs I haven't tried yet.

So, what, you might ask, is the problem?

The problem, simply stated, is that although I can do all of the above I don't have the faintest clue what's going on. This, I grant you, is not an entirely unknown experience to me, and one which I am reasonably confident will pass in time. It doesn't seem so long ago that I was staring blankly at compiler directives wondering what on earth those funny little commenty things were, and now I'm something of a dab hand at them. As with all things, once you're on the far side of the difficulties you look back and wonder what you were making such a fuss about. But at this moment in time, if you'll permit me a slightly flowery turn of phrase, I am firmly on the lower slopes of the COM mountain, and the top is shrouded in mist.

At the moment everything seems rather disconnected and mysterious. Typically, a Delphi book will have you writing a little automated 'Hello World' object in one chapter then, with barely a pause for breath, you'll be writing an ActiveForm in the next and cheerily running it in your WebBrowser. This too, you are assured, is part of COM, but the two seem worlds apart.

What I particularly dislike about COM is the way that it undermines my confidence in the files I have in front of me. I'm usually pretty comfortable with a standard Delphi form or unit file, I know what most of the sections do, I even wrote an `initialization` section once, and how many of us can say that? and there's not much that scares me. But once you're using COM it seems you're into a world of mysterious files that Delphi produces for you, full of code stubs and Interface declarations and long, sinister-looking comments warning you not to touch anything.

The problem with COM, I suspect, is that it's as much a mindset as a tool. It's not unlike somebody showing you a neat new component. You play with it a few times and start to use it and from time to time you find a few new properties and features which come in handy. (The first time I found out that a `TStringList` supports .ini-style parameters through its `VALUES` property, I was stunned into silence for about an hour, not least because I'd just spent a week writing parsing code of my own.)

Just as with OO you start trying to break the world down into objects, with COM it seems you must also break the world down into interfaces. Indeed, switching to COM is perhaps like switching to OO from procedural code: you labour away at it, not really understanding why, then suddenly the penny drops and you start seeing everything through OO-tinted spectacles. You become evangelical about it, lose lots of your inhibitions, grow spiritually as a person and probably start drinking bitter instead of lager. Perhaps a similar transformation awaits me with COM, but I'm not holding my breath. *[So what do COM programmers drink, then? Chateau Lafitte or Belgian Trappist Ale? Answers (and samples) to me... Ed]*