

One Last Compile...

The Empire Strikes Back

Many issues ago I filled up my space here by moaning about Java. My moan went something along these lines. Everybody was talking about Java, it looked like Java was about to become the next big thing, and it scared me. I only knew Delphi, liked it, was slowly starting to understand it, and I didn't want to budge, thanks very much.

So, out of pig-headedness more than anything else, I stuck with Delphi. And, looking at things from a couple of years on, I'm glad I did. Sure, there are a gazillion and one job adverts for Java people, as opposed to about three for Delphi geeks.

Yes, anyone going into a bookshop still runs the risk of being flattened into early extinction by an avalanche of huge Java tomes, but would struggle to get a decent fire going on the fuel provided by the available Delphi volumes. But, for all that, I get the feeling Java has shot its bolt. It has its place, and people are doing some neat things with it, but it hasn't yet become the world beater that it was being hyped up to be when it first arrived. For this, we owe Microsoft some profound thanks. They made the whole Java enterprise, which was so irritatingly pure and high-minded when it started out, an ugly mess of lawsuits and confusion. And I'm very grateful to our friends over in Washington State, I truly am.

You might think, therefore, that all is sweetness and light on the Delphi horizon, and yours truly can relax, safe in the knowledge that my core skill (make that my only skill) is as up to date and saleable as ever. We can all settle down and do the important stuff without fear of distraction, like figuring out exactly what Visibroker is supposed to do (according to the Borland website, it does 'RMI over IIOP', so that's cleared that particular mystery up).

If only. I feel the same way that the lead characters in Star Wars must have done, when they discover there's a second Death Star being built. (If I'd have been Luke Skywalker, I would have been pouting and whining about how I'd only just got back from blowing up the last one, and couldn't somebody else go this time?) This time the Death Star is coming from Redmond, the well-known home of the Dark Side, and it takes the form of .NET.

If you will permit me a moment on my soapbox, this is another irritatingly silly name in a world that already has too many. Nouns are getting too clever by half these days: giving your product a name which most of the population (and their spell checkers) will think is a typographic error is not my idea of a clever marketing ploy.

But what is .NET? Well, perhaps ominously, it's a little difficult to define. It's not a language, though there is a new one of those thrown in as a bonus, the equally silly sounding C# (that's 'sharp' not 'hash' by the way). No, it is a 'framework', which usually means that some of it is built and some of it isn't. Based on my hazy understanding of it, the closest analogy is that it's a kind of alternative set of APIs for developers, with much more support for doing key, web-oriented tasks. There are function calls for the crucially important

SlowlyDownloadExtremelyLarge-
AndUltimatelyDisappointing-
MPEGFile

for example, and

PopUpAnotherUnwanted-
AndIrritatingBrowserWindow

Half-finished framework or not, people who I respect think that, much as we would like to believe otherwise, .NET is going to be a Big Thing. For one thing, its lead designer is the chap behind the first version of Delphi, and we can therefore assume he knows what he's doing. There is a real risk that, in a year's time, Delphi will be a backwater, left out of the mainstream by the .NET revolution. Hopefully, Borland (now that they've decided the really important issue of what to call themselves) will be able to adapt Delphi to .NET, and we can all breathe a sigh of relief.

And in the meantime? Well, I've got a cunning plan, which I encourage you all to adopt. I'm going to keep my head down and ignore it, and hope it goes away. It worked last time.

[If you were hoping to keep your head down too, you might like to check out just what .NET really is all about first, just in case... The October 2000 issue of Developers Review carried an in-depth preview of .NET, including Visual Studio .NET and the new C# language, which looks suspiciously like Java with some ideas nicked from Delphi. Give us a bell or go to www.DevelopersReview.com if you want to start a sub or get the back issue. End of plug. Ed]