One Last Compile...

Wired up and winding down

In the old days in the office we all had to use our own individual modems to dial up the internet. This was bad on two counts. One, it was slow. Two, we only had one spare phone line, so if you wanted to get on the internet you had to wait for a colleague to get off it. Then we got an ISDN line, and connecting was a matter of seconds. And you know what? ('What?' they chorused) I used to get a lot more work done before ISDN arrived.

This may not come as the world's biggest shock. But no, it's not because I spend all my time looking at, ahem, non-work-related sites, though I admit I do spend the odd hour or six doing just that. No, even when I restrict my web surfing activity to just Delphi-related stuff, and do so with the best of intentions, my productivity nosedives.

A typical scenario might be this. I need to write a component that does X. Now, I just know that somewhere in the world, somebody has probably written a component that does X, and probably Y and Z into the bargain. Just to make it even more tempting, it's probably free, with a slick help file and a dedicated user group who are constantly adding new functionality to it. The trick is, where is it? Surely, an hour spent finding a component that's already written and debugged is better than spending a morning writing a buggy one of my own? But (and you know the answer to this, don't you, boys and girls?) that hardly ever seems to be true.

Finding stuff is hard. Not because the Delphi stuff is hard to find (it is, but not relative to other internet activities, like proving to my Mum and Dad it's actually a useful resource). It's hard because I get distracted en route by a gazillion other things that look quite interesting, and are surely worth a few seconds of my time. So lunchtime arrives, and I haven't yet located Component X, but I've found a few things which are vaguely similar and might do the job if I bodge them a bit. And I've found a few other neat things and, perhaps most importantly, I've made it all the way to the million on the 'Who Wants To Be A Delphi Millionaire' quiz at about.delphi.com*.

Another scenario might be that I have an odd error message which I can't understand. I quite like getting these, because thanks to those wonderful sites that let you search Usenet newsgroups, I'm guaranteed to find at least three hundred other individuals who've had the same message, no matter how obscure it is. But do I just dip in, get the answer, and dip out?

Friends, I do not. Reading Usenet threads is strangely addictive, even when they're concerned with an obscure Interbase problem that somebody had in Czechoslavakia four years ago. You see little friendships spring up, blossom, and die, all in the course of a few postings. You worry about those lonely, desperate voices who never got a reply to their problem, even though somebody else who posted the same thing three months later got a deluge of friendly and helpful information. I'm tempted to email these unfortunates, urging them not to take it personally, and assuring them that I was moved and concerned by their plight, and that if I knew anything at all about writing TCP/IP sockets in assembler code I would place all I knew at their disposal.

It's all a bit like drinking from a supertanker using a straw. It's almost certainly bad for me, and yet there's no going back. Once you're hooked in, you're hooked. Besides, I've made loads of new friends in Czechoslovakia.

 * I did reach the million, but I cheated. I think that's probably the thing I'm most ashamed of in my entire life.