

Nashville BDC: A Mike's Eye View

by Mike Orriss

EVERY YEAR, Borland organise a Conference somewhere in the USA, with lots of technical sessions in a variety of tracks, an exhibition of third-party tools, books and the like, and usually a bit of fun too. Your Editor is (as usual!) too busy working on the next magazine to go hopping off around the world on such jollies, so he asked me to report back on my experiences of this year's conference in Nashville, Tennessee...

This report is essentially one Delphi developer's impression of the event. It does not attempt to cover all the marketing razzmatazz that surrounded us nor does it mention much about JBuilder, which seemed to be the main focus this year. The report does describe what I found interesting and hopefully should whet your appetite for next year's event, which will be back on the West Coast.

Initial Impressions

After a fairly uneventful *seventeen hour* journey, the usual mixture of fatiguing boredom and long queues, I reached the Opryland Hotel at 5:30pm on the Saturday afternoon. I walked into one of the five lobbies and immediately bumped into the British Merlin team: Mike Scott and the luggage-less John Howe (it arrived later that night).

The hotel itself was very impressive: five main buildings and the complex covers 31 acres (not including the Opryland Pleasure Park alongside). It felt rather like a bigger version of Main Street in Disneyworld, an impression reinforced by walking over a bridge inside the hotel and seeing a cruise boat complete with microphoned guide pass underneath! Where else do you see guests queuing to pay \$4 for a boat trip around the inside

of the hotel? A speaker later remarked "It's like living in a terrarium, I keep expecting to see a giant eye peering through the glass roof."

By the time I had booked into the hotel, found my room and removed the travel dust, it was too late to register for the conference and the rest of the evening was spent in a steak house with Mike and John together with another UK visitor, Mark Smith, who we collected from the bar next door.



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Conference**
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Sunday

Thanks to the six hour time difference, Sunday started a bit early, 4:30am in my case.

Still, it gave me chance to unpack properly and get my portable connected up to CompuServe, which proved easy thanks to the data connection on the side of the room telephone. Incidentally, the main reason for lugging my portable here was to be able to look at the conference CD to help me see which sessions were worth attending, time will tell if this reason was valid.

The first real business of the day was registering for the conference, which went very smoothly with no queue (I was almost disappointed having got so used to queuing for everything). I was given the usual Borland bag and retired to a quiet corner to explore its contents. First there was a name badge to hang around your neck, with a name label (coloured blue for Delphi) which followed the time-honoured tradition of being just too small to read without invading the other person's personal space. Next was a small exhibits guide booklet, then a (larger) Conference programme booklet, the Session outlines (a *heavy* tome), a T-shirt (amazingly, it fitted). The aforementioned Conference CD came out next, and lastly various advertising brochures, including a very professional glossy from Borland.

As well as this standard stuff I also received a small badge (a pin in American speak) because I attended last year's conference, and an invitation to an informal "Connections" breakfast (for members of Borland's Connections scheme).

Having decided to forgo the various pre-conference tutorials through Saturday and Sunday, the conference for me really started at noon when the exhibitors hall opened. Attendance here served two purposes: to see what new goodies are imminent and also to meet up with people not seen since last year. The last point was important: the hotel is so big and without an obvious meeting place that I had seen very few people that I recognised.

Overall, the exhibition was not as good as I expected. I did, however, manage to buy a signed copy of Ray Lischner's new book *Hidden Paths of Delphi 3* from the author.

At 5pm over 2,700 (compared with 2,500 last year) of us were massed in the hotel's largest conference room for the opening keynote presentation given by Del

Yocam, Borland's CEO. This year the theme was Star Wars, with Borland coming to the rescue of data trapped by the evil empire!

Most of the speech related to Borland's Golden Gate initiative and the concept of the InfoNet was introduced. References to Delphi included the forthcoming Enterprise edition with links to Entera and we were also told that Delphi sales have just passed the million mark!

Following the keynote, the opening reception proved just as tiring as last year's and jet lag caught up with me at 9pm.

Monday

Monday started bright and early with the Connections breakfast at 7am. This was excellent and I sat at a table of Delphi people. We were joined by Rick Le Faivre, Borland's new head of technology, and he was left in no doubt as to the continuing requirement for Delphi 1.5 and BDE16 bug fixes and enhancements. He also took note of our request for better two-way communications between Borland and developers. It will be interesting to see if anything does come from this, but I'm not holding my breath.

The first session of the day was the Delphi Product Address. In view of the other presentations (and the fact that it was repeated on Tuesday) I was a bit surprised to see so many people attending (about 1000). The talk was given by Lance Devin (Delphi Product Manager) and Chuck Jadjewski (Mr Delphi since the departure of Anders). Lance showed a nice three tier database application using four linked portables. After an initial mention of Delphi 4, the presentation was disappointing. There was no real news except the announcement that Delphi 3.1 is now in beta and the professional version of the update will include the missing socket components.

For the next session, I just had to attend Bob Swart's *Writing Delphi Experts* talk else he would never have forgiven me... The talk was received very well, but I won't go into details as readers of this magazine will be familiar with the topic.

Next was the keynote presentation by Corel. Here I must confess to playing hookey, preferring to join a group discussing Delphi matters.

Following lunch, I had decided to see Nick Hodge's *Writing Web Server Extension DLLs with Delphi* but arriving 10 minutes before it started I found the room already full. Instead, I went back to my room for a shower and to continue this report.

My choice for the next session was *Building ActiveX Controls with Delphi* by Conrad Hermann, which I found slightly disappointing: too much background explanation and not enough demo. I followed this by attending Nick's next session *Building and Deploying Active Forms in Delphi*. This talk was excellent, well presented and covered many tips and gotchas.

Next, it was back to the exhibitors hall to join the throngs queuing up for pizza and beer. This proved to be an excellent opportunity to get together with people I had met last year.

The first evening event was *Meet the Delphi Development Team*, hosted by Gary Whizzin. First the team (or about ten of them anyway) were individually introduced and the session continued with a good-humoured question and answer session with the questioners lined up in two fairly long queues at the sides of the room. The questions that occupied most time inevitably concerned the documentation. The team acknowledged the problem and said it was caused by losing the whole docs team between Delphi 1 and 2 (self-inflicted?) and the whole structure of the help system has had to be re-worked and is an ongoing process. New documentation files are in beta and should be available on the Web shortly. Another topic covered in depth was the need for an official Delphi bug list. Gary Whizzin publicly bestowed ownership of this item to Ben Riga so hopefully this should at last come to pass. Finally we had a definitive statement from Gary that Delphi 1.5 will not happen: he stated that a business case could not be

constructed and it would have impacted the functionality added to Delphi 3.

For the final session, I attended Marco Cantú's *The Fun Side of Delphi*, which proved to be very entertaining. Topics ranged from the *Nothing Form* to the *ScreenVirus* component, where we learned how to make the screen develop red spots.

Finally, a group of us ended a long exhausting day at the Jack Daniels Saloon.

Tuesday

Another early start as I felt duty bound to attend the *Birds of a Feather* session at 7am hosted by Mike Scott and John Howe on Merlin (we do have to support UK initiatives!). These 'B of a F' sessions are last minute items where attendees can set up their own thing with rooms and facilities supplied by the conference. Unfortunately, the session was only really publicised thirty minutes after it started so attendance was low, but it was well received. [Look out for a review of Merlin by Mike Orriss in, hopefully, the launch issue of *Developers Review*, our new magazine. Editor]

I skipped the 8am session, preferring a leisurely cup of coffee: I was beginning to suffer from session overload!

9:30am saw me at Ray Konopka's *Advanced Delphi Component Topics*. Although the presentation was good, for me it was a mistake because I had seen most of the topics before. This was followed by the daily keynote speech, this time from IBM on the AS400. I decided at the last moment that my time would be better spent elsewhere so I re-visited the exhibitor's hall. Loren Scott of Luxent Software (born of Apollo and LightLib) gave me a demo of version 2 of DBPower: this is an impressive package which brings database desktop facilities right into the IDE, together with an enhanced DBGrid.

After lunch, Marco Cantu gave a very interesting talk that compared the C++, Object Pascal and Java languages. In his opinion, Java

is closer to Object Pascal than to C++. His overall summary concluded that C++ was built for speed and control, Delphi for speed and ease of use and Java for compatibility, sacrificing both speed and power!

Next I saw Eagle Software's Raptor demo. Here, Mark Miller was flying by the seat of his pants (as usual!): what with a faulty disk cable and self-inflicted problems caused by continuing product development while at the conference, Raptor was only up and running about two minutes before the scheduled start. The demo itself was very impressive and I'm sure that the product will be very successful.

For the final session of the day, I went to John Lam's *Fusing 32-bit Applications with Explorer and the Windows95 Shell*. This presentation made me think more than any other I had seen thus far: it opened my eyes to a complete new set of programming possibilities. The demo showed John's custom folder in the Explorer left pane (ie like Control Panel, Printers and Dial-up Networking) while the right panel then displayed a Delphi form!

Now it was time for the Conference night out and we all trooped across to the Opryland theme park. Leaving the hotel for the first time, the 93 degree temperature and 90 percent humidity came as a bit of a shock. I was with Mike Scott, John Howe and David Baer and we ignored the sign saying "You will get wet" and spent the rest of the evening very wet indeed after going on the rapids ride. Unfortunately, the humidity meant that we didn't dry out as expected: this put a bit of a damper (sorry!) on the evening and we left early.

Wednesday

Yet another 7am start for another *Birds of a Feather* session. This was given by Mike Scott on writing wizards for Merlin and was much better attended. The Merlin wizard wizard expert (or was it expert wizard wizard...) makes these things so easy to create that I predict that we will be overrun with them!

At 8am I attended the session which proved, for me, to be the most useful of the entire conference. This was given by Bill Fisher, a Borland Technical Support Engineer, on *Using the Power of the Abstract TDataSet* which is a topic where documentation is somewhat lacking. He showed that hooking up a new back-end database is done by supplying code for 29 callback methods and three events and also showed the code required to hook up to Btrieve. Bill did make the point that it is easier if you know the database before you start as it made his task far more difficult having to learn Btrieve as he went along.

For the next session I attended a Vendor's Showcase: *Integrated Debugging for Delphi with Bounds-Checker 5*. This I found extremely disappointing. I have owned this program for a while, but have never spent the time to get the best out of the product and I was hoping to get a few tips and tricks from the horse's mouth. Instead, they turned the session over to an independent reviewer who only covered the absolute basics and I learned nothing.

After three solid hours I needed a break and decided to skip the final morning session. I had been intending to go to Carlton Hewitt's *Building Business Objects in Delphi* and missing it seems to have been another mistake. An attendee told me how Carlton used Data Module inheritance and a message passing system to keep business objects and rules truly reusable for different projects. I must check the CD to see how well that process is described. By the way, bringing the portable in order to check the CD didn't work: I could never find the time to look at it. There was another option though: the Computer Lab had about 70 pentiums with web access, although this was so popular that finding a free PC could be problematic.

After the customary final day packed lunch, I attended the final keynote speech which was given by Larry Ellison, Oracle's founder and CEO, by satellite. This was a very impressive speech which

expounded his vision of the light-weight network PC as a universal commodity. He was very persuasive, although the speech was tinged with a fair bit of Bill Gates paranoia. The speech was followed by a question and answer session and he very deftly handled some verbal grenades lobbed at him.

The closing session followed with all the usual items at such occasions: thanks all round, drawing of raffle tickets (these having been previously "purchased" by completing speaker evaluation forms at each session). By popular request, the Star Wars video shown at the opening keynote was re-shown. This was an incredibly professional production and I hope that Borland include it on the final CD for the conference, which we are scheduled to receive in the next couple of months. The final item of the conference was the video shot throughout the event, showing attendees, interspersed with Star Wars out-takes. I was very relieved that I was edited out of this as the roving camera caught me totally unawares and I must have looked a right prat...!

Well that's it. I'm sitting in my room at 8am the following morning, finishing this report ready to email it off to the Editor prior to packing and the long trip home...