One Last Compile...

Delphi and the Art of Hard Disk Maintenance

With the New Year came another attempt to get my life in some sort of order. I had tired over Christmas of listening to my cousins recount stories of their new cars, new girlfriends and lucrative new pay deals. Nobody seemed interested in my anecdotes about the time I came through with a crucial DLL right at the last minute, or share my outrage that thanks to Office 97 you could now be patronised at your desk by an animated paperclip (*"It looks like you're writing a letter! Would you like help?"*). I felt life was passing me by, and it was time for some careful reflection.

So the next morning I sat quietly at my desk, reflecting. The animated paperclip became quite agitated, and suggested several times that I might like to get on with some work, but I was lost in a personal hinterland of dreams and ambitions. I thought about who I was, and who I wanted to be. I thought about my long-term goals and my personal relationships. A new start was clearly needed. The problem was, where to begin? I gazed absent-mindedly at the paperclip, which was now on the phone to its broker talking about the long term economic prospects in the Far East. I decided the best place to begin my personal journey was with a brand new hard disc.

Three forms, two heated phone calls and several days later a gleaming new 5.2 gigabyte drive sat on my desk. Why do new drives give me such a quiver of pleasurable anticipation? There's a feeling of so much potential waiting to be tapped, those vast, empty rolling plains of megabyte after megabyte, ready for me to neatly partition it up and start filling it with the results of my honest toil. I imagine the early settlers in America had much the same feeling. I could even run multiple operating systems in different partitions. A 16-bit application, you said? No problem: excuse me for a second while I boot up into Windows for Workgroups. A rugged, manly, 32-bit database? I'll just switch effortlessly into Windows NT. With a disc of this magnitude, I felt that success in all other spheres of my life was bound to follow. If I ever publish a self-help manual (and my fan mail is currently divided on this issue, my mother being a definite yes, the guy in New Zealand a possible maybe), one of its maxims is going to be is that behind every successful man is a well-organised hard drive.

Making a new start is never simple, of course. My old 470 megabyte drive was, as the paperclip pointed out, a poignant metaphor for my life in general, ie a complete shambles. This was largely, although not entirely, Delphi's fault. Even the simplest little application generates more files than a visit from the tax inspector. And, if you'll forgive me for going over old ground, the fact that Delphi 1 can only have 255 characters in its search path for components is, to put it mildly, extremely annoying. After wrestling with trying to retain some semblance of order, I ended up with one directory called "Addons" into which I simply dumped everything, and it took me the best part of a day to pick through it trying to discover which files belonged to which components. The idea was that on the new disc I would now do everything properly, and keep track of all these files in separate directories, but I was still hamstrung by having to use Delphi 1. After a dull morning trying to come up with a sensible naming convention for directories using only single characters, I gave up and created a new 'Addons' directory and dumped everything back in it. Another of my self-help maxims is: if something works despite all experience pointing to the contrary, it's almost certainly better than anything else you'll come up with.

Despite that minor hiccup, I'm a new man. 1998 can throw what it likes at me, I've got the storage space to handle it. Now, if I could just get rid of that damned paperclip. (*"It looks like you're attempting to write a humorous column! I haven't laughed once so far! Would you like help?"*)