One Last Compile…

Delphi, spitting and the path to true happiness

Most people, I think, have some kind of inspirational material that they turn to for guidance in times of crisis and spiritual need. I have friends who go off for retreats clutching copies of the *New Testament, Zen and the Art of Motor Cycle Maintenance* or *GQ's Cover Girls of 97.*

Personally, when times get tough I turn to Billy Crystal and the film *City Slickers.* For those of you who missed it – shame on you – *City Slickers* has Billy trying to discover the meaning of life while chasing cows around America. Billy finally finds the answer in the unlikely shape of Jack Palance, who growls at him that the secret of life is simple: it's just one thing. Billy confesses himself none the wiser and asks, not unreasonably, just what that one thing is. Jack spits, looks enigmatic, and replies that he's got to find that out for himself.

I was reminded of all this the other day while wrestling with the design of a form in Delphi (and I apologise if you think that's a long-winded introduction, but I am paid by the word *[Dream on! Ed]*). I just couldn't get this form to look good or feel right, and I couldn't figure out why. Then Jack Palance appeared at my shoulder, and whispered 'One thing.' And suddenly I realised what was wrong: the form had to do just one thing. I was trying to make it do too much, and it was failing at everything.

I don't know why I have this predilection for making forms so complicated (incidentally, I think I should be paid double for 'predilection' *[Nah, With 'proboscidean' you might be in with half a chance. Ed]*) Part of it is that I want them to be like Swiss penknives, with useful little tools for every contingency. Even now I have to fight to stop myself putting on status bars which tell users the time and the date. It's often the first thing I do. I know there's no need. Not one of my users is ever going to have a crisis where he needs to know the time and date NOW, This Very Second. But it just makes the form feel more useful, and it's a comfortable way to ease yourself into designing a form; a task which is, after all, usually quite tricky.

I also like clutter on a form. Users hate it, of course. What they want, in my experience, is a large green button which says `Start` and a large red button which says `Stop`. If they have a third button which says `Pretty Graph` then they sometimes die of happiness. Me, I like the kind of form which looks like the flight deck of the *Millennium Falcon*. It should look businesslike and aggressive and rather confusing. But they're fatal. They're the kind of form where you end up mournfully dragging components around trying to make things seem more intuitive and sensible, but you only succeed in making things worse.

The third reason why my forms go wrong is that I'm lazy. A new form seems like a lot of work to me. You have to create it, lay it out, save it, then write code to show it and take it away again. Okay, we all know that in practice that takes about three minutes, but it *feels* like a lot of work. And it's *boring*. And if it's only an itty-bitty little task, then can't I just squeeze it onto one of the forms I've already done? (Does 'itty-bitty' count as one word or two?) And before I know it my form looks like it's been in a serious motor accident.

So, my dear pupils, today's lesson is this: your forms must do just one thing. Therein lies the way to true Delphi contentment and productivity. But what, you may ask, is that one thing? Ah. Excuse me while I spit and look enigmatic. The answer is, you must find that out for yourselves.