

Re: No wonder Borland Technical Documentation stinks

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<http://coding.derkeiler.com/Archive/Delphi/borland.public.delphi.non-technical/2006-05/msg01398.html>

- *From:* "IanH" <none@xxxxxxxxxx>
 - *Date:* 9 May 2006 01:55:05 -0700
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Bob Dawson wrote:

....a lot of excellent ideas.

1. Forget traditional bookstore sales and major publishers--Marco Cantu is about the only one left in the general Delphi market, and let's not make his life any harder. Instead, partner with one of the newer on-demand publishers that can deliver targetted topics economically on small runs. DevCo can vette books for a DevCo Press imprint, and sell them directly or through internet channels like Amazon. The key is reasonable length on a tight focus:

Agreed - one of the most useful books I bought was Eric Harmon's "Delphi COM Programming". If I take on a new technology, I need hard-core detail that does not dwell on stuff I could figure out myself in a day or two.

2. Obviously, we need a tech writer or two assigned as editor/moderator to the on-line help wiki that JK has previously mentioned. Or make it a joint responsibility of documentation and testing.

Agreed: I would prefer a moderated approach, but using the Quality Central model, with the Borland staff delegating specific tasks to approved volunteers.

The lack of a wiki or equivalent baffles me - the only thing more surprising is how long it is taking to do anything about it (caveat: I know JK is working on something on these lines, but there is nothing visible yet. Hopefully DevCo will not be stuck with the same lumbering bureaucracy / dubious sense of priority that appears to prevent Borland

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from progressing on any number of things)

3. API/Object help needs help: closer relationship between the writers and R&D team, so the writers become a part of the scrum. I've already mentioned how valuable it is to get a good tech writer on a design team as early as possible. The best documentation evolves with (and in some cases out of) internal development documents.

Exactly: why rewrite the wheel (if you'll forgive the mangled metaphor)?

4. Additionally, it's always bugged me that documentation always tells you what a method does, but rarely gives any detail on limits or failure behavior. Take a page from program by contract here: documentation should document supported use, limits/boundaries, and failure responses. It should be possible to write a unit test or method contract based on the requires and quarantees information in the documentation.

5. And while I'm thinking about that, we all know that example code is getting harder and harder to come by. It's expensive to maintain, and doc writers aren't always in the right position to create effective demo code when the deadline's approaching. So in addition to using the wiki for accumulating test code, why not tie the doc writers to the test engineers? Use what's already there: incorporate the actual unit and integration test code into the product's documentation.

Moving from print-based documentation to a managed collaborative on-line environment opens up a broad range of possibilities. There are a lot of excellent articles / tutorials on the net; if there is a relevant article on Dr Bob's site, why not link to it? If there are partners providing add-ons for a certain object, why not link to their home pages?

I don't know how practical these might actually be---there's nothing like a lack of direct responsibility to make a guy feel creative. And no doubt whoever's in charge of this already has a list of to-dos. But from a position of pure outsider ignorance, I'd sure like to see some of them.

I think that an investment in this area would allow DevCo to leverage it's highly-knowledgeable user base in a very positive way. It reminds me of Quality Central - I don't know how much it cost to implement (though I recall how long it took to push through), but I am willing to bet that it has been more than justified.

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Cheers,

Ian

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