

Marathon to Delphi

After we had finished Delphi 1, Gary Whizin, the Director of Delphi Development, used to joke that it was like running a 10K race, then discovering you had entered a marathon. It was certainly no sprint to the finish, but rather, a lot of hard slogging. We set our goal and then worked to achieve the milestones that would lead us to the goal. We've found it to be a pretty good way to do things.

Delphi 1 took almost exactly two years of development. In the first year we built on our compiler technology, created the development environment, and built the foundations of the Visual Component Library. In the second year we added more components, more tools, and database support. Although the goal had always been to provide database capabilities in Delphi, the scope and significance of what it means to support client/server development, well, that was the "Heartbreak Hill" of our marathon. We knew our goal. So we paced ourselves, slogged through the hard parts, and yes, we finished on time. I've shipped quite a few products in my career, but Delphi 1 stands alone. It's the product I'm most proud of.

In the case of Delphi 2, we knew what we had signed up for. We set out to create a full 32-bit version with support for Windows 95 and Windows NT. Luckily, we had a head start. We'd begun work on the 32-bit Object Pascal compiler back when Delphi 1 first started. Our goal was to ship Delphi 2 within 1 year.

I try to work out regularly, even during the most hectic periods of the development schedule. I do this to maintain balance in my life and to reduce stress. I was a weekend runner, taking part in the occasional 5K or 10K race — but I always wondered about a marathon. In the

fall, after signing off on beta releases of Delphi 2, Molly, a friend of mine at work, asked me if I wanted to run a half marathon. To be honest, she caught me off guard. I was slightly dumbstruck, but also curious about running such a distance. I agreed — after all, the race was still four weeks away. At the time, I was running once or sometimes twice a week, usually somewhere between five and eight miles. What the heck; I figured I'd be able to add 15 minutes to my time for a couple of weeks and increase my distance to 12 miles before the race. How hard could it be? Actually, running a half marathon isn't that hard. At least, not compared to walking down stairs the following day. Or the day after that. It hurt like hell, but I did it. It was the most significant milestone in a very long and personal project.

Who me? Run a m-m-m-arathon? Well, I didn't know about that. But I knew I could add another 15 minutes to my "long run" distance in two or three weeks. I knew my goal; I just didn't think about it too often. Instead, I focused on my short term milestone: my next long run.

Delphi 2 development continued steadily during the fall. I had originally hoped to ship it within 90 days of the Windows 95 release date, but I was a little optimistic. Instead, we added some additional important client/server features, including Data Modules,

SQL Explorer, and cached updates. We were into a regular groove with Delphi and things were proceeding on track to meet our ship date.

Meanwhile, my running was getting serious. I made sure I ran my long run every two or three weeks. It was my personal "milestone," much like the regular builds we did of the software. I remember trying to cram a two-hour run in before going from California to Toronto for Christmas. It was the longest lunch break I ever took. I figured it would be a heck of a lot easier to run in the warmth of Santa Cruz than in the misery of a Canadian cold front. In the meantime, I got good at finding pay phones along my route so I could check on how things were going.

Finally, February came around and we were getting ready to sign off the final version of Delphi 2 and send it to manufacturing. It had been hard slogging for a few days to beat the first anniversary of Delphi 1's release. It was a significant emotional deadline for folks on the team, though certainly not a rigid deadline for the company. Wednesday was our "internal" team date by which we wanted to sign off. I didn't really think we'd make that day — and we didn't. Thursday was a flurry of bug fixes, testing, new builds, more minor bugs. By Friday, I was beginning to become concerned. We were still finding a few bugs, and every-

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one on the team was getting tired of evening and weekend work. Our sign-off date moved to the weekend. We could still get to manufacturing on Monday morning, well in advance of our anniversary.

Saturday was pretty much a blur. I brought in some food, as did others, and everyone was testing like mad. We found a few last minute glitches; enough to keep fixing the “stop ship” bugs as well as some minor inconveniences. We may not find or fix every bug, but if it’s something that can’t be easily worked around, we do our best. In a fit of weirdness, someone built a “sign-off shrine” to Delphi in one of the empty offices. We sacrificed old sign-off candidate CDs, leftover Chinese food, Tums, aspirin, cartons, you name it, all of it lighted by the eerie glow of a lava lamp from tech support. Several folks broke into a case of beer that a customer had sent us.

On Sunday, things were looking good. We had a few of the integration folks stay around “on call” so we could build all three of the Delphi products: Delphi Client/Server Suite, Delphi Developer, and Delphi Desktop. Unfortunately, we still found a couple of unlikely bugs in the demonstration programs, which meant rebuilding all three products,

an automatic process that takes a couple of hours. We’d stopped finding bugs, so folks had to hang around the office waiting for their official “sign-off.” Around noon, things were looking good, so I went for a run. A long run. Just enough time that all three builds would be finished and sign-off would be proceeding with final testing when I got back.

It was a stark, sunny day. The nicest I’d seen in weeks. I chugged past the old Borland buildings on Greenhills road, where my office had been when I started about six years ago. The hills, once intimidating, were just a warm-up to me now. I continued on for about five miles, past De Laveaga Park, where we’d held a few Borland picnics over the years. I continued on for another few miles, spotted a pay phone, and checked my voice mail. No messages. So I kept on running. At just over two hours, I was back into the civilization, if you can call it that, of Scotts Valley. I bought a Gatorade and juice. I called in again; things were proceeding on track.

Now the hard part. I started on Bean Creek. Bean Creek is about an eight-mile run with a very steep hill that extends for nearly a mile. Even though I’d already clocked about 15 miles, I knew this next part would be hard. And it was. But it was also familiar. I’d run Bean Creek dozens

of times during training. I knew the curves, the hills. I knew where to look for deer. I knew where to speed up and where to slow down. And if my body forgot for a few miles that I had already run 15 miles, well I wasn’t going to let on. Not for a minute. Coming down the final hill I was getting a little buggy. I was talking to myself. Talking myself into it. I had just under two miles to go to get to the next milestone. Just 15 minutes. Step by step. Two miles. Not even.

After four months of training, I’d broken three hours and more than 20 miles.

When I got back to the office, we signed off Delphi 2 in just under 365 days.

I continued my training for another two months, logging three more “long runs” before tapering down for the race. On April 28th, I ran the Big Sur Marathon in under four hours. It’s the race I’m most proud of.

— Zack Urlocker

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