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Subject: Ranting and Raving, Was: Global variables and command line  
Posted by [davidf](#) on Sat, 18 Apr 1998 07:00:00 GMT

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J.D. Smith ([jdsmith@astrosun.tn.cornell.edu](mailto:jdsmith@astrosun.tn.cornell.edu)) in another elegant and well-reasoned article, this time on main-level variables, ends the article by writing this:

> Perhaps RSI is trying to protect us from ourselves here, realizing that  
> with the problems people have with variable locality already, breaking  
> it slightly might serve to confuse even more. But they really shouldn't  
> underestimate our ability to harness and control whatever new power  
> comes our way.

Having spent considerable time afield (and I say this with considerable humility and respect for the efforts of people trying to learn IDL), I believe that more often RSI errs on the side of \*overestimating\* the user's ability to harness and control the power of IDL.

There are certainly IDL users who can handle whatever it is IDL wants to throw at them. Most of these people come from some kind of computer science background. But the vast majority of us are simply folks who want to get a job done. Hell, half of us don't even \*like\* computers! (Or so it would seem from our aversion to learning most of the important technical details about them.)

IDL is a wonderful piece of software (overlooking for the moment our favorite quirks and oddities). But most of the people who use it don't have a clue about 90% of its power. (I don't wish to offend anyone by speaking strongly, but Miss Bock, my high-school English teacher, always told me to say what I mean.)

As much as I like the new features of IDL, I think RSI would be much further ahead and would sell many more copies of IDL if they took a year to consolidate what is currently in IDL and make it more accessible and easier to use for the vast majority of their customers. This could include hiring 5 more technical writers to write \*user\* (as opposed to \*IDL\*) oriented documentation and to write a suite of higher-level programs that worked together to analyze and visualize data.

(Insight is a step in the right direction, but I think the mistake there is to try to make it all things to all people. I would have preferred a suite of smaller and more customizable tools, perhaps still using direct graphics, that worked together.)

> And besides, if they get to do it, then so should we.

I can't argue with this, especially if the program is written in IDL. Are you certain they get to do it? I don't know the details of how Insight was written.

> Alright, the rant is over.

Me, too. I think we should do this at least once a month whether we need to or not. :-)

Cheers,

David

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