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Subject: IDL5.3 and documentation

Posted by [Richard G. French](#) on Tue, 18 May 1999 07:00:00 GMT

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With his permission, I am posting RSI's Mark Goosman's answer to some questions I posted on this newsgroup recently. He also provided the following information about the next release of IDL:

IDL 5.3 is scheduled for October 99.

Mark's message:

I wanted to give you a response to the wishlist you posted recently to the newsgroup comp.lang.idl-pv-wave. I'm the IDL/ION Product Manager. In your list, you had some very good comments and I wanted to make sure you recieved a response to each of the issues. If you have comments or questions on these or any other issues, please let me know.

1) Enable help to be read using NETSCAPE.

Research Systems makes every effort to make the online documentation as convenient and easy to use as possible. To this end, we distribute our documentation in the most widely accepted manner in the software industry. Online documentation is distributed in Adobe Acrobat format (.PDF). This allows better document handling as well as being more efficient with disk space.

Prior to the IDL 5.2 release, we did make an effort to include an HTML version of the IDL documentation. In addition to taking up almost 30% of the total file space, it created a third method of distributing IDL documentation (Original FrameMaker files, Adobe Acrobat, and HTML). This is in addition to the platform specific on-line help. The decision was made to eliminate the HTML files and concentrate on the overall quality of the documentation in PDF format.

2) Make sure that ALL the keywords for all procedures are documented. It

is hard to know if undocumented keywords are in the category of "Don't use this since we reserve the right to change it" or are simply left out because no one updated the documentation.

In most cases, we do attempt to completely document IDL routines and all their keywords. In some cases, there may be issues with the functionality associated with a keyword. If the keyword either does not work as it should or is replaced by other functionality, it may not be the best decision to continue support for that particular keyword. By removing references to it in the documentation but leaving the existing functionality, we maintain backward compatibility.

In the IDL 5.3 release you will see major improvements to the documentation set which reflects our commitment to improving the quality and value of IDL. If there are specific omissions we should correct please let us know and I will ensure these are addressed. Thank you for your interest and attention to IDL!

3) Math routines that work! In the version of CURVEFIT that was distributed a couple of years ago, there were so many serious errors that I had to hack the code all over the place to get it to compute the parameter errors properly. Just saw the posting on the SVDFIT routine which also seems to have bugs. I love IDL, but I must admit that I have gotten to the point where I don't even trust that it computes Bessel functions properly without doing some cross-checks with other programs.

We are working to improve the quality of every functional area of IDL. The past couple of releases saw an incredible amount of attention to IDL's visual capabilities with Object Graphics, a wide array of new data formats, enhancements to the language to support several new data types (16 bit signed/unsigned and 64 bit signed and unsigned), support for very large files (> 2 Gb) on many systems, and a whole new development environment. Hopefully, you've

reported  
any errors you find in  
any of the analysis routines so that they can be entered in to our  
defect  
tracking system.

4) Has someone found a real manual for the GUI builder? If so, I'd love to read it! I've tried to track it down in the Help menu but just have not been able to navigate to a manual that actually shows you how to use the thing, rather than simply telling you that it exists.

The IDL GUIBuilder does not have a stand-alone manual. As a part of the IDL Development Environment, it is documented with the other features of the IDLDE. As it was introduced in the IDL 5.2 release, it is currently documented in the "What's New in IDL 5.2" manual. With the IDL 5.3 release, we will be reorganizing and greatly enhancing most of the IDL manuals. At this time, we will be moving the documentation for the IDL GUIBuilder into the "Building IDL Applications" manual.

5) I would LOVE to have as easy reference for each function a history list of what changes were made in what version of IDL. I know this is asking for too much, but it sure would help when trying to figure out why things that used to work don't work any more!

Each IDL release includes a "What's New ..." manual to describe any changes to IDL. As far as figuring out why things used to work but don't work any more, we do make every effort to make IDL 100% backward compatible. With everything we do, one major goal is to make sure that existing customers have the best impression of each new IDL release. We do, however, have situations where behavior does change between releases. Many times, specific behavior may indicate a problem that is fixed in a later release of IDL. This may cause applications that were written

depending on the errant behavior, to behave differently.

6)The old DEMO routines in the old days actually did simple things like draw plots of sine waves in black and white - the kind of thing that a beginning user would like to know how to do. I used to be able to have my students learn IDL by running the DEMO and then looking at the code that produced it. This is no longer possible. The demo is so high-powered that it is impossible for beginning IDL users to use it as a way of learning how to program in IDL. I think this is a real loss. I learned IDL by looking over someone's shoulder and by reading through programs that did close to what I wanted to do myself.

We are trying to address the needs of the new IDL user. Part of this is identifying the best tools to help a user get started as well as understanding the purpose of the IDL Demo system. In the past, the best way to learn IDL was to reverse-engineer the demo system. Unfortunately, IDL now has widgets, objects, object graphics, ActiveX Control, etc. With all of this new functionality, we have come to realize that we need a better way to get someone started using IDL. Part of the IDL 5.3 release will be a new IDL Getting Started manual. This should address the concern you mentioned over how someone learns the basics of IDL. We are also re-releasing the IDL HandiGuide. This is going to be a major improvement over the previous IDL HandiGuide in that it lists each routine as well as all parameters and keywords.

Again, if you have questions on any of these issues or anything else, please do not hesitate to let me know.

Best regards,

Mark Goosman

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