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Subject: IDL User Group Meeting Huge Success  
Posted by [David Fanning](#) on Fri, 17 Oct 2008 05:42:00 GMT  
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Folks,

I thought you might like an update on today's IDL User Group meeting in Boulder. What a HUGE success! Kudo's to Harold Cline, Bill Okubo, and all the fine folks at ITTVIS for a wonderful day of exciting and stimulating presentations.

The festivities actually started yesterday, when a dozen or so "early testers" of the new IDL 7.1 Workbench were invited to do a series of exercises in front of the IDL engineering staff. I was one of the "testers", and boy did they get an earful about my ideas for iTools! But not once was I told, "Now, hang on, Fanning, you are WAY out of line!" Instead, everyone wrote down my suggestions and seemed genuinely interested in those things that irritate the hell out of me about iTools.

I can't tell you how unprecedented and refreshing this approach seemed to me. Imagine listening to what your customers like and don't like about your product. It was great. And after I finished ranting, I felt like I was heard, and--even more important to me--that the folks at ITTVIS really cared. I can't say I've converted into a big fan of the direction IDL is moving in, but I will say I am impressed with the people currently running the show at ITTVIS. I think they are doing some very, very important things right. So much so, that I've even decided to give iTools another chance. (Not that I have much choice, but I've signed an agreement not to give away any secrets. :-)

Today was jam-packed with presentations, all of them excellent. Goodness, people do some interesting things with IDL! But even better than that was seeing in person some of my friends from this newsgroup. Ken Bowman was there, and Mark Buie. Kelly Dean, who is here occasionally, and with whom I have carried on numerous e-mail conversations over the years. Amara Grap of IDL Wavelets fame was there. Ronn Kling and Rob Dimeo, two of the best students I ever had in IDL classes were there, with IDL programs that put mine to shame. Vince Hradil, the young man who appears to be taking over my place on this newsgroup flew in from Chicago for the day, and I am happy to report you are going to be in good hands for a long time to come. David Stern even showed up, looking for a job, I guess, what with the current economic crisis

playing havoc with all the money he made selling RSI.

Lots and lots of fun.

I'm going to be short-changing a lot of people here, but here were some of the outstanding highlights for me.

Rob Dimeo has some amazing quantum mechanical visualizations that he runs in real-time on a honking Dell computer, that he claims is faster than the fastest Supercomputer in 1990. It was an impressive (if back-breaking to carry around in an airport) computer. Peter Messmer continues to up the performance of GPULib, using graphical processors to increase computationally expensive operations from 20-100%.

Richard Azuah's presentation of how it took him only 3+ years to write an iTools application (6 months before he could write a line of code, I heard him say, as he basically had to re-write the entire set of documentation) not only confirmed everything I believe about iTools, but pushed it into the nightmare category. Richard is the only person I know, outside of ITTVIS, who has ever successfully written an iTool application, and my hat is off to him. I think we will all be writing iTool applications now that he has forged the way. ;-)

(It was probably not a coincidence that when I asked an ITTVIS sales rep how IDL sales were fairing he said the real gain had been in software consulting. Yeah, I guess...)

Ronn Kling demonstrated some amazingly good software for fitting ellipses in 2, 3, or N-dimensions(!), and \*extremely\* fast software for telling if a point (or, actually, as he demonstrated, MANY points) are inside a 2D polygon or 3D polyhedra or not. Very, very slick, but not surprising if you get one of Ronn's Christmas Cards every year. (I'm not clear where you can find these, whether on Ronn's web page or in the IDL Contrib Library on the ITTVIS web page. Maybe he can clear that up. I know I want to use these programs.)

Finally, the absolute highlight for me was Eduardo Iturrate demonstrating how to use his Revolution IDL program. This program was mentioned here a year or so ago, but didn't make much of a splash at the time. It allows the user to quickly build a 3D graphics scene from stock "templates". Then, and this is the best point, you can save the IDL object graphics code to a file.

I thought it was a neat idea at the time, and I downloaded

it, but I was busy at the time and didn't follow up too much. I am *\*definitely\** giving this program another look! OK, Eduardo is a master at the little keyboard short-cuts you need to know to move around in this program effectively, but this was the most amazing, spectacular demo of IDL functionality I have ever seen.

The best thing about it is that it solves the number one problem with object graphics: it takes a DAMN long time to get even one object coded up, and there are at least 1000 ways to do it wrong. With at least 999 of those ways, you see absolutely nothing on your display. So it is massively frustrating to learn how to code object graphics. (Ok, Ronn Kling's book *Power Graphics in IDL* helps. A lot.) But with this program, you can add an object in about 10 seconds, and 2 seconds later, you are looking at the IDL code that does it right! This will squash the object graphics learning curve practically flat.

I came home *\*really\** jazzed about writing IDL object graphics programs again for the first time in a LONG time. This program is named perfectly. It could cause a revolution in your IDL programming. It is available on the ITTVIS User Contrib web page.

Alright, I've left a lot of good things out, but you get the idea. ITTVIS is hoping they can get this going on an annual basis. I can tell you this, I am not going to ever miss one. This was terrific. Hats off to the great crew at ITTVIS for putting on a most productive day.

Cheers,

David

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Sepore ma de ni thui. ("Perhaps thou speakest truth.")

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