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Subject: Re: The Secret Widget Manual and IDL V5  
Posted by [davidf](#) on Tue, 10 Jun 1997 07:00:00 GMT  
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Hi Folks,

Charles Martin and Bill Sawchuck had a lot of nice things to say about some manuals I wrote and classes I taught. Thanks to both of them.

I just want to clarify a couple of points.

Charles wrote:

- > The fact that I was never even informed about the existence
- > of this manual really annoys me. It seems as if RSI expects
- > you to take the training course if you want to do anything
- > but the basics in IDL. Another thing that frustrates me is
- > that even if the training course was free, for me
- > reading the manual was enough. I would not want to waste
- > time traveling to and from the training site.

I don't think RSI tried to hide the existence of these manuals at all. They were on the official IDL price list from the day I wrote them. And although there was (and still is) a rule about responding to newsgroup articles, I probably wrote 5-6 private e-mails a day answering questions and letting people know the manuals were available. This is probably the "fluke" you mention for how you came to hear about the manuals.

And although I am pleased that you were able to read the manuals and learn what you needed to know, there is no comparison at all between what you learn in a manual (even a very good manual) and what you learn in a class. I had many discussions at RSI about whether the sales of the manuals would cut into course revenue. My position has always been that to think so is nonsense. I personally think people who come to classes (well, at least *\*my\** classes :-)) learn far more information than they can get from the manual alone.

But more importantly, the information you learn is much more current. To some extent the stuff an author commits to paper is old hat. If you are any good as an instructor or as an IDL programmer you grow and mature and the way you do things changes, sometimes dramatically.

Building Graphical User Interfaces in IDL was a good manual, but I would not recommend using it now as an example of good programming style. It was written almost two years ago.

Bill wrote:

- > Fortunately, I think we are all in luck. It is my understanding
- > that David is currently working on an IDL book which is to include
- > some coverage of the newly added object functionality which has
- > been incorporated into IDL 5.0.
- >
- > David, what is the status of this latest venture of yours?

When I worked for RSI I was fortunate enough to have "creation of training materials" as part of my job description. This made it much, much easier to put other things aside and work on manuals. (And one thing I don't think anyone really appreciates is how much hard work it takes to produce a good manual. I mean look around you on your book shelf. How many do you see? I had the leisure, because I worked at home and nobody knew what the hell I was doing, to do it right. Most technical writers do not work under such perfect circumstances. That they do as well as they do is a mystery to me. I could not do their job.)

Anyway, book producing nowadays is not a revenue producing operation. (How much would you want to pay for one of those manuals, anyway, Charles?) I have to jam it in around trying to make a living, carting children to 5-10 soccer and basketball practices and games a week, and learning stuff that people expect me to be an expert on.

That said, I am about a chapter away from having a book that is the equivalent, I suppose, of the Learning IDL manual I wrote for RSI. All of the graphics chapters are done, as are the hardcopy output chapters, etc. It is a book about practical programming techniques and the tricks that you can only learn from a lot of programming experience.

The intended audience for this book are people just starting to work with IDL and those people who have had to learn IDL on their own from the IDL manuals. I am very pleased with it. I've taught enough IDL classes to think I know what people want and need to learn about IDL. This book covers those essential things. Looking ahead at my summer schedule, that book should be for sale by the end of the summer, if not sooner.

The second book I have in mind to write will be concerned with

writing larger IDL programs and applications. It will be the equivalent of Building Graphical User Interfaces. It will cover object graphics (if I can learn them!), widget programming, and what I think of as the "art" of writing good IDL programs. I do not have a release date in mind for that book.

In any case, when the book is ready I am sure you will hear about it. :-) It will come with a lot of example programs that I think demonstrate good programming techniques. I am going to self-publish it.

In the meantime, check out the programs and article on my web page. This is where I try out new ideas and get feedback on what customers need and want. The example programs there often reflect my thinking today on the proper way to write IDL programs. I hope there is something there for people who don't want to pay \$\$\$ for training. And I always hold something back, so that the people who \*do\* want to pay \$\$\$ always get their money's worth. :-)

Cheers,

David

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