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Editorial

I'm hoping by the time you read this Spring might finally have arrived. But as I write (6th April), there is snow on the ground outside and kids making snowmen in the park. SUG has started doing its bit for global warming by becoming paperless with this issue; though we'll all have to make an effort to reduce the impact of a SIR conference in Dublin!

There are details of the Dublin conference and training in this issue, and more on the SUG website. Book before the 1st of May for the best rates. And if you want to go green, you can get there by ferry and train eg at <http://www.seat61.com/Ireland.htm> , or fly and use <http://www.carbonneutral.com/> or similar to calculate and neutralise your carbon emissions.

We have some vacancies on the SUG committee and would love to hear from anyone who might like to join us. We meet 4 or 5 times a year in London to organise conferences and Reporter, and to act as a conduit for user feedback to SIR Oz. Please contact John Lemon at j.s.lemon@abdn.ac.uk if you think you might be interested.

Hope to see you all in Dublin.

Kathy Brooks
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SIR is at <http://www.sir.com.au>
UK SIR Users Group is at <http://www.sir.com.au/~sug>

Chair's Chat

This is a milestone "Chair's Chat" as it is the first one in the new electronic format and also the first one for many years not written by Dave Doulton; you might call it a 'good news' / 'bad news' chat !!

First of all the SIR UK Users Group Committee decided that it would be more cost effective and 'green' to use an electronic format to distribute Reporter (in fact you can see electronic versions of all the previous Reporters at

<http://www.sir.com.au/~sug/reporter/index.html>

and so from now on all reporters will be in this format. Our thanks must go to Kathy and Fran for all the work they have done over the years in getting the paper format produced and distributed. I think we are all noticing the move to electronic formats for many other newsletters and journals, in fact one of the big complaints from the academics about the proposed design for the new library here at the University of Aberdeen is that is very little space for books !! I hope you like the new format and if you have any suggestions or improvements please let us know.

As I mentioned in the first sentence Dave Doulton will no longer be writing the "Chair's Chat" as he has resigned from the committee due to changes at work - for those of us remaining it will be the end of an era because Dave has been an active member for many years and has served as the Chair for much of that time. Not only has he served tirelessly as the Chair and maintained the website but he has contributed papers and to the training at many conferences. I think that whereas many of us use SIR in a fairly mundane manner Dave has pushed it to the limit to provide many applications at Southampton University. I think he is one of the few people to really use the HOST and EXTERN subroutines and functions or the CGI calls as demonstrated in some of his papers. His latest in London (2007) included the ability to read live train running times from the National rail website. Dave has also been responsible for some of the more esoteric uses of SIR including a card game, a polynomial display programme and also the solution and generation of Sudoku puzzles. We will miss you Dave but at least we will see you in Dublin.

Finally in this chat I would like to say I hope to see many of you in Dublin for what promises to be a different approach to a conference and training; one that will I am sure benefit all who attend.

John Lemon

SIR International Conference 25-27 June 2008, Dublin

Draft Programme

Wednesday 25th June

1230 Lunch	
1330 Registration	
1400 Welcome	Mo Reardon and John Lemon
1415 Changes over the years and what I like in XS	Dave Doulton University of Southampton
1430 The Joys of XS	Tom Shriver DataVisor
1515 Tea	
1535 The move to XS	Nick Gawrit, Greg Neils & others

1800 Dinner	
1900 Musical Pub crawl	

Thursday 26th June

0900 SIR developments	Tony Reardon SIR Pty Ltd
0940 SIR features for workshops	Tony Reardon
1020 Coffee & Organising Teams and Projects	
1100 Project Workshops	
1300 Lunch	
1400 Project Workshops	
1515 Tea	
1530 Project Workshops	
1830 Dinner	

Friday 27th June

0900 SIR UK UG - AGM	
0910 Workshop followup and discussion	
1015 SMUG launch	David Merle Columbia Uni DCC
1030 Coffee	
1045 Barcode reading with SIR	John Lemon University of Aberdeen
1100 Cohort studies	Jon Johnston Institute of Education
1120 Processing Journals	Tom Shriver
1200 Paper	TBA
1220 Paper	TBA
1240 Closing sessions	
1300 Lunch	

Please book your place at:

<http://www.sir.com.au/~sug/confbook.html>

Book before 1st May for the best rates. Abstracts and further details available at

<http://www.sir.com.au/~sug/joining.html>

Please come and join us in Dublin Ireland from Wednesday 25th June to Friday 27th June at the Jurys Croke Park Hotel (http://www.jurys-dublin-hotels.com/jurys_crokepark_hotel) for the SIR User

Group International Conference 2008. Just 10 minutes away from Dublin Airport and a short walk from the city centre this luxurious Dublin hotel offers the best appointed bedrooms, a lively bar and bistro, up to the minute technology and a warm welcome. Opened in September 2005, this 4 star Dublin hotel is ideally situated for our next conference.

The conference will provide excellent training in how to upgrade to SIR/XS for those who have not yet taken advantage of this latest version of SIR. As the renewal fee already covers the upgrade the conference will be an excellent investment to enable you to make the best use of SIR. For those of you who have already upgraded, there will be the opportunity to share your experiences with other users of SIR/XS and learn what other features are available.

Training in Dublin this year will be an intensive one day workshop. This will be preceded on the Wednesday afternoon with sessions highlighting "Excellent reasons to Upgrade to SIR/XS and how to do it". The Thursday will start with an overview of SIR/XS features that will be needed for the workshop followed by an outline of a project with a set of tasks to be performed. The attendees will then be split into small hands on groups and assigned tasks to be completed. Each team will be led by a very experienced SIR user or instructor. The project and tasks will be realistic and reflect real world practicalities as far as possible with regard to time constraints.

The teams will use SIR/XS to achieve the various project goals with guidance and supervision. Tony Reardon will be on hand to assist all teams and at intervals throughout the day, he will review particular features for the whole class to ensure that all participants benefit.

The teams will then each give a brief informal presentation on the Friday morning as to the solutions found and lessons learnt followed by a general discussion addressing any points of concern arising from the exercise or from day to day use of SIR.

Project Tasks will cover such topics as database design and implementation; importing and exporting data from other systems; recovery and security; developing user interfaces; extracting and analysing data; managing programs and procedures.

It is expected that all attendees have some SIR experience. Any attendees who have only used SIR applications developed by others and never developed SIR applications themselves or who have little SIR experience will be put into teams with experienced SIR trainers and the basic development tools will be explained and demonstrated to them as the project progresses.

A separate Introductory class will be run at the same time if enough delegates request this.

We're hoping to see you in Dublin in June.

Mo Reardon
SIR Pty Ltd

SIR UK USERS GROUP AGM AGENDA 26th June 2008

1. Apologies for Absence
2. Minutes of the last Annual General Meeting
3. Matters Arising
4. Chair's report (John Lemon)
5. Treasurer's report (Jon Johnston)
6. Elections
7. A.O.B.

The committee currently consists of:

- Kathy Brooks, Dave Doulton , Adrian Hodgson, Jon Johnson(Treasurer), John Lemon (Chair) and Fran Williams who were elected at the 2006 AGM and are due for re-election (Bylaws article6(b))
- Mo Reardon who is the ex-officio member appointed by the SIR distributor (Bylaws article 5(b)).

There are thus at least 7 vacant positions to fill by elections (Bylaws article 5(a))

Nominations for committee membership will be received by the current chair (John Lemon) up to 11am on 26th June 2008 (Bylaws article 6(e))

News from SIR Oz

At the moment I am fixing things as they come up and handling any small requests for enhancements. Recent fixes include:

- an issue with Master that didn't record user names on the journal;
- a small problem with compiling subroutines against one copy of a tabfile and executing against another;
- an issue with the default Procfile when you connect a database in PQL;
- some issues with VFORMAT;
- some with Modify Schema;
- one with PQLForms, etc.

I've allowed a new Exact date format specification which means that input must exactly match the given specification rather than the normal allowance of variants.

One outstanding issue I am working on is to do with common vars. It was always not very straight forward to update common vars specifications and we have allowed a new separate 'record type' style definition of common vars in XS which makes things much easier. However this leads naturally to wanting to do things like delete a common var but this means changing any record definitions that reference this and this is quite tricky. For the moment I just don't allow you to do this but am thinking of ways of dealing with the various issues.

As you probably know, we got a Mac version ported. We also have new Redhat Linux and Solaris 10 (intel) versions of XS.

If anyone has any minor requests I am happy to consider them. At some point we will issue a new revision but I don't like to do this for every little bug fix. My plans for the next 'big' things to work on are to rewrite the way multi-user stuff works and to allow SQL style SELECTs in PQL but I don't feel that anyone is really pressuring for this. I would like to feel that most users have moved to XS and they were happy with that release before I get too far ahead of them.

Tony Reardon
SIR Pty Ltd

SIR Training and Conference 14-15 June 2007, London

Conference write-up by **Adrian Hodgson**

Using Extern

Dave Doulton
University of Southampton

Dave's paper on Extern functions covered what they are, how to use them and how to create them.

The EXTERN and EXTERNS are two functions held in the extern.dll (dynamic linked library) in Windows. They can have both string and numeric parameters. EXTERN returns a number and EXTERNS returns a string.

In order to create these functions you can use the supplied template which is located in the api\examples sub directory from the SIR installation directory.

David Baxter had constructed a dll that reads web pages, and this was used to create five example programs to illustrate the use of these functions in reading from and writing to web pages. It is not possible to use these to read from secure web pages that start with https.

The five example programs write the contents of a web page to a file, reading share prices from the msn money website, reading weather forecast information from the BBC weather website, reading train live running details from the national rail website and reading Formula 1 grand prix results from the F1 web page. These programs use sub-procedures to read from the web server in chunks of text ending in the next > (HTML tag) encountered. This keeps the size of the text chunks relatively small which helps in the analysis process.

Dave then illustrated these programs with several live demonstrations.

He showed the weather forecast for the next 5 days for several locations including London Bridge, Romsey and Los Angeles. He then gave a demonstration of train times from the live running site for Kings Cross and observed wryly that he had noticed that First Great Western trains are always late.

The final demonstration was for the Formula 1 Grand Prix results. This is a useful application for

Dave as he takes part in a Fantasy F1 league at work. His application reads all the F1 results to date. Dave updated the results for the most recent race which was the Canadian Grand Prix. This had been a disappointing race for Dave's Fantasy team as he had dropped from 1st place to 4th with the latest results. This was because one of Dave's fantasy team drivers is Felipe Massa who had been disqualified in the Canadian Grand Prix on Lap 51 for a pit lane infringement, whereas other colleagues have Lewis Hamilton as one of their drivers who had won the Canadian Grand Prix.

Dave's slides:

<http://www.sir.com.au/~sug/conf2007/extern.ppt>

Examples and DLL:

<http://www.sir.com.au/~sug/conf2007/externexamples.zip>

SIR within bureaucracies: sociological speculations, with some illustrations from Germany

Klaus Allerbeck

Klaus introduced the main theme of his session as "illustrations of the issues and problems of convincing decision makers to use SIR for applications".

He observed that Germans always look for technical solutions and automated systems. This is particularly true of public transport in Germany which generally runs smoothly and on-time, but the down-side of this is when there is an incident the whole system tends to grind to a halt with no trains running at all. Klaus then offered a SIR example of this reliance on automation by outlining the history of the software in Stuttgart.

Back in 1985 there was a state competition for students to submit essays. Klaus's colleagues wanted to computerise the handling of this competition and the marking of the essays, and opted for a SIR system using SIR Forms with a system of reports to schools and parliament. The over reliance on the SIR automated computer system was demonstrated when the system froze one day due to problems with the cache file on a low specification machine. As a result of this incident, many involved felt that the SIR application was too complicated, and two new staff were hired at a later date to introduce a Word /Excel / Microsoft solution. The migration away from a SIR application was not helped by the fact that at the time SIR support in Germany was relatively poor in part due to the closure of the Berlin office.

There has always been a big gap in Germany between the capabilities of mainframe systems and smaller PC systems, with limited scope to pass data

files between the two. As a result there has been a tendency for secretaries to use the mainframe system and to spend a lot of time manually copying the information they need. In the early days of personal computers there was a reluctance to introduce these into the workplace, with the result that many staff started to bring their own PC's into work.

Klaus concluded that it is becoming increasingly difficult to convince the University these days that social students need training in SIR, whereas the case for other more widespread packages like SPSS is more straightforward. Klaus is determined to do what he can to fight against this trend and promote the use of SIR in this difficult environment and he is aiming to show the usefulness of SIR in a postal and online survey for student parking issues in Frankfurt.

Multiple databases or tabfiles?

Frances Williams
ISER University of Essex

Since SIR 2002 multiple databases have been available as an alternative to Tabfiles. Fran reviewed these for her own applications to see if multiple databases would be better and determine if Tabfiles are now redundant.

Fran first reminded us of her work on the British Household Panel Study which started in 1991 and is now on its sixteenth wave. The databases used are separated into a series of survey databases (SDB's) for receipt and cleaning of the data and a User database (UDB) for the research community. There is a separate SDB for each wave of the survey with variable names and structures which reflect the question numbers on the questionnaire for the wave. The UDB holds the data for all waves of the survey in a flattened structure with mnemonic variable names and includes derived, imputed and weighting variables.

On a yearly basis Fran converts the contents of the latest SDB into further database entries for the UDB. This process is only initiated when the latest survey data is clean. From one wave to the next roughly 42% of variables change and some variables need to be merged. It is often the case that values for some variables change from one year to the next for Don't Know, Refusal or Missing Values.

The original processing code for this application was developed in SIR 2.2 fifteen years ago, and utilised intermediate Tabfiles to hold the SDB variables converted to the relevant UDB equivalents. The disadvantage of this approach is that two separate processing stages were needed, each of which took over an hour to run. If the SDB changed then Fran needed to run both processes

again to update UDB, and there were two sets of code to maintain and update which had more potential for error.

The advantage of the new approach in SIR 2002 using multiple databases is that it enables the whole process to be run in a single retrieval which is quicker, less error prone, and less space intensive. It also results in less program maintenance each year as there is only one retrieval program to maintain.

Despite the obvious advantages there was some initial reluctance to start this conversion. There was a lot of work to convert including 15 databases and 28 tabfiles which by this stage were held in SIR2000. One of the more tedious parts of this conversion was moving the export files from SIR2000 to SIR2002 due to a bug in SIR2000. Numeric variables occasionally end up split over 2 lines in the export file and needed to be manually edited. The fact that ISER use caseless databases and Solaris also caused some teething problems.

The conversion work was long and tedious because of assorted problems encountered along the way. The command DO REPEAT VAR = A TO B doesn't work in SIR 2002 when A and B are the same. It compiled but produced garbage.

In the early days of the conversion process the Caseless database caused problems as when attempting to connect to a second caseless database nothing happened. Fran observed that she wouldn't want to go through such a conversion process again.

In conclusion Fran declared that multiple databases are great but tabfiles still have some uses and it is "horses for courses".

When transposing large volumes of data or variables multiple databases are the most effective. Where static files are used for lookups if these are already in tabfiles it may not be worth re-writing but if you are starting from scratch with this use multiple databases.

Finally if you are using a temporary file to hold data external to a database you could read information from a csv file, but this is where a tabfile may be useful as an alternative because you can create and drop it "on-the-fly" and no schema is required.

Slides: -
<http://www.sir.com.au/~sug/conf2007/Multiple%20databases%20or%20Tabfiles.ppt>

SIRvey

John Lemon
University of Aberdeen

John reported back on his quick snapshot survey into satisfaction with SIR UK user group activities.

We decided to undertake a survey because the UK User group has been organising and running events for over 20 years, and we wanted to check if we are getting it right.

John created the core of the survey using SNAP on the train back from London to Aberdeen the day after we decided to run the survey. It was exciting as another committee member to get periodic e-mails from John via an efficient wireless internet connection as the questionnaire development progressed. (thanks to GNER !).

John had managed 4 iterations by the time he reached Edinburgh and the questionnaire was virtually (sic) ready.

The survey was despatched to 79 addresses, with 39 replies a response rate of 49.4%.

The main results were as follows; -

1. Why didn't you attend a conference?

The main replies were: -
Too expensive (6), Too far to travel (5) No time (5),
Not relevant to my work (40)

2. Where should we hold future conferences?

The main preferences were for London, Scotland and Europe.

Over half of respondents would probably attend an event in London and 59% would probably go to Dublin.

Sixteen people (41% of respondents) claimed they did not receive SIR reporter.

The most popular sections of SIR reporter were Hints and Tips, Product News and Conference reports.

There was a degree of support for a chat room or message board and the idea of an electronic reporter.

Slides: -
<http://www.sir.com.au/~sug/conf2007/SiRvey.ppt>

SIRxs

Dave Doulton

Dave completed the day with a trawl through what is new in SIRxs with loads of great examples

Slides:

<http://www.sir.com.au/~sug/conf2007/Whatsnew.ppt>

Database export:

<http://www.sir.com.au/~sug/conf2007/COMPANY2007.exp>

Adrian Hodgson

Minutes of AGM held on 15 June 2007, London

Apologies for absence

Randy Banks

Minutes of Previous Meeting

Agreed.

Matters Arising

None.

Chair's Report

We have held a UK conference and training in June 2007 – this one. The last issue of Reporter to be posted to recipients was produced in March – thanks to Kathy and Dave for this. In future Reporter will be posted on the web site and people notified by email.

The next international conference and training will be in Dublin at the Jury's Croke Park Hotel 26th – 28th June 2008

There is a production version of SIR XS available for Windows and the Unix version will available shortly. There is an Intel Mac beta version.

Patrick has left the committee and will be sorely missed. Kathy has been persuaded to stay on for another year.

Treasurer's Report

Current account: £2031.04

Saver account £2217

Business reserve: £231

Elections

There were no nominations to fill the vacant committee posts so no elections were held.

Any Other Business

None.

Frances Williams

Secretary

SIR UK User Group Committee Members 2007/2008

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