FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR ASTRONOMICAL IMAGE DISPLAY

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Final Report

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1 Project Objectives

In the “Future Directions for Astronomical Image Display” project, the Smithsonian Astrophysical Observatory (SAO) and the National Optical Astronomy Observatories (NOAO) evolved our existing image display program into fully extensible, cross-platform image display software. We also devised messaging software to support integration of image display into astronomical analysis systems. Finally, we migrated our software from reliance on Unix and the X Window System to a platform-independent architecture that utilizes the cross-platform Tcl/Tk technology.

2 Accomplishments

Our efforts during the course of this project were concentrated in three areas:

- support for existing image display and messaging software
- development of new messaging software
- development of new image display software

We describe each of these efforts below.

2.1 Support for Existing Software

During the course of this project, we released three versions of our existing SAO R&D software suite (v1.8 in July 1998, v1.9 in May 1999, and v1.9.1 in January 2000), containing the SAOtng image display program and the XPA point-to-point messaging system. These releases of the SAO R&D package provided much improved support for astronomical image analysis and display. For example, we added support for several new types of FITS data, including image extensions, binary tables, n-D images, compressed FITS data, and FITS files that are on the Web. In addition, SAOtng now can display raw event lists (i.e., binary files containing events with a known record structure).

Perhaps the most interesting and significant technical feature of our work on SAOtng was the development of a new technique for filtering photon events in FITS binary tables: the filter specification is converted into a tiny C program, which then is compiled, linked, and run automatically so that events can be fed to this program and filter results returned to the calling program. The power of the technique lies in these considerations:

- The generated filter program is very small, containing less than 200 lines of code, so that it compiles and links in a second or less on most modern machines.
- Filter checking is performed as part of compiled code, not in the usual interpreted mode. This use of a compiled filter results in an order of magnitude speed improvement over previous techniques, even after the program compilation overhead is added.
- All C syntax and C operators become valid parts of the filter syntax, making available a much wider range of filter possibilities than previously.

- It is easy to replace the standard filter program with a user-specified filter program for more sophisticated applications.

Our "compile on the fly" technique has not only been used successfully in SAOtnng, but also has given rise to a new research direction (not funded under this grant): development of a "smart" FITS library that will support all essential FITS access functions (including column and spatial image filtering) with a minimum number of easy-to-use routines. This library is an attempt to build software that makes the best possible assumptions about what a user intends (so that the default behavior is correct for most applications), while also leaving room for less common behavior. Tailoring routines in this way opens the possibility of greatly simplifying many astronomical data analysis programming tasks.

Our SAO R&D software suite is in widespread use by astronomers all over the world. Each of our releases was accessed by hundreds of astronomical sites, from Russia to the Navy to the Vatican. We have had the pleasure of working via e-mail with hundreds of users. Major projects such as Chandra and XMM have made heavy use of this software—and of our successor image and messaging software, which also were developed under this grant, and which are described below.

2.2 Development of New Messaging Software

During the course of this project, we re-designed and re-implemented the XPA messaging system to move beyond its original conception as an inter-process communication system for X Window System programs. In implementing XPA 2.0, we paid close attention to the concept of "minimal software buy-in" that was described at our first PI workshop.

One of the most important changes we made to XPA 2.0 was to utilize standard sockets rather than the X Selection mechanism. The new XPA supports both INET and UNIX sockets, with the choice of method based simply on a single global environment variable. This change not only makes XPA 2.0 much faster than the previous implementation, but it also means that XPA no longer is dependent on the X libraries and can be added to non-X programs or ported to platforms (such as Windows) where X might not be available. Thus, we now support XPA within the Tcl language and in non-graphical Unix programs that process events using the standard select() system call. Other environments can be added in a straightforward manner.

The new XPA 2.0 extends the single point-to-point communication of the original XPA by supporting broadcasting. An XPA service is registered using both a "class" and a "name" specification. For example, a number of image display programs might register themselves using the class designation "IMDISP" and names such as "saotng-1", "saotng-2", etc. A client can then send or receive messages to/from multiple XPA servers by using a class:name template to specify the desired servers. For example, a client can send messages to a specific
SAOtng program by specifying a name only (e.g., "saotng-3") or send to all SAOtng programs by specifying a template such as "saotng*" or "IMDISP:*".

Communication between client and server is still direct, i.e., there is no forced need to send a message to an intervening message router that in turn broadcasts the message to individual servers. However, we implemented an optional message routing program that acts as a classical message bus in situations where this is warranted. (For example, it might be desirable to send the currently active FITS file to such a message server, where it can be stored for later retrieval by other processes.)

Access to XPA services is provided on a host by host basis for each service. By default, users can access an XPA service if they are logged onto the same machine. Other default access permissions can be maintained in a simple ASCII file, so that access can be granted to users on other machines for any individual access point. Access permission to XPA services also can be changed at run-time (by the access point owner) using simple XPA commands. We can extend this security model to use private keys if we ascertain that the astronomical community requires the heightened security.

The user and programming interfaces for XPA 2.0 are easy to use but provide a great deal of flexibility and power. An XPA service is defined by means of the basic XPA server routine XPANew(). Application-specific send and receive callback routines are passed to this routine to implement the specific services. Once a number of XPA services are defined using XPANew(), they can be added to an X or Tcl event look with the calls XPAXtAddInput() and XPATclAddInput(), respectively (no such initialization is required for Unix select() loops). The server program then enters its event loop and handles XPA requests along with other requests.

On the client side, the XPA programming interface parallels the XPA programs available to the user at the shell level. For example, to send/receive data to/from an XPA service, one can execute xpaset/xpaget at the command line, or call the XPASet()/XPAGet() subroutines inside a program. No other program setup is required at the command line and no other subroutine calls are required within a program (although more advanced support is, of course, available for client applications.) This parallelization of the command-line and programming interfaces allows developers to test their application-specific services easily at the keyboard. (Indeed, we even have taken care to ensure that one connect to XPA services via telnet, so that these services can be exercised directly without using client XPA programs at all!) We believe XPA 2.0 is a major step toward our goal of developing “minimal buy-in” messaging.

XPA 2.0 was ported to Sun/Solaris, Linux, SGI, and Dec/OSF1 (meaning that it works on big-endian and little-endian machines, and on 32-bit and 64-bit architectures). We made three releases of XPA during the period of this grant (May 1999 as part of saord 1.9, and two minor releases containing bug fixes). As a result, XPA now is part of major astronomical projects such as Chandra, XMM, DEIMOS, and HEASARC/ftools, and is in use by astronomers all over the world.
2.3 Development of New Image Display Software

Along with support for new messaging software, we also sought to move astronomical image display beyond the bounds of any particular program and even beyond the bounds of the Unix operating system that has been so central to astronomical software over the past decade and a half. Towards this end, we developed SAOTk, an integrated set of Tcl/Tk widgets for astronomical imaging and data visualization (see Table 1).

Table 1: SAOTk Widgets

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Widget</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Image</td>
<td>FITS viewer for a single image or a mosaic of images</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colorbar</td>
<td>control of imaging color environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Panner</td>
<td>thumbnail image for position control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Magnifier</td>
<td>magnified view of a section of the image</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Image widget is the central component of the SAOTk widget set. It used to display both FITS images and binary tables. Multiple extension FITS files are also supported. The Image widget is designed specially to support the display of large amounts of data. For images, the rendering time is constant, and is based on the size of the display window, not the size of the data. Thus, the widget is capable of rendering very large images (8k x 8k or larger), or a large mosaic of images (such as 36 images, each 2k x 4k). Since all rendering is done directly from the raw FITS data, memory requirements are very small.

For FITS binary tables, the rendering time is based on the number of filtered rows or events. Since the image is binned on the fly before being rendered to the screen, memory requirements again are very small. Of course, if the data are sorted by position, binning and rendering times are much faster, since the widget can calculate which segments of a table contain events that need to be processed.

The Image widget supports display of a mosaic of images, where each image segment is a separate FITS image. These segments may be stored in a single multi-extension FITS file, or may be located in a number of different files. The widget uses FITS mosaic keywords to place each image in its proper place in the overall image space.

One special feature of the Image widget is the ability to rotate, orient, and zoom an image to align its display to an arbitrary world coordinate system (WCS). This feature is very useful for making comparisons between images from different instruments or telescopes that have different coordinate systems or WCS parameters.

Another important feature of the Image widget is its support for PostScript level 1 and level 2 printing. This is not a screen capture process, but a full-featured PostScript driver. A variety of document sizes are available, and grayscale and color imaging are supported. Level 2 output is compressed via RLE and encoded via ASCII85, so the size of the output PostScript data is usually very small.

The SAOTk widgets are designed to be incorporated easily in any standard Tcl/Tk environment to build custom data analysis and visualization applications. We have used
them to develop DS9, our code-name for the next version of the SAOtng display program. This Tcl/Tk application also incorporates the new version of XPA (described below) to allow external processes to access and control its data, GUI functions, and algorithms. DS9 supports all major capabilities in the current version of SAOtng, including direct display of FITS images and binary tables, multiple frame buffers, region/cursor manipulation, user-defined scale algorithms and colormaps, and easy communication with external analysis tasks. It also supports advanced features such as mosaic images, arbitrary zoom, rotation and pan, and a variety of coordinate systems (including Image, CCD, Detector, and WCS).

DS9 is implemented as a stand-alone application that requires no installation or support files. Binary versions of both DS9 and SAOTK exist for Sun Solaris 2.5/2.6, Linux, SGI, and Alphas, as well as a port to Microsoft Windows. All versions and platforms support a consistent set of capabilities.

Our DS9 software has not yet been “officially” released, as we still are working on essential support for the IRAF analysis system. However, due to demand from users, we have long been making DS9 available informally via the WWW and anonymous ftp, with the result that it is already being used heavily within the astronomical community, even in this pre-release form. In fact, DS9 has been adopted by Chandra and XMM as a replacement for SAOtng, and we are working with other groups (such as the DEIMOS Project a Keck/Lick) to tailor DS9 to their needs. With support for its further development being provided by SAO, we are confident that DS9 will soon become the de facto image display standard in the astronomical community.

3 WWW Access to Project Software

All of the software developed under this grant (along with extensive documentation) is freely available via the World Wide Web. For more information (including down-load instructions), please visit the following sites:

# general information about the SAO R&D group
http://hea-www.harvard.edu/RD/

# information about the SAOtng image display program

# information about the XPA messaging system

# information about the ds9 image display program