



SimpList

By Don Leahy

PRODUCT RATING

Very poor Poor Fair Good Very Good Excellent

DESPITE the proliferation of desktop-based tools, the mainframe programmer still spends a vast amount of time working directly with ISPF. The ISPF user interface has been incrementally improved over time, but many of the changes have been so subtle that even longtime users are oblivious to them. This has contributed to the myth that productivity improvements can only be realized by using GUI-based tools.

SimpList, a new product from MacKinney systems, explodes that myth.

It's not GUI, but SimpList gives you an integrated work environment that gives you point-and-shoot access to just about every mainframe tool and object you would ever want to use. At its heart is the "object list," a persistent, user defined list of dataset names, dataset name patterns, DB2 tables, IMS data bases, DB2 commands, Workstation files and several other types of objects. For each object stored, you can easily launch just about any type of operation you can think of: Edit, Browse, Copy, Print are just a few examples.

All of its functions are context-sensitive. Choosing Browse on a data set name causes ISPF Browse to be invoked; Browse on a DB2 table causes your installation's DB2 browser to be invoked. If you choose Browse on a DB2 command stored on an object list, then that command is executed and the results are displayed via ISPF Browse.

This brilliantly simple idea is what distinguishes SimpList from DSLIST (option 3.4) and the ISPF Workplace. DSLIST and the Workplace are limited to data sets only, and the Workplace has a user interface that many people find difficult to use. The SimpList user interface is easy to understand and doesn't make you jump through any hoops to build an object list. All you have to do is type in the name (or pattern) in one of the object name fields and it is there for good. On the other hand, you can use ISPF edit to build an object list via the EDL command.

As a working programmer with a failing middle-aged memory, sometimes it feels like I spend more time searching for dataset names and (mis)typing them than I do actually writing code. And there is the time spent searching manuals for the syntax of a command that I can 'almost' remember. SimpList can eliminate all of this thrashing around: once you've looked something up, you can keep it within easy reach.

Moreover, once you've got an object name on your list, there is a lot you can do with it. When you select a PDS (or PDSE) for Edit, Browse, or View, SimpList opens what it calls an 'Advanced Member List' (AML). This powerful feature brings together, on one panel, member list functions that are normally found in different products. There are too many functions to describe them all in this space, but one of the major ones that I've made a lot of use of is the 'SEEK' command. The 'SEEK' command, using similar syntax as ISPF's 'Find', scans the entire PDS for the target string. If you specify the 'ALL' parameter, then a new member list containing the hits is displayed. From there you can issue another SEEK or any other function. The member lists are nested so that you can retrace your way back up the chain with the END key.

AML also has a 'CHGALL' command that lets you perform global changes across the entire PDS, a 'COMPRESS' command, a command that launches any edit macro against all or selected members, line commands for Edit, Browse, View, Rename, Copy, Move, Delete, reset ISPF stats and several others.

Other products have similar functions, but SimpList is unique because it gathers them all in the same place. During my evaluation of this product, I found that I was spending my entire working day within it. There was never a need to shut it down in order to do something else.

From a systems programmer's perspective, SimpList is installed like most ISPF applications and has no special needs in terms of operating system exits or Linklist requirements. For best performance, the vendor recommends concatenating the libraries in your logon procedure, but LIBDEF can also be used.

Installing and configuring SimpList is very straightforward. The vendor supplies an ISPF dialog that you can use to update a table where you specify the startup procedures used at your installation for the products that you use to manipulate DB2 tables, VSAM data sets and IMS data bases. Sample startup routines for Compuware's Fileaid, IBM's File Manager and Mackinney's own File Marvel product are provided by the vendor if you don't already have a suitable one in place.

FIGURE 1: SIMPLIST SCREEN CAPTURE

```

DEVL ----- SimpList - LIST 'X' ----- 1 to 11 of 99
COMMANDS ?=> SCROLL ?=> CSR

FUNCTION ?=> E - B,C,E,H,I,L,P,U,V,1,2,3 LIST 'X' INDEX ?=> Demo

PROJECT ?=> FUNCTIONS: (scroll LEFT/RIGHT for more information)
LIBRARY ?=> Browse, Copy/move, Edit, HSM, Info, List, Print, Utilis,
TYPE ?=> View, 1,2,3 User defined by entering PRODF on cmd line.
MEMBER ?=> LINE CMDS: Repeat, Select, Top, Z-bottom (plus above).

OTHER OBJ ?=>
- OBJ 1 ?=> 'ABCD.REPRT.FILE' (COMMENTS BEGIN WITH LEFT BRACE
- OBJ 2 ?=> 'ABCD.MARY.CLIST(MEMB1)' (PARTITIONED (PDS) DATA SET
- OBJ 3 ?=> 'MARY.CLIST(MEM*)' (UNQUALIFIED PDS WITH WILD MEMBER
- OBJ 4 ?=> 'ABCD.*.DATA' (DATA SET WITH WILD CARD
- OBJ 5 ?=> 'ABCD.MARY:FRED.CLIST' (MERGED MEMBER LIST FOR 2 PDS'S
- OBJ 6 ?=> 'ABCD.TEST.TABLE(0)' (GENERATION DATA GROUP (GDG)
- OBJ 7 ?=> 'ABCD.VSAM.FILE' (VSAM FILE
- OBJ 8 ?=> '-DIS THREAD (*) (DB2 COMMAND BEGINS WITH "-"
- OBJ 9 ?=> '-SYSIBM.SYSVOLVMS (DB2 TABLE BEGINS WITH "-"
- OBJ 10 ?=> '/STA REGION IMS1 (IMS COMMAND BEGINS WITH "/"
- OBJ 11 ?=> '/MY.DBDLIB(PRODDB)' (IMS DATABASE BEGINS WITH "/"
  
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Likes:

1. Intuitive user interface
2. Integrated environment
3. Powerful feature set
4. Easy installation

Dislikes:

1. Limited to three user defined functions
2. Object names limited to 59 bytes

I was also unable to test the Workstation file support because ISPF Client/Server is not active at our site.

Overall, this is an excellent product that would be a welcome addition to any mainframe shop. The learning curve is nearly zero and the productivity gains are significant for both systems and applications programmers. With a low introductory price (contact the vendor at www.mackinney.com for details) the return on investment for this product could be measured in days rather than weeks or months.

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The installer is also required to modify a couple of REXX execs in order to define the DB2 and/or IMS subsystem names that are in use at your site.

One of the final steps in the installation is to set up some ISPF Command Table entries. Some systems programmers don't like dealing with Command Tables, but I strongly recommend that you follow the detailed instructions provided by the vendor and install the commands. Besides allowing you to launch SimpList from any ISPF panel, the commands make available powerful point-and-shoot features that you can use anywhere in ISPF. In SDSF, for example, you can type 'BR' on the command line (or, better yet, set up a PFK to do it) and put the cursor on a dataset name. Press Enter and Browse will be invoked on that dataset.

Performance is excellent, from both a human and a systems perspective. The product is distributed as compiled REXX and the majority of the ISPF panels are ISPPREP'd. The panels are well laid out and consistent in their appearance and operation and feature a very extensive and well written Help facility. Typing is kept to a minimum because most functions can be selected by placing the cursor on the appropriate command name and pressing Enter.

One important benefit is that it makes ISPF more accessible to the new user. Think back to when you first learned ISPF and try to remember how much time you spent just learning how to navigate through the panels, and which functions could be performed on which panel. How many times did you hear things like "No, you have to go to 3.1 to do that?" SimpList does away with all of that by centralizing all functions in one place.

For advanced users, SimpList has an API that you can use in your own ISPF applications to invoke any SimpList function. You can also define your own line commands that you can use on the object list panel or the AML. I have already taken advantage of this ability by creating a function that I can use to launch our homegrown source management system, right from the same member list where I was editing my program. I have another function that launches the ever-popular "PDS" utility from any object list. The possibilities are limitless.

This brings me to one of the very few issues that I have with the product: it only supports three user defined functions. For most users this will be insignificant, but some advanced users may find this somewhat restrictive.

Another nit is that there is a 59 byte limit on the size of an object name. This is more than enough for objects such as dataset names and DB2 table names, but it limits the DB2 and IMS commands that you can store there.

One feature that I was unable to test was the IMS interface which allows you to execute IMS operator's commands from your TSO session. This interface requires APPC (Advanced Peer to Peer Communications) to be active on your IMS system, which is not the case at our site.

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