

MapInfo Professional v6.5 upgrade

Bob Barr reviews the latest upgrade to MapInfo's popular *MapInfo Professional*, version 6.5.

MapInfo is one of the most popular desktop mapping packages, with a loyal user base that appreciates the product's ease of use and business-like approach to mapping and spatial analysis. The product is regularly updated and users have the option of purchasing each upgrade as it comes along, or purchasing maintenance and receiving all updates for a year. Some users opt not to upgrade, which can cause some difficulties if multiple versions of the product are used at the same site, because there have been changes in data format between versions. Companies that rely on the upgrade cycle for a

significant part of their income have the dilemma of how to add enough value to each new version to persuade users to move on, without changing the product so much that existing skills become redundant. Microsoft has a regular upgrade strategy for most of its main products, but the company is noticing a degree of 'innovation fatigue' that makes it more and more difficult to persuade users that each upgrade is worth investing in. So the question is, has MapInfo changed enough to make the upgrade to version 6.5 compelling?

As usual, the upgrade includes both new and

enhanced features. The new features include enhanced support for Windows 2000. In previous versions, there were problems with multi-user network installations as certain shared files were placed in locations that could be accessed by all users. This would appear not to be a difficulty; yet our experience in student lab classes was that only the first student using MapInfo could carry out certain functions, such as thematic mapping, because that student then locked the configuration files and further students were unable to use that function. Version 6.5 follows Windows installer

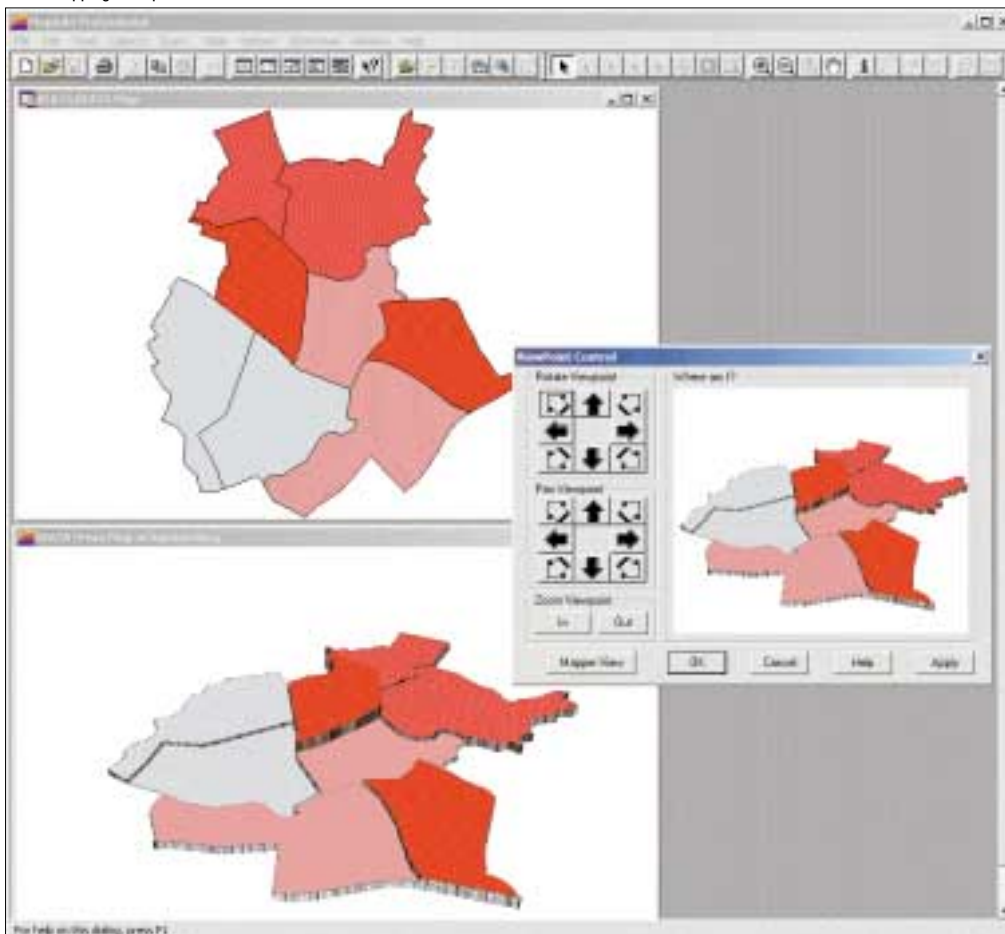
conventions and overcomes these difficulties by placing key configuration files in individual users' directories. This may be considered a bug-fix rather than a new feature, but it is one that will be very much appreciated by system managers.

Other new features include useful additional functions. For example, it has often been tedious to select a large proportion of the records relating to objects on the screen. A new 'invert selection' function now allows the user to select the records that are to be excluded from a selection, rather than those that are to be included, and then to flip those objects to unselected and all others to selected.

There have been some limitations to the way in which multiple objects can be handled by MapInfo. Version 6.5 introduces Multipoint objects, which can be made up of a number of points, and Collections, which can be treated as a single object but are made up of multiple objects that can individually be of different types. The new version also includes much greater flexibility in handling object linkage and faults in object topology. Previously, third-party tools were required to carry out many of these operations, but, as in the upgrade to version 6.0, more and more popular tools are being included as part of basic MapInfo functionality.

Version 6.0 introduced 3D tools that overlapped in functionality with products such as Vertical Mapper. Version 6.5 includes a pair of stereo spectacles to allow three-dimensional objects to be viewed directly in 3D rather

Prism mapping in MapInfo 6.5



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than as 2D projections. This functionality has been enhanced by the addition of new grid interpolators and handlers which allow the construction of TIN (Triangulated Irregular Network) models and the direct opening of a number of additional 3D data formats including .dem files. Thematic mapping capabilities have been enhanced by the addition of a Prism mapping tool that allows three-dimensional extruded area maps to be produced. While visually involving, the value of Prism maps can be limited when area based data is used; however, such a tool can be used with building outlines and building heights to produce urban structure models. Viewing angles can be

adjusted to allow the Prism maps to be presented most clearly.

Another important enhancement is the facility for displaying raster layers as translucent images to allow underlying layers to be viewed through the raster layer. This allows much clearer combined raster and vector maps to be produced.

In addition to the new features, many minor enhancements have been made which should continue to improve the already high level of usability of the product. While some of these enhancements could have been slipstreamed in service packs or as patches, there are enough of them included in this new version to make a significant

difference to users. For example, the valuable HTML output functions included in release 6.0 have been enhanced to support points, lines, arcs, ellipses and rectangles. Multiple layers, each with their own hotlinks and hyperlinks, can be used and landing pages can be combined into a single HTML page.

Conclusions

So, has MapInfo done enough in Version 6.5 to keep the upgrade bandwagon on the road? As a keen MapInfo user I think it has, but this is a harder and harder trick to pull off. The features that are being added and enhanced will continue to enthuse dedicated MapInfo users, but they do not affect the basic functionality, which remains good and more than adequate for most users' needs. Hard-bitten IT managers may become less willing to keep moving through the upgrade cycle, and it is noticeable that some large organisations are sticking with

earlier or much earlier versions of MapInfo.

In the face of new, or much modified, products from its major competitors, MapInfo's strength is that it is a tried and tested favourite with most of the bugs and wrinkles ironed out. However, there must be a limit to how much additional functionality can, and should, be built on the basic architecture before a more radical re-design becomes necessary. Version 6.5 will tide MapInfo over the current upgrade cycle, but users, and new users in particular, will be taking an ever closer look at where MapInfo is going in the future.

A full review of MapInfo Professional version 6 appeared in the March 2001 issue of GI News.

Dr Robert Barr is director of the Regional Research Laboratory, University of Manchester, and chairman of the AGI.

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Department of Information Science
City University, London
Northampton Square
London EC1V 0HB, UK