Annual Report
Working Group on Astronomical Software
Submitted by R. J. Hanisch, Chair
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This report covers the period from June 1995 (after the Pittsburgh AAS Meeting) through June 1996 (including the Madison meeting).

The WGAS held its third winter meeting in conjunction with the San Antonio AAS Conference in January 1996. In addition to the usual business meeting and contributed papers, WGAS hosted a special session on Network Information Services for Astronomy. This latter session featured nine talks highlighting current and innovative uses of the World-Wide Web for supporting research in astronomy, including the ADS Abstract Service (G. Eichhorn), the Electronic *ApJ* (P. Boyce), Electronic Preprints (R. Hanisch), On-Line Ph.D. Dissertations (K. Strom), the Astronomical Software Directory Service (H. Payne), AstroBrowse (S. Murray), WISARD (N. Oliversen), AMASE (C. Cheung), and CDS (F. Genova). The talks were excellent, but the session was rather poorly attended (30–35 in total).

There were five contributed papers at the regular WGAS session: three concerned new products and services from the CDS, and the others were about Software for the Sloan Digital Sky Survey (C. Stoughton) and the XTE All Sky Monitor Data Products (J. Lochner). There was a short discussion concerning FITS issues. Attendance was also quite small at this session (25–30 people).

Four software technical reports were submitted for publication in the summer (1996) BAAS. This is down from 1995, when 11 reports were submitted.

The relatively small turn-out at WGAS sessions this year and the small number of submissions of BAAS software technical reports indicates a change in focus for people interested in astronomical software. The annual ADASS (Astronomical Data Analysis Software and Systems) Conference is three days long and draws approximately 300 participants; it has become the pre-eminent conference for astronomical software. At the 1995 ADASS, held in Tucson in October, there were 130 oral and poster papers presented. There is a published proceedings for the conference, and this has reduced the need to rely upon the BAAS technical reports for disseminating information about astronomical software. There is no way that one or two WGAS sessions held in parallel with other events at a regular AAS meeting can draw a similar audience as ADASS. Also, astronomers have become comfortable with using the WWW as an information resource and with the concepts and goals of electronic publishing, so that the WGAS does not now need to function in an educational role with respect to network technologies. It is a sign of success of ADASS, not failure of WGAS, that ADASS is now the focal point for exchange of information about astronomical software.

The need for WGAS remains, however, in order to have an official body within the AAS to consider issues related to software and data format standards. In particular, the WGAS contains a FITS Committee that is the official voting authority for revisions and additions to the FITS data format standard. The chair of the FITS Committee is appointed by the chair of the WGAS, and members are drawn from throughout the community (representing not only software developers and major data centers, but also end-users and university astronomy departments).

At this point, then, it is my intention to suspend organizing regular oral sessions of the WGAS, and to confine WGAS dealings to FITS and other standards issues that the Society may find of interest. There is, of course, a danger of there becoming a disconnect between astronomical software developers (the primary participants at ADASS) and astronomical software users (the primary participants at AAS meetings). My approach to this is to continue to make the program of the ADASS Conference attractive to astronomers and, on an as-needed basis, schedule special sessions of the WGAS during AAS meetings. I am also willing to work with the Executive Office to update and enhance the information about WGAS which appears on the AAS WWW server. Should the need arise for special topical sessions related to software or computer and information technologies in general, the WGAS will be happy to organize and coordinate these.