

## **Gerald's Column by Gerald Fitton**

First some comment about Fireworkz Pro and then to my monthly discourse on a more general subject. What will it be about this time? Wait and see!

### **Fireworkz Pro**

Each month I try to classify the letters I receive by subject so that I can discover what is topical. There is no doubt about the top-of-the-list subject for this month. It is Colton Software's recently released Fireworkz Pro. Letters range from requests asking me to help with the creation of an unusual type of document starting with "How can I . . .", through wish lists for the next version, to massive detailed comparisons with earlier Colton Software products.

So far as help goes, where I know how to do something I am only too pleased to help – but please send me your problem with a disc example, self addressed label and, if possible, return postage. In some cases it is not possible to do the thing you want to do, at least not in the way you want to do it. In many of these latter cases I have found that you're asking me the wrong question. This is because you have already made up your mind how you are going to do something – then you find that Fireworkz won't do it your way! Often, when I find out exactly what you're trying to achieve, I can suggest an alternative approach which not only works but is usually much better and simpler to execute. However, I must admit that there are some occasions, I'm no help at all!

Let me turn now to your praise and criticism of Fireworkz Pro. I think the fairest thing to say is that your reactions are mixed; an even better description is that your views are polarised. I have to generalise and, as with all generalities, there are exceptions. Those of you who have come to Fireworkz Pro directly (without the intermediate stages of Wordz, Resultz and Fireworkz) are most impressed and those who have taken the long road with Colton Software from PipeDream 3 (or 2), through PipeDream 4, Wordz, Resultz, Fireworkz and now to Pro are generally the most disappointed.

If, like me, you have used Colton Software's products for a long time let me ask you to step back and look at Fireworkz Pro from a distance. The fact that new users are impressed and like the package is because (a) learning to use it is relatively easy and (b) it has many excellent features you won't find elsewhere. In the first draft of the Fireworkz' specification, what these days is called a 'short learning curve' was high on the list of priorities. A second important part of that specification was that it should have more useful features than any similar package. To my mind, the positive reaction of new users to Fireworkz Pro shows that these two major objectives have been achieved. For new users Fireworkz Pro is an excellent package – and they say so!

So why are we long term users of Colton Software's products disappointed? Part of the reason is that we expected something better! When PipeDream was launched it was unique. It was by far the best spreadsheet for the Archimedes, what's more it could be used as a word processor and simple database as well! PipeDream has so many features that, even with many years of experience, aficionados are still discovering short cuts and methods of improving the way they use it! A long time ago I said that, with PipeDream, you can do things which are impossible with other packages. That is still true.

I think we all expected that Fireworkz would have all the good features of PipeDream plus many more. It hasn't happened because, in changing to and concentrating on a page based layout, font styles, variable height rows, variable width slots and button bars, some of the versatility of PipeDream has been lost – if only temporarily. From my correspondence the three features of PipeDream which are missed most are keyboard short cuts, command files and fast character printing (using PipeDream printer drivers).

There is good news; I am assured that in some future version the first two of these three features will be added; the underlying structure of the program code is there, it just needs refinement. I'm sure many of us look forward to the day we can use these highly desirable features. Although fast character printing is possible from Fireworkz (through Acorn's RISC OS drivers) many with PipeDream experience find it too difficult to get to grips with it properly. For others it does work!

Apart from loss of functionality (such as that I've just described) perhaps the greatest complaint from ex PipeDream users is that Fireworkz is slower. I've also received reports that, with some machine and spreadsheet configurations (but not all), a direct comparison of Fireworkz and Fireworkz Pro shows the latter to be noticeably slower. In word processing mode unfavourable comparisons are made with Style and Publisher. One thing we can be sure of, Colton Software are acutely aware of this complaint and are working on it.

The most serious criticism of Fireworkz Pro which I've received is that the integration of the card database is nothing like as seamless as Colton Software devotees expected from the company which created the leading integrated package. Most of us expected that we would be able to mark a block in a Fireworkz spreadsheet containing, say, names and addresses and, with a few deft mouse clicks, convert the marked block into database format. Disappointingly it is necessary to use an intermediate CSV format file. I have spoken to Mark Colton about this and I've been assured that a 'Make database' command (from a marked block in a Fireworkz spreadsheet) will be included in the next version of Fireworkz Pro.

So what is my summary of Fireworkz Pro, not for those new to Colton Software (who are generally most favourably impressed) but to long term devotees (who are generally disappointed)? Yes! It has bugs (more than you and I expected at this stage); it lacks features (which PipeDream has) which you believe you need; it is slower than you'd like it to be; the database feature is not as seamlessly integrated and you expected it to be.

In spite of these deficiencies my advise is that you should wait a while before scrapping your investment of time and money in Fireworkz Pro and looking for something else. The grass might look greener on the other side of the fence – a new package might not do what you want. My view is that Fireworkz Pro has the makings of a good integrated package – all it needs is improvement!

So, in the meantime, what to do? Colton Software have a reputation for listening to their customers' criticisms, particularly those who they regard as 'family' (the word they use to imply a long term commitment between them and their faithful users). So, if you are disappointed don't give up, write to them with your suggestions for improvements. I'm sure that they'll listen and that when the next version is released you'll be pleased that you did.

Finally, if you are about to buy Fireworkz Pro then don't be put off by these criticisms I have voiced. My information is that by the time you read this (or shortly afterwards) there will be a new release which will have the most annoying and mystifying of the bugs removed.

## **Topic Number 2 – Introduction**

One of the questions I am asked with increasing frequency is “Why should I buy an Archimedes (for my next machine) rather than a PC?” Most of the people who ask this are not intending to buy a PC; they've already made up their mind to buy an Acorn machine. Their difficulty is that they are being confused by facts thrown at them by PC users; what they need is reassurance that the decision they've already made is the right one.

I give different answers to different people. These range from considerations of the price of comparable software, to the way in which all packages and utilities (including Style, Draw and the Acorn Font manager) work harmoniously with each other to make the whole system greater than the sum of the parts. However, there is one type of user for whom I have a more unusual answer. Those users (a) receive a lot of software on disc or over the 'phone (b) send software to others.

To these people I sometimes say that one big advantage of buying Acorn is that: (a) It's much harder to catch a virus (b) The viruses generally do less damage (c) There are fewer viruses and the ones that exist are well documented (d) The cost of keeping your system clear of viruses is much less.

The PC has a soft operating system (the Acorn machines hold their operating system in ROM) and when that gets infected you're in real trouble. There are many PC viruses and the degree of protection which you can get depends upon how much money you can afford. Some commercial organisations using PCs (who must keep free of viruses) spend hundreds of pounds every year on anti virus utilities. On an Acorn machine you can get a better degree of protection for less than £30 a year than you can by spending hundreds of pounds a year on protecting a PC.

## **What is a Virus**

Referring to computer systems in general there are three types of nasty which you catch—only one of these is correctly called a virus.

The first is more correctly called a Trojan Horse. These nasties masquerade as one thing, probably something useful, and do something nasty as well. An example of such a nasty is a utility which you install so that your backspace key (just to the right of the £ key) deletes backward but the <Delete> key deletes in the forward direction (just like <Copy> does in Style). You might install such a utility because you think it's useful. Another useful utility is one which grabs the screen as a Sprite. Of course the Trojan Horse utility you buy does work and does exactly what you installed it to do. What you won't discover until it's too late, is that it does something nasty as well. (See below for nasty things which can happen.) Usually the Trojan Horse doesn't make copies of itself and you have to be running it before it can do its dirty work! In the Acorn world there are Trojan Horse types of nasty.

The second type of nasty is more correctly called a Worm. If you have a Worm in your system then you probably have only one. If you have a network then it might move around on the network. If you have a stand alone machine then it may move from one package or data file to another gobbling up bits of program or data as it goes. Most Worms don't reproduce. As far as I know the only Worm type of nasty on Acorn systems operate on networks and not stand alone machines.

The third type is the true Virus. If you have one then you'll soon have many copies spread throughout your hard and floppy discs. Generally the Acorn viruses are stand alone relocatable modules or they are lines of code added to existing modules. An example of a module is the Colours (ColourTrans) module which you'll find in your !System directory. Modules such as Colours can be infected by having the virus added to it.

Some stand alone viral modules have a Sprite filetype, some the Data filetype and others the Basic filetype—but they aren't! They are modules written in machine code. As a general rule the viral module (or the legitimate module which has been infected) is called into action by adding an extra line to a !Boot file. What the module does is to reproduce itself and place a copy of itself in another package's directory. For example a copy called from within the !Style directory might be placed in the !Fireworkz directory (and the !Fireworkz !Boot file modified). When you switch on next time and run the !Fireworkz !Boot file, the copy (from within the !Fireworkz directory) will be copied somewhere else (eg into the !DrawPlus directory). In the meantime, as well as making copies of itself, the virus will do something nasty—more details of these nasty actions are listed below.

## **What Do Viruses Do**

From here on let me concentrate only on those viruses which can affect an Acorn machine.

Nearly all Acorn viruses enter the user's system through packages (which Acorn call applications) rather than through data files. So something starting with a ! such as !Style can be infected but something such as a [ReadMe] file is much less likely to be infected.

Some viruses have a trigger date which is activated by the real time clock in the Archimedes. Until then they do nothing except reproduce themselves so that, by the time something happens you will probably have multiple infections.

Some viruses change the datestamp of a file so that when you upgrade by dragging a new version of, say, Colours, over the old one the old one fails to be overwritten because its datestamp is newer than the new version of the file! I've known many people who've failed to upgrade their !System modules because of this type of virus.

Other viruses only do nasty things now and again. For example they may do something nasty only when it's the 13th (or 113th) time you call them; once again you can have these viruses for a long time before anything nasty happens.

Some viruses do simple things such as grabbing memory every time you load a file; the result is that you seem to use up memory far too quickly!

Others do very nasty things; there is one which will format your :0 floppy disc (unless you've write protected it); another will delete part of a data file (and you won't notice it until you reload it and find that it's corrupted); there is one which modifies your configuration or your (switch on) !Boot file (so that your !System directory can't be found)!

## **Some History**

Both as an author for Archive and in running our User Groups we receive and send out many discs. It would cause us no little discomfort if we contracted a virus; it would be disastrous if we sent out a batch of discs containing a virus. Although we haven't done it yet (and I hope we never will) many magazines, including Archive (a long time ago) have had the misfortune to send out a virus infected disc.

My recollection is that at first Acorn ridiculed the idea that viruses could exist on the Archimedes. Even when the first ones appeared Acorn (in my view mistakenly) tried to keep the lid on this information since they thought it might cause a panic. When the news broke it did!

Acorn developed the first Virus protection utility for their machines and then hastily appointed (if that is the right word) a company called Pineapple Software to continue further development.

## **What Do We Do**

For our part we subscribe to the Pineapple protection programme. This Acorn approved scheme costs us less than £30 a year. As part of this protection programme we receive about four discs from Pineapple each year; these discs contain the latest version of a virus detection and remover utility called Killer.

When any of you send me a floppy disc I write protect your disc (so that I can't infect it) and then I always run !Killer over it before I click on the :0 disc drive. If I find anything nasty on your disc then I let you know right away – by 'phone if possible.

You will appreciate that !Killer can protect me only from known viruses (ie viruses known to Acorn and Pineapple); however, the module VProtect (part of the protections system), which I always load at startup, is a much better since it prevents my machine becoming contaminated with the most common types of unknown viruses (ones which load through an Obey file such as !Boot files). I do realise that there is still a chance of infection but I have no doubt that I am using the best virus protection available for the Archimedes.

I keep the masters of my packages (such as !Style) write protected, I keep back ups of all my data files. If my system does get infected (it hasn't yet) then I can rebuild it from the master and backup discs.

## What Can You Do

Ideally, subscribe to Pineapple's virus protection programme. Write protect all incoming discs before you insert them in your machine. Keep only packages (not data) on your hard disc. Keep data files on floppy disc. Keep a backup copy of all your data files. If you do those things then, if an unknown virus strikes, you will be able to rebuild your system from the master discs and from the backup data files.

Enquiries about the operation of !Killer, and administrative/sales enquiries (eg area/site licences) should be made to:

Pineapple Software, 39 Brownlea Gardens, Seven Kings, Ilford, IG3 9NL

Phone: (+44) (0) 181 599 1476

Fax: (+44) (0) 181 598 2343

E-Mail: sales@pinesoft.demon.co.uk

## An Interesting Example

Recently one of my correspondents (who wants to remain anonymous), contracted a version of the Module virus. He tried unsuccessfully to kill his viruses with !Killer and, in desperation, asked for our help. We did help him and we asked him to write a few words on the subject.

He writes:

"I had !Killer installed on my hard disc and I managed to get it to run but it failed to find a virus I was sure I had. When I finished checking my hard disc all the signs and symptoms of viral infection, including a message from the virus, were still there, indeed the situation was worse than when I started. Gerald suggested that I look in my System.Modules directory; I did and found that the virus had datestamped many of my modules. I decided that I must have an unknown virus but Gerald had a different idea. I was wrong—he was right (as usual)! What had happened was that a System module needed by !Killer was infected and was (a) preventing !Killer doing its work and (b) infecting everything else! With Gerald's help I put together a 'killing system' on a write protected floppy disc which removed over 90 copies of the virus off my hard disc. The moral of this story is to keep an infection free copy of your !Killer on a write protected floppy together with an infection free copy of all the !System modules it needs."

## The PC Emulator

The PC side of the Archimedes can contract PC viruses. You can't kill PC viruses with !Killer. If you receive and send out much PC material then you are likely to get your PC side infected with a PC virus. If you decide to go for protection then it will cost you lots of money. If you still insist on using the PC emulator then make sure that you can rebuild your DOS, Windows and PC Packages from the original master disks.

There is an alternative to buying expensive viral protection for your PC side.

My son, who works professionally in the PC world, suggests that everyone who uses a PC should reformat their hard disc and install all utilities, packages, etc from the master discs every six months (or more often if it's important to remain virus free). He says "Keep only packages etc on the hard disc; keep data on floppies! That way you'll be able to rebuild your system at any time you think you might have been infected."

I think he's right and that, in the case of the PC, reformatting and reinstalling from (write protected) master discs regularly is the most cost effective method of keeping a PC system clean. I know that many of you will disagree—I can only give you the opinion of myself and that of my son.

## **In Conclusion**

Contracting a virus is a traumatic experience; it can happen to you. If it does then don't jump to the conclusion that it has only just happened and blame the last disc you received.

If you don't have protection then, when you catch the virus, copy any unique data files (as far as I know data files can be infected only with a worm) from your hard disc onto floppies (they ought to be on floppies anyway), reformat your hard disc and then reinstall all your packages (eg Fireworkz) from your (write protected) master discs. Alternatively, telephone Pineapple (or NCS?) and order Killer on your credit card.

## **PipeDream and the Risc PC**

Is there a problem? I still don't have a Risc PC yet so the following is second hand. The Risc PC doesn't use the system font but an outline font which you can choose for yourself. I've been told that when the row numbers exceed 99 then the leading numbers are lost so that row 1234 will appear as 34 (without the 12 in front). If you have found this to be so and particularly if you have any solution or advice for a work around then please write to me.

## **Finally**

You can write to me at the Abacus Training address given on the back cover of Archive; it is quicker than writing via the Archive office.

If you write to Colton Software about Fireworkz Pro (or PipeDream and the Risc PC or anything else) then please let me know how you get on.

. . . And (but not as an afterthought) thanks again for all your letters; they're always good fun to read!