

Gerald's Column by Gerald Fitton

Correspondence

“Whatsoever things are true . . . think on these things.” But why?

I am still receiving many letters which contain questions and remarks of a philosophical nature arising out of my comments in the May 1996 Archive. One which I found well written in that it was both witty and yet quite serious suggested that I was more than part way towards proving the existence of God with a spreadsheet! Although I would not make that claim I must confess to a certain sense of satisfaction when I receive letters suggesting that I have caused some of you to “think on these things” particularly if it is for the first time in many years or, in some cases, many decades since you have been inclined to wonder.

I have had many letters from teachers to which I would like to give a general response. Good teachers can be proud of the profession to which they belong. Although I have always done some teaching (at first it was a Maths A Level evening class) I came into full time teaching late in life. Like many of you who are teachers I find it very satisfying. In my working life initially I *made things* like aeroplanes which worked – and that gave me a great deal of pleasure. In a second career I *made profits*, mainly for others – that too was satisfying until I discovered that I didn't like the person I was becoming. At my interview for the job which I now hold I repeated some of the above and added that being a teacher would give me an opportunity to ‘*make people*’. I was asked to explain what I meant – so I did!

In fact the reality was better than my expectations. As well as providing my students with knowledge, to those with the currency to buy, I, like all good teachers, peddle wisdom. The currency the student must be willing to exchange for this wisdom is their time, their patience, curiosity and an addiction to seeking that which is true. “Seek the Truth and the Truth shall make you free.” The student with the currency to buy the wisdom peddled by a good teacher will be freed from exploitation by those who are determined to twist the truth into traps for the naïve. “Ask, and it shall be given you” – wisdom (and much more). With the decline of the libraries, the extended family, and the growth in those TV programmes which entertain rather than educate, good teachers remain one of the few sources of wisdom for our young. To those teachers I say the value of the wares which you peddle are beyond any price which can be included in a financial balance sheet – be proud to do so and don't sacrifice them on the altar of assessment criteria.

Before knowing his exam results, a student made a special journey today solely to thank me for changing his life. Risking political incorrectness I have to say, with some understatement, that this student is not one of my brightest. He is likely to fail his exam and we both know it – but my heart was touched by his gratitude. It was most eloquently expressed and totally unexpected. I shall treasure that eternal moment – it is likely that he will remember me kindly for the rest of his life. Most good teachers I know have experienced such moments.

I have received several more letters which relate to my comments about the morality of the National Lottery! I never suspected that so many of you would want to discuss your views

(or mine) with me. In spite of all the advice I've received I still can not understand my reluctance to participate in the lottery yet, at the same time, I don't feel anything like the same way about Premium Bonds. Suggestions are invited.

PipeDream

I shall continue with my detailed comparison of various spreadsheets in future issues of Archive but I've been asked by many of you to "get to the bottom line". OK. Here goes.

Possibly I'm prejudiced but, in spite of its age and, by the standards of more modern Archimedes software, its peculiarities, I prefer PipeDream most of all. I accept that those of you who have never used PipeDream but have used other Archimedes packages would find it more difficult to learn than other spreadsheets, but one of its advantages is that it is a mature package with only a few obscure residual bugs. It is an integrated spreadsheet – word processor package. Everything which you can do through the menus is available as a keyboard short cut. It contains facilities so that you can build up your own custom functions and command file (automated sequences of keyboard short cuts). You can print quickly using fonts resident in the printer. The graphics package is superb.

Schema 2

My second choice is Schema 2.

I have not had Schema all that long but I like it. There is no doubt in my mind that, for some reason or other, Schema has not had the quality of media coverage which it deserves. It is a completely different package from the early Schema and, with hindsight, it would have been better to give it a new name (rather than Schema 2). It is an excellent spreadsheet, much more modern in its look, feel and operation than PipeDream. More importantly, it works – I have yet to find a serious bug!

I am getting used to using the common clip board to create tables or charts in Schema and load them into Impression. The more I use that facility the more I like it. I find that I can keep a Schema spreadsheet alive in one window whilst using Impression for all the text of my document. Then I illustrate my text with a table taken from the live Schema document. The table below is an example of such an operation. Porting charts via the clipboard is a bit more tricky and I have had a few problems.

x	$y = x^3$	$y = x^{(1/3)}$
0.000	0.000	0.000
0.010	0.000	0.215
0.020	0.000	0.271
0.030	0.000	0.311
0.040	0.000	0.342
0.050	0.000	0.368
0.060	0.000	0.391
0.070	0.000	0.412

If I had to pick just one thing in Schema which I would like added it would be the facility

to edit text within a cell rather than in the formula line. I believe that, together with the 'big slot' facility, this would provide nearly all the requirements that many have for a combined text and number processing package.

If I could have two new features the second would be Object Linking and Embedding (OLE) so that I could edit Draw files from within Schema and Schema tables from within Impression.

Schema macros

Last month, in error, I likened Schema macros to PipeDream custom functions. Using the Schema macro language you can create not only the equivalent of PipeDream custom functions but also PipeDream command files. In fact you can mix both functions and Schema commands within the same macro. Many is the time that correspondents have asked me how to do something in PipeDream or Fireworkz which required such a mixture and I have had to say that it couldn't be done, or at least it couldn't be done that way.

In many ways writing Schema macros is more like writing a BASIC program than writing a PipeDream custom function, so those of you with some skill in BASIC will find it easier to write Schema macros than PipeDream custom functions. Using a Schema macro you can load spreadsheets, you can modify their shape (add columns for example), you can create links between unrelated documents, you can create drawings (in a similar way to that which you can in BASIC) and add them to your document, you can execute special functions you have created, change and apply Styles, print out the result and Save part or all of what you have done under any file name you choose – and that's not a comprehensive list. The only problem I have is getting to grips with the huge degree of flexibility which this gives.

Like the PipeDream 'Record' command you can record sequences of commands as a macro (instead of writing them out in the programming language) and then merge the recorded commands with other commands or functions.

I am surprised that there is no library of Schema macros available so I'm going to start one. Let me quote the manual.

"If you can not write macros yourself you can still make good use of macros written by other people. In time macros for all sorts of useful jobs will appear in the Schema community." Send me your macros and I'll make them more widely available.

Porting

I am working on various methods of porting spreadsheets from PipeDream and Fireworkz into Schema. If you have already done this then I'd like to hear from you.

The 'bottom line' here is that I have ported quite complex individual spreadsheets and linked sets of spreadsheets into Schema. So, if you are thinking of giving up Fireworkz in favour of Schema then you needn't worry about all the hard work you put into creating your Fireworkz document; it won't be wasted; it can be ported into Schema.

Price

The price of Schema is (how much?) from Norwich Computer Services and includes VAT and delivery. Remember that your time and frustration should be taken into account when you decide whether to continue struggling with less mature bug ridden packages which are upgraded far too frequently. Really the initial price of a package is negligible compared with the effort you put into entering data, formula, etc. If that can be made easier or less frustrating then you will soon get a return on your investment.

Fireworkz

I get letters asking me if it is worth your while upgrading your current version of Fireworkz to the latest version. You have to pay for every upgrade now so this is not a trivial question. I get letters asking me what significant differences there are between the different versions.

I regret the answer I must give. As far as I can determine all the recent upgrades are merely bug fixes. Some of you who have paid for an upgrade knowing that it is just a bug fix find that a bug which didn't exist in an earlier version has now appeared in the paid for upgrade!

My advice to you is to document carefully any bugs you find, send your discs to Colton Software with the documented bug and you may receive a free upgrade with the bug you have documented fixed. On the other hand, if what you are doing with Fireworkz does not reveal any bugs, then don't upgrade – stick with the earlier version. Eventually, given time (and enough complaints) Fireworkz will mature into a reasonably bug free package. At that time you may find it worth while paying for an upgrade.

Most of the serious bugs are in the database part of Fireworkz Pro. This is both a good and bad thing. The good thing is that most of you have given up using the database part of Fireworkz Pro so the bugs in it don't matter any more. The bad thing is that Stuart Swales (the programmer) is spending most of his Fireworkz time on the database and so not much is happening to the non Pro section (which has its shortcomings).

Several of my correspondents tell me that are returning Fireworkz Pro to Colton Software and asking for a 'downgrade' back to Fireworkz non Pro together with a refund of the price they paid for the upgrade. They say that this is not just "I thought it might be a good idea to have the full package but I've changed my mind" but "the database part of Fireworkz Pro doesn't work in the way it was advertised so I want my money back!"

Graphics in non Pro is still a problem area. I receive reports (and discs with examples) which demonstrate how difficult it is to position graphics where you want them and then, in many cases, even when you've got the graphic where you want it on screen only half the graphic prints! The work around is this. Firstly load the graphic into Draw (or better into DrawPlus). Select All and then Group all the selected objects. Drag the selection so that the bottom left corner of the group is close to the bottom left corner of the Draw document. Save the document in Draw format. Now load the object into Fireworkz. Do not embed the graphic object in the Fireworkz document but leave it as a referenced object. You will find that it is easier to position and prints as it appears on screen.

Upgrading

From time to time I am asked about upgrading hardware as well as software. My general advice is not to upgrade unless you have a use for the extra facilities the upgrade will give you. Be patient! Given time you'll find that initial difficulties will be resolved as the package matures or the innovations of the new hardware stabilise.

Let's get particular. Do you really need the newest (not yet available) Acorn machine to do the things you want to do? If not then I suggest that you ought to consider buying not the newest machine but the more mature Risc PC. The new machine just over the horizon, like the grass on the other side of the fence, looks a bit too green. My advice to you is that, if you can, then you should wait until that greenery matures. In the meantime its delicious and luscious specification is driving down the price of the Risc PC (a little) but more importantly it is making for a much more flexible policy regarding the way it is sold.

Have a look at Paul's 'custom built' Risc PC offer. Essentially you start your specification with the bottom of the range Risc PC and you add extras to it to your own specification. Do you want a writable CD ROM drive? Yes! Then add it to your specification! Paul will give you a quote for your 'Mix and Match' specification, build it for you, test it and deliver it to your door in working order. You will have exactly the machine you want and, in many cases, it will be at a lower price than if you bought an off-the-shelf, top-of-the-range model!

I dare say that, for the less adept, if you tell him what software you want installed on your hard disc then he'll put that on for you. Maybe, if you are like one of my correspondents, a person who finds the installation of software fraught with difficulties you should send Paul your master discs (Schema, Publisher, Printers, Fonts, etc) and I'm sure that (for a reasonable fee) Paul's team will not only put together a Risc PC to your specification but will instal on it all your favourite packages and check out that they work together harmoniously. Such an installation service for the nervous takes all the hassle out of upgrading their system.

Paul will have to speak for himself but I've been asked if I know of any company which will transfer all my correspondent's favourite software from his current A3000 hard disc to a new Risc PC which he hasn't bought yet. He wants to go to a supplier who will provide that service. I have suggested to him that he tries Norwich Computer Services and gets a quote for a Mix and Match Risc PC to his specification with all his software packages and his own personal data files installed thereon and ready to go. At present he's still thinking about it. So Paul, is this a market you're willing to service?

Finally

Thank you for all your letters. I enjoy them all. Please feel free to write to me about any matter I raise, even if it has nothing to do with computers. I will reply.

If your letter is technical then please include a disc with an example. My address is at the Abacus Training address given at the back of Archive.