

Gerald's Column *by Gerald Fitton*

Although I have had many letters relating to topics raised in my last three articles I have to put them on hold so that I can tell you more about a new version of PipeDream which will be released at the Acorn World Show. Jill and I have been invited to attend that Show on the Colton Software stand and we look forward to renewing old acquaintances there.

Selling Technology

I notice a wind of change moving through the computer hardware market. Whereas, in the past, companies kept their "Technology" much to themselves in the (mistaken) belief that it would allow them to steal a march on their competitors nowadays I see more companies selling what they call "technological solutions" (chip sets containing the essential hardware and operating systems which use these chips) in the hope that they can increase the user base for their "Technology" to the point where it becomes a de facto standard.

The Philips compact cassette (which you now know as the ubiquitous audio cassette) beat the opposition into the ground in spite of the fact that the opposition (such as the 8 track format) had better technology. Philips succeeded because they asked a minimum royalty for their "Technology" and gave excellent technical support to those wanting to use it. I am pleased that Acorn are selling "Technology" to the likes of Digital; it will help ensure the future of the personal computers we have known as the Archimedes series. I see that Psion is also adopting this policy of selling "Technology". Bill Gates is steadfastly refusing to do so and I think that, in the longer term, his decision to keep his "Technology" to himself may be terminal!

PipeDream 4.50

Last month I reported that an alpha test version of PipeDream 4.50 existed. I have now received a beta test version and I've been giving it a try.

PipeDream 4.50 will be available at the Acorn World Show at Olympia at the beginning of November 1996 but only as an upgrade to those who have PipeDream already. The reason for limiting the market this way is that it will be issued without any documentation. You will need to bring with you your PipeDream discs (two of them). The upgrade will not be a free one (it might cost as much as £35 – though there might be a reduction at the Show) so it is relevant to ask, "Is it worth the cost of upgrading?" I shall try to answer that question. It is likely that, later on, PipeDream 4.5 will be available to new users.

The beta test version comes with a [ReadMe] file, part of which I reproduce below:

“Changes:

- “* High resolution sprites are now used.
- “* Window templates are three dimensional.
- “* Window templates now look fine on RISC OS 3.5 and later.
- “* Dynamic area storage for PipeDream files installed.
- “* Memory usage slightly revised.
- “* A number of small bugs fixed.
- “* Column and row numbers now position themselves correctly on Risc PC’s.
- “* Menus now align their shortcuts correctly on Risc PC’s.
- “* Kerning in outline fonts implemented. See the options dialogue box.
- “* Save boxes now allow you to drag their sprite using DragASprite.
- “* The Messages file has been preprocessed for faster loading and reduced run time space requirements. Each line is NUL (ASCII 0) terminated, the end of file being two adjacent NUL characters.”

Let me explain a few of the above Changes.

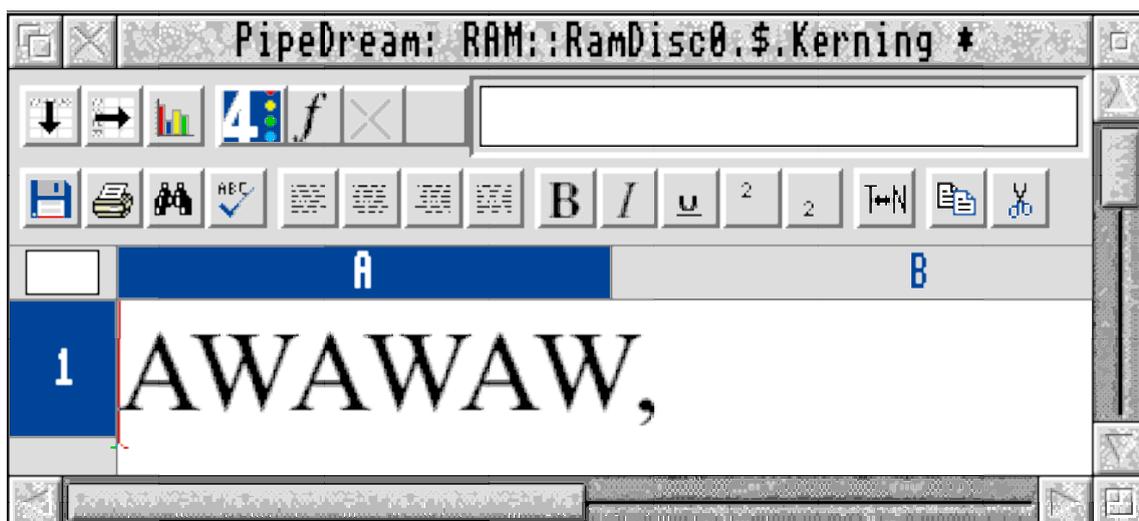
The installation of dynamic area storage speeds up the package on Risc PC machines and means that Clares’ virtual memory utility, Virtualise, can be used to store parts of files on disc when they won’t fit into the RAM (memory) installed within the machine. With Virtualise, PipeDream 4.50 can be used with massively large files.

In PipeDream 4.13 if you had a large spreadsheet with row numbers above 9999 then you lost the first digit of the row number. This annoying problem has been cured.

If you use outline fonts the you’ll find an extra row in the <Ctrl O> (Options) window. This extra option allows you to use kerning. The screen shot showing “Kerning:” appears a little later in this article.

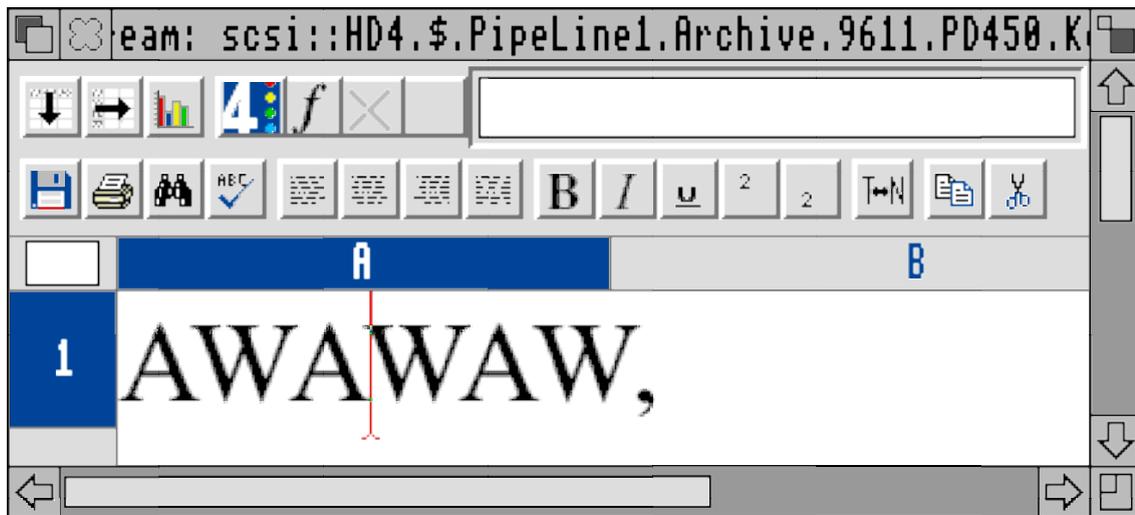
Kerning

The screenshot below shows a simple PipeDream file loaded into PipeDream 4.50.



I have chosen the Kerning ON option so you should notice that the capitals A and W

overlap. In the above screenshot you will see that I have installed a patch (see below) which contains the sprites for the newer looking 3D windows. The screenshot below shows the original window borders.



Button Bar

Both of the screenshots show the extensions to the top button bar and the new second button bar.

The icons in the top button bar, from left to right are:

- Replicate down – equivalent to <Ctrl BRD>
- Replicate right – equivalent to <Ctrl BRR>
- Create chart – equivalent to <Ctrl CHN>
- Enter formula in window – equivalent to <Ctrl EFW>
- Function list
- Escape from (ie cancel) editing formula line – equivalent to <Esc>
- Enter formula into spreadsheet – equivalent to <Return>

The second button bar from left to right are:

- Save – equivalent to <Ctrl FS>
- Print – equivalent to <Ctrl PO>
- Search and replace – equivalent to <Ctrl BSE>
- Spell check the whole document – equivalent to <Ctrl SC>
- Align left, centre, right, fully justify
- Bold, italic, underline, superscript, subscript
- Number to Text – or Text to Number – equivalent to <Ctrl BNT>
- Copy marked block – equivalent to <Ctrl BC>
- Block Move – equivalent to <Ctrl BM>

Speaking personally (many will disagree with me) I find that using keyboard short cuts is faster than button bars which in turn is faster than pop up menus. Hence, as a general rule, I welcome button bars when I am unfamiliar with a package because it gives access to the most frequently used operations without having to go through the tedious process of pop

up menus. I accept that all operations can not be included on a button bar because they take up too much valuable window space. However, as I become more familiar with the package I learn the keyboard short cuts and ultimately I stop using the button bar.

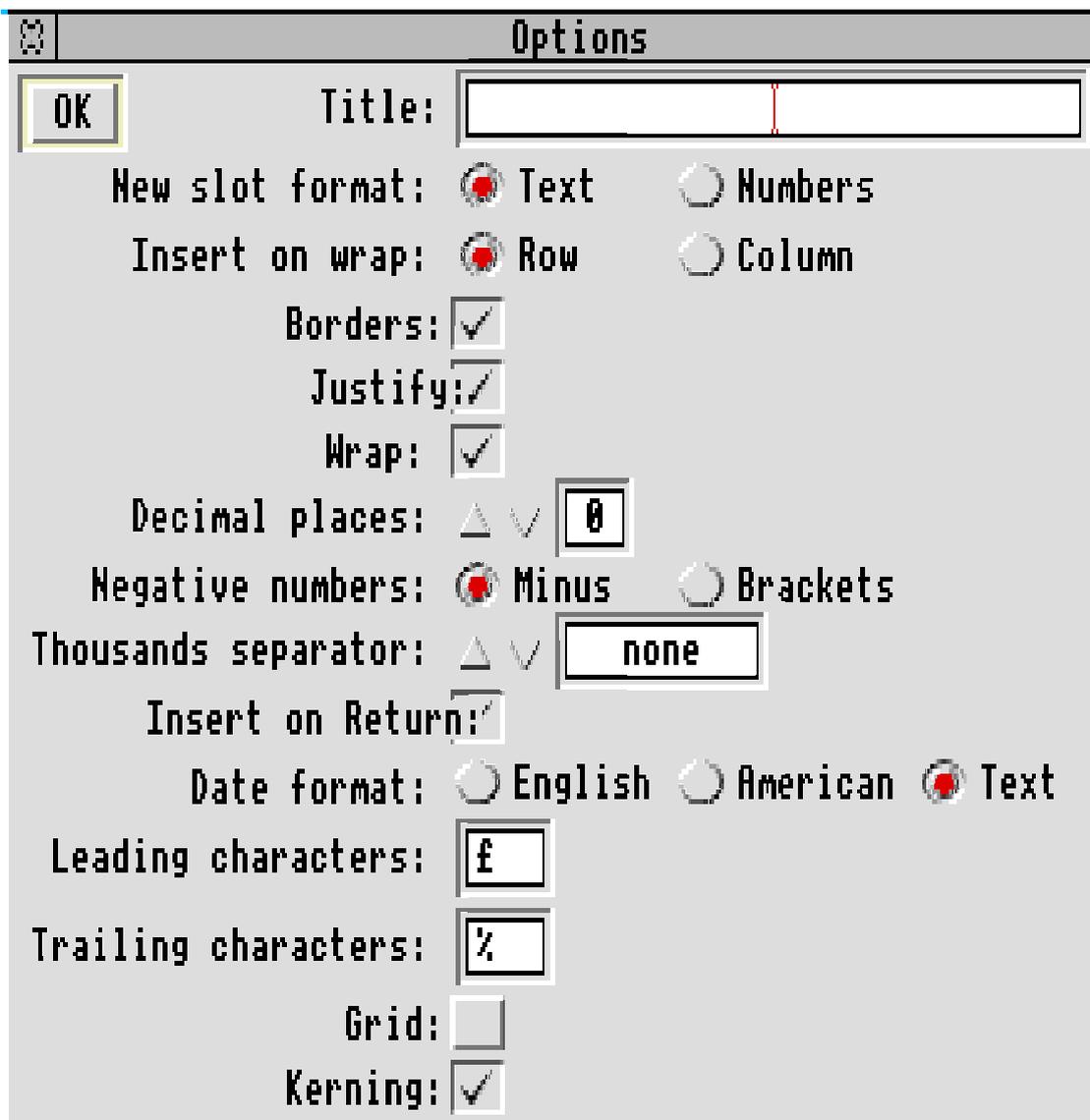
In view of the fact that PipeDream 4.5 is going to be offered initially only to those familiar with PipeDream 4.13 I question the usefulness of a button bar to that particular market segment. Later, when PipeDream 4.5 is offered to new users, the new button bars will be of great use to them.

RISC OS 3.1

In RISC OS 3.5 (and later), outline fonts rather than system fonts are used for the row numbers, column headings and, importantly, in pop up menus.

So what happens in RISC OS 3.1? Acorn's system font is used and you'll see from the screenshot below that Colton Software still have a small amount of work to do to make version 4.50 backward compatible to earlier versions of RISC OS.

The screenshot shows the new Options menu accessed with the command <Ctrl O>. In that screenshot you'll see the new option, "Kerning:", below the what was formerly the last entry, "Grid:". However, what I'd like you to notice is that "Justify:" and "Insert on return:" are too far to the right and so they overwrite part of the button. Beta test versions always have little problems like this so please don't let it put you off. Everything works in RISC OS 3.1 and the backward compatibility of the screen display will be fixed in the release version.



I have tried version 4.50 very briefly with RISC OS 2. Some of the visual displays look a bit strange but everything seems to work at least as well as it does with RISC OS 3.1.

The Patch

PipeDream (and a few other packages) don't toggle to full size and back properly on a RISC PC in high resolution modes. Colton Software have included a WimpBugFix as part of the new version 4.50. If you instal this fix then you'll find that not only does it cure the toggle problem for the Risc PC but that windows take on a 3D look in RISC OS 3.1. You will see the effect of running the fix in the first screenshot of this article.

In the [ReadMe] file on the V 4.50 disc Colton Software give the following explanation:

“Due to RISC O 3.5 having a bug, PipeDream doesn't toggle to full size and back again properly in high resolution modes. To prevent this happening, install the patch enclosed on the !PipeDream disc. You will also find it cures the same problem present in many other applications.

“A side effect of this is that the window furniture now looks and works slightly differently. The input focus colour now applies to all the areas it did on previous RISC OS versions, and also some of the icons are slightly wider and fatter. Clicking on certain items simply slabs them in rather than actually changing their colour. Technically speaking, what’s happened is that Acorn broke the rule that all furniture is 44 OS units wide, and changed it to 40 OS units. This leaves two pixels around the edge – which causes PipeDream (and some other packages) to expand the window to a size slightly too small, which, in turn, stops it shrinking again. Quite simply, this patch simply replaces the furniture sprites with 44 OS unit ones, and makes the other tools show the input focus correctly.”

Speed without StrongArm

The following results were achieved on an 18 Mb 700 RISC OS 3.7 system.

The overall feel of the V 4.50 package is that it is much faster than V 4.13. This is because the window redraw has been speeded up beyond all recognition. Indeed, windows redraw instantly under V 4.50 when compared with V 4.13 (which usually takes a long time). Custom functions generally ran about 10% more quickly (without a StrongArm card) but a few sample macros (which take about 5 seconds under V 4.13) run about 50% more slowly under V 4.50!

StrongArm

As with most beta test versions there is still work to do before release (particularly with backward compatibility) but there is no doubt in my mind that version 4.50 is an improvement on version 4.13. Although the benefits for those with a pre Risc PC are mainly cosmetic, for those with RISC OS 3.5 or later there are noticeable improvements. PipeDream 4.50 with its button bar and 3D windows now looks and feels more modern; bugs which appeared with RISC OS 3.5 such as the shortened line numbers have been corrected and it is noticeably faster.

PipeDream 4.50 has been ‘optimised’ for StrongArm; it has been tested on a StrongArm machine (by Acorn) and shows considerable improvement in its operational speed (reported to be between three and eight times faster than without StrongArm). The conclusion must be that it is those PipeDream users with StrongArm (when it comes) who will benefit most from this new version of PipeDream whilst those with RISC OS 2 or 3.1 will gain little but an extended button bar.

You must make up your own mind whether you want to upgrade your version of PipeDream now or whether to wait until you have a StrongArm machine. Version 4.13 looks a little strange on a Risc PC so that might well be your motivation for upgrading now. It is most reassuring for those of you who have ordered the StrongArm upgrade for your Risc PC to know that version 4.50 is optimised for StrongArm.

Colton Software

I keep getting requests from you for the ‘inside story’ of exactly what has happened at Colton Software during the last few years. There is much that I can’t say (for many

reasons such as confidentiality, privilege, libel, etc, as well as the fact that some of the things which have happened are not relevant to the future) but I've decided that the time has come to list a few of the more historic events of the recent past.

Robert Macmillan used to own part of Colton Software. He had a row with Mark Colton in the summer of 1993 and, as a result, sold his shares to Mark and left. With Robert went a great deal of expertise and knowledge about the user side of PipeDream and Fireworkz. Since Robert left the number of requests for help we have received has increased considerably. Usually we find that either we can help the correspondent or we know someone who can. Having helped them we try to persuade them to join one of our user groups (PipeLine or ZLine) or Archive or, better still, both!

Two years after Robert left (mid 1995) Mark Colton decided to merge his company with Protechnic. That deal was never signed because Mark was killed in a motor sport accident in the summer of 1995. Mark was an only child, he was divorced, he had no children and so the controlling interest in Colton Software passed to his parents. His father is Richard Colton, a professional businessman whose business has nothing to do with computers. Protechnic started negotiations with Richard Colton. Although Richard Colton is still the owner of Colton Software he has agreed that, for now, the day to day running of Colton Software should be left to Protechnic. As I write that is still the way that Colton Software is managed with Stuart Swales the main driving force behind Colton Software products.

The news that both Fireworkz and PipeDream 4.5 will be optimised for StrongArm augurs well for their future. If the StrongArm versions of PipeDream and Fireworkz at the Show are a success then Protechnic will back more of Stuart's ideas and they will invest further in developments of PipeDream and Fireworkz. Those of us who, like Stuart Swales, believe in PipeDream and its derivative, Fireworkz, must hope that Colton Software does well at the Show! If you use PipeDream, if you are about to instal StrongArm but believe that Colton Software's flame may be extinguished then you could do a lot worse than buying version 4.5 before that (unlikely) event comes to pass!

Finally

(a) Please send a disc, self addressed label and return postage if you want a problem solved; (b) My address is that of Abacus Training (see back inside cover); (c) Many thanks for all your letters.