

Gerald's Column *by Gerald Fitton*

I am a little behind my usual schedule; I usually have my column written by the time Archive appears – but not this month. Jill and I went on holiday to New York and Niagra Falls for a couple of weeks at the end of September and it's put me behind. I am almost up to date now and, phew, what a wealth of letters and emails I've received since Archive Vol 11 No 2 came through my letter box! Let me deal with some of the points therefrom before moving on to this month's theme, Maturity. My theme concerns the needs of those with what I shall call 'Mature Systems'.

My Retirement

Thanks for your good wishes. I was dreading the impending day of doom, but now that it has passed, I must report that the experience of retirement is not that which I imagined it to be. Definitely I feel better about the whole idea of being retired that I did just before it happened. Indeed I feel liberated from the constraints imposed on me by the need to satisfy my employer's desire for the achievement of 'Good Figures'.

The Screening Test

I have received two types of comment.

The first is that you would like more articles which deal with the uses of Computers/Statistics/Mathematics/etc to solve what many of you have called 'real life problems' even if this means that the computer content is diluted by what some might refer to as digressions away from matters computerate. My response to this is "Please write to Paul (the Editor of Archive) and let him know your views".

The second comment has been made by many and nearly always in the same way. You believe that the test I developed tested the "Logical" or "Systematic" approach rather than the "Creative" or "Intuitive" approach to tasks. Most of those writing went on to say that these two sorts of activity tend to be mutually exclusive when testing young adults (meaning 16 year olds); a few went on to say that for the more "Mature" person (over 30) the two activities (Logical and Intuitive) tend to mutually support each other. In other words as you grow older (I might add "and wiser") you tend to use your strengths (whether that is logic or intuition) to develop those skills (intuition or logic) in which you are weak. I never ran such a screening test with mature adults and perhaps I should have done so. I had the opportunity (except for my last year at college there was always somebody older than me amongst my students) but I didn't think of it. I wish I'd asked your advice sooner.

The High Scorers

I don't know whether or not I should classify the letters I received on this subject as the 'saddest' of my month's mail or not.

I received about twenty letters from people who had high scores in tests similar to mine but dropped out of their academic courses before completing them. Most recounted their

experience with some sadness, others seemed resigned to the hand fate had dealt them, a few were still angry (either with themselves or with those who ran the course). All recognised most clearly what had happened to them and all (being highly intelligent) were able to describe the events which changed their lives with great lucidity.

I shall not name any names but I shall quote from one letter I received. Before I do so I must tell you that the first language of this correspondent is not English so that some of the expressions sound a bit winsome; nevertheless the meaning is crystal clear.

“I must really say that this article touched me deeply and that you are a master of the art of teaching. As I am writing this article I am crying, and I just can’t help it. But, it is not a sad crying. It is a happy one. After some thinking on why I cry, I have come to realize that I would probably have been one of your high-ranking students if I had been in your class (or one of your test subjects). And, I believe that I can fill you in on some of your questions regarding this. You are very right when you conclude that this is a communication gap. What I experienced in University was that the lecturers were killing my interest in the subjects, even though the subjects really interested me. Two such examples are mathematics and statistics. Before I started at the university, I had very high grades in mathematics, but at the university, I just didn’t find it inspiring, and I never made it through that mathematics course.”

Most of my correspondents on this topic echoed the sentiment “The Lecturers/Teachers killed my interest in the subject”. To my surprise none of my correspondents used the word “bored”. Invariably they used stronger language; in a few cases they expressed hatred for the assassin who had murdered their dreams. I empathise because I too abhor bored, incompetent Teachers; they do not ‘make people’ – they destroy them.

Solitaire

You will remember that Clive Eggington sent me a Basic program which chugged its way steadily towards the definitive solution of the Solitaire game – but never got there because it was too slow. I made a few philosophical comments about “problems of the second kind” and told you to get on with solving the Solitaire problem by using your brain to improve the way in which your computer program operates.

To my complete and utter chagrin Colin Granville has sent me a ‘brute force’ program which (on my A540) found its first solution in six minutes! The source code is in C++ and the program is in absolute ARM code. The files are on the Archive monthly disc and on the Abacus Training web site. I don’t understand C++ well enough to know whether there is a significant difference between the strategy used in the programs of Clive and Colin or whether the only significant difference is that Clive’s runs in Basic and Colin’s runs as absolute ARM code. If you look at these two sets of programs and can work out why Colin’s is so much faster then please let me know (and you might become famous).

In spite of my complete defeat I believe that the philosophical point which I tried to make is still relevant even though it does not apply in this case. My point was that sometimes you should not use the sheer power of the computer (by which I mean its speed of operation) to solve problems but that you should try to program it so that it uses the same intuitive (creative?) processes we do when solving problems.

My main point was that the logic and the systematic approach are all very well in their place but creativity and intuition can yield greater dividends. Best of all is the combination of good clear logic and inspired intuition. Naturally I have a story to illustrate this but it will have to await another occasion. For now let me repeat what you have told me; such a combination is more often seen in the mature rather than in the youthful programmer.

A La Mode

Having returned from the 'U S of A' recently let me quote one young man who said to me in a strong Bronx accent, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it!"

I get many letters from people asking whether or not they should upgrade their hardware and software. As an example: "Should I buy one of the (£200 voucher offer) RISC PCs?" By the standards of my more youthful correspondents my response may seem rather circumspect and they'll probably label me a 'stick in the mud'.

I ask what the computer is going to be used for. I ask what benefits the questioner expects from the new system. I ask on what they might otherwise spend their money. Rather more often than 'box shifters' would like, my considered advice is that the money might be better spent elsewhere. "If it ain't broke, don't fix it!"

Now let me turn to a complaint from those of my correspondents with whom I have had this dialogue and who've decide to stick rather than be twisted.

Typically these correspondents have an 'old' machine which they have got to know and love. They have 'old' software with which they have a certain familiarity. What they have fits the purpose for which they use it. Their complaint is that what they want and don't find much of is articles in magazines which deal with *their* problems which they are having with *their* old machines and *their* old software. They complain that articles in most Archimedes magazines deal only with the latest innovations such as the A7000+, new developments on the Internet, the latest version of Ovation Pro, StrongArm chips and their incompatibility problems.

I get requests for information about the use of PipeDream 3 or 4 rather than 4.5. I get requests asking me to solve problems with 8-pin dot matrix printers. I get requests for printing simple documents using the printers own fonts rather than outline fonts. I get requests for help with TableMate I (the current version is 3 – but I still don't have a copy) and !Printers version 1.28. Those with RISC OS 2 ask me about the benefits of installing Outline Fonts and ask for advice about the backward compatibility of RISC OS 3 fonts with their system.

Let me tell you what I have and use it as an example. For my 'heavy' work I use an A540. I don't know if it is the 25 MHz or 33 MHz variety but, relative to a 200 MHz StrongArm it runs quite slowly – but fast enough for the things I use it for.

I know it has a uni-directional printer port so most of these new gadgets which plug into the parallel port won't work with my machine. My printer died the other day and I had a real problem discovering which printers are backward compatible with my old fashioned parallel port. In the end I opted for an old fashioned HP 400 which the salesman explained was going cheap because it wouldn't handle the most recent bi-directional protocols.

I want to fit an external SCSI CD ROM drive. I don't want to upgrade to a SCSI 2 board, I just want a simple old fashioned SCSI 1 CD ROM drive with a port which looks like an overgrown Centronics port. Printers have Centronics ports but the SCSI 2 port on my Windows machine looks entirely different. I would like to be assured that whatever I buy won't have any backward compatibility problems. I guess I'll need a CD ROM filing system ROM chip for my (original) Acorn SCSI 1 board which came with the A540; but where do I get that sort of information these days?

My A540 won't support millions of colours so when somebody sends me a screenshot taken in a 1 million colour mode I can't resolve it with or without my ChangeFSI. Is there a simple utility which do the conversion on my machine and will save me returning the disc containing the sprite file to my correspondent asking them to use their ChangeFSI?

Time and time again it is suggested to me that what I need is a StrongArm machine with a 24x CD ROM drive, scanner, GigaBytes of hard disc and a large high resolution monitor. "Get up to date!" I am told. Up to now I've resisted the temptation to go 'a la mode' for its own sake but, with some of my correspondents it's been hard going persuading them that my system has benefits for me which have nothing to do with saving money.

If you recognise yourself as someone who doesn't want to upgrade but you feel under some kind of pressure to keep 'up to date' then don't write to me. If you do then I shall be sympathetic. What I suggest you do is to write to Paul and tell him your troubles; tell him what you'd like to see in his magazine; tell him how much you miss the many 'old' articles which related to your machinery when it was in its youth. If you can persuade Paul then he might persuade me and others to cater for your needs. Both Paul and I know that if a magazine doesn't cater for your needs then you'll stop subscribing – my impression is that there are quite a lot of you who would like some articles about your very own Mature System.

Archimedes or Industrial Standard Computer

I always preferred the BBC computer to the IBM machine. I never liked MS-DOS.

My first Archimedes was an A305. I get letters from many people who still have them and use them with a single floppy disc drive and the original 14 inch monitor. All my A305 correspondents have upgraded to RISC OS 2 but most have not upgraded to RISC OS 3. They are users of PipeDream 3 and early versions of Impression II and Artworks. They use Paint and Draw. They have 8-pin dot matrix printers and few outline fonts. They are very happy with their (almost) ten year old system. They have grown to respect it.

In the early 1990s the Archimedes was far superior to the Industry Standard machine. At that time the latest innovation for the latter was MS-DOS 3 – a command line operating system. Since then the Industry Standard machine moved on. The operating system became Windows 3.1 and then Windows 95. The memory increased from 640 kb to 1, 4, 8, 16, 32 and even more Megabytes. The mother board changed (several times), hard disks and other peripherals changed; indeed everything changed. Now the Windows environment has many of the GUI (Graphic User Interface) features such as 'drag and drop' we've had since RISC OS 2. You've all heard that story before. Here's my slant on it.

We all know that if you buy an add on for a Windows machine it will be cheaper than a similar add on for an Archimedes. Some years ago my son built me an MS-DOS machine mainly from discarded but working spare parts. It was a 'gift' from him which cost me a mere £300. More recently he converted it to a more modern Windows 95 machine (again for free – except that I seem to have spent another £300 on a mother board and MMX Pentium processor) so that I could run the Excel spreadsheet (Microsoft Office) I needed for my college work. His latest 'gift' to me is a CD writer for the Windows 95 machine. (I suspect that he wants me to spend my time making compilations of his favourite CDs.) It came complete with 'Easy-CD Pro' software at a price which is less than 40% of the corresponding Archimedes price for a CD writer and software. It was easy to install (ten minutes using something called 'plug and play') and it is easy to use (it worked first time).

Here's my point. We all console ourselves that we'll get our money's worth from the Archimedes because the things we buy will last longer. They do last longer and, because they last longer, we need support for a longer time. One way in which we need longer term support is through magazine articles as I've suggested above. If you agree with me then don't write to me but please do write to Paul!

Life Cycles

Let me develop my theme. In the past I have written about the Life Cycle of Products. I can't recall the issue of Archive and I'm not going back to look for it because I know somebody will write to me and tell me the volume, issue and page number I need to look up. What I can recall is the gist of what I said. Let me summarise.

Acorn sell machines. These machines last a long time. If Acorn can't sell new machines then they'll go out of business and they won't be able to support the old machines which still work perfectly well. It is in Acorn's interest that we throw away our beloved mature Systems – but would it serve our interests?

Colton Software sold PipeDream. PipeDream was and still is an excellent package. There must be thousands of people who still use it (many of them subscribe to our PipeLine User Group). When Colton Software stopped selling PipeDream to new customers their support for the old customers had to fade away because their revenue from PipeDream stopped.

A current problem for hardware and software manufacturers (and suppliers) of the Acorn Archimedes is that the hardware and software last too long. What is more, those who have bought Acorn products have done so in spite of the higher price partly because they know the products will last a long time – and now they want their money's worth. Personally I am on the side of those who won't upgrade just for the sake of having the latest gimmick. What I can't do is solve the problems of Acorn and Colton Software; what I can do is help those who have these 'old fashioned' but still useful 'Mature Systems'.

If you want to read less about new fangled hardware and software which has no backward compatibility (it can't be deliberate can it?) and if you do want to learn more about the old hardware and software with which you have become familiar then don't write to me except for sympathy. Write to Paul and tell him what system you have and, whilst writing, be proud of having a Mature System. Ask him for technical support of your Mature System. Before you buy anything (like a printer) for your Mature System ask about backward compatibility and, if you're not reassured, then go elsewhere!

The Advantages of Maturity

There are many advantages of maturity (and not just for computer systems).

Mature Systems tend to have fewer problems such as software bugs and hardware incompatibilities. Mature Systems crash less often. If a fault develops then it probably has been seen before and it is relatively cheap to diagnose even if it is more expensive to fix.

What you don't need is a new system full of new bugs, incompatibilities and inexplicable crashes; what you do need is support for your Mature System. I believe that you would like your Mature System treated with the respect it has earned by its faithful service to you. From your correspondence I know that you appreciate that there is always something new to learn and always there is a better way of doing something (even with your Mature System) than the way you're doing those things now. You want to read such information but where can you find it?

If you recognise your equipment (and yourself) as 'Mature' from this description then don't write to me unless all you want is sympathy (or to praise me for my stand against needless upgrading). Write to Paul if you want articles on 'Mature Systems' in his magazine.

<http://www.abacusline.demon.co.uk/>

I have been taken to task for tempting you you visit the Abacus Training web site with hints at the goodies you'll find there – and then not giving you the URL. I had hoped that Paul would include it on the back page of Archive but somehow it got left off.

For those with Mature Systems

If you do not have access to the Internet then you can still have all the goodies to which I refer but a speed more befitting the Maturity of your needs.

- (a) Please send a disc, self addressed label and, if possible, return postage if you want a problem solved.
- (b) My address is that of Abacus Training (see back inside cover).