Gerald's Column
by Gerald Fitton

Last month I described a method of importing tables into Impression using TableMate Version 4.05a (30 Jun 97). At the time of writing last month's article I thought the price was about half that which it is now. What I don't know still is whether the higher price corresponds to a product which has more features than the version 4.05a that I described or whether the price has simply risen without extra features being added.

As I promised, this month I shall describe another product which I use regularly as an alternative to TableMate called TableCalc. I shall follow that with some more general comments about Standards which, I hope, will clarify remarks I made in an earlier article.

Whose Software is it?

The version of TableCalc I have, V 1.06c, was supplied by:

Aaron Timbrell
iSV Products
86 Turnberry
Home Farm
Bracknell
Berks
RG12 8ZH
Telephone: 01344 55769

I believe the author to be Thomas Down; the copyright is "© iSV/Thomas Down". I have a note which says that the RRP is £21.50 but, like the price I quoted for TableMate, it may be out of date by now. If the price is still close to £25.00 then it is much cheaper than TableMate and, in my view at least, TableCalc represents a better bargain.

Common Features

TableCalc and TableMate have many features in common such as merging cells (to make big cells), auto line height (so that text does not run off the page to the right but wraps around onto a new line within the same cell) and Styles. Like TableMate, Object Linking and Embedding (OLE) is supported so, with a <Ctrl> double click, you can return your table from Impression to TableCalc and, in TableCalc, the table will still be 'live'.

Differences

TableCalc's Save formats are fewer than TableMate. From TableCalc you can Save in TableCalc, CSV or Draw format but not DDF nor HTML. This is the 'down side' of TableCalc; however, TableCalc does support a greater range of functions than does TableMate. Have a look at the screenshot on the next page and you'll see the Power function (x^y), the log() and ln() functions, the major trigonometrical functions and their inverse; none of these functions appear in TableMate.

The 'Editing Expression' box which you see in the screenshot appears when you click the button on the right hand side of the button bar (the button which contains the four arithmetic operation symbols) or when you use the keyboard shortcut <Ctrl E>. When the 'Editing Expression' box is on screen you can click on the 'fn()' button to reveal the 'Functions' sub menu shown in the screenshot.
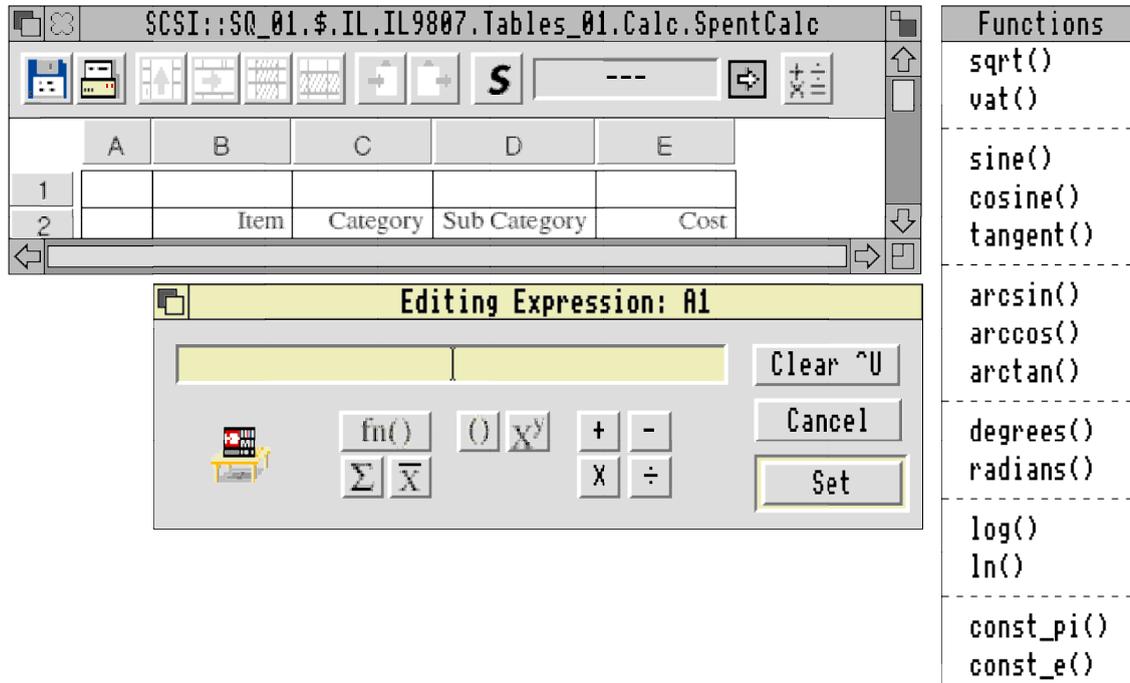
My preference is for TableCalc because of the extra spreadsheet functions, the 'Snapshot' facility and something I use a lot, the 'Number to Text' and 'Text to Number' commands. These appear in a sub menu as shown in the screenshot below.
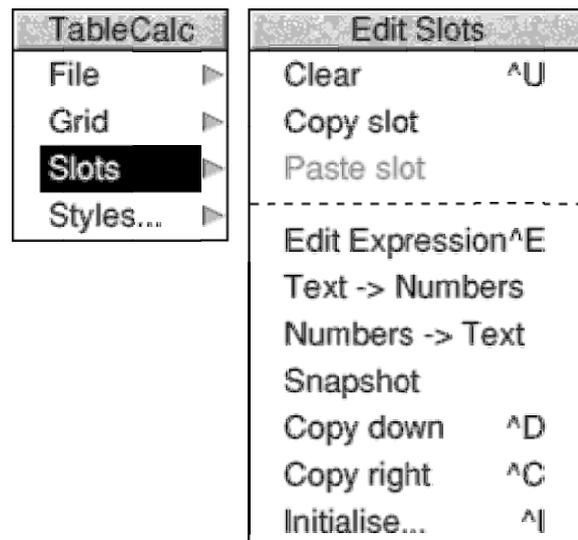
In Summary

The version of TableCalc I have may not be the latest and, at a little over £20, I may have quoted a price which is on the low side. Nevertheless, I believe TableCalc to be good value for money. It may suit your requirements better than TableCalc because of its more comprehensive set of functions.

PipeDream

I must put in a good word for PipeDream if only because, in a later article, I shall describe how it can be used to 'port' tables into Impression. The current version of PipeDream, V 4.5/20 (14-Nov-98), is optimised for use with StrongArm . It can be supplied with a 'Getting Started' Tutorial Guide for £60 from us at Abacus Training—quite a bargain.

Buzzword Disease

I have experienced a wide range of emotions when reading correspondence received in response to my articles in Archive. So far as I am aware they have never caused me to be angry but a comment in last month's Archive certainly caused me to feel sad.

It was over forty years ago that I was last accused, quite rightly, of 'blinding with science' a colleague who deserved better. I resolved that never again would I use jargon to to confuse an argument or to demean an opponent. Over the last forty years I have put a lot of effort into being able to explain, in terms my listener would understand, the complex scientific or engineering principles I was applying to a problem. Although I say so myself I think I became good at it. My reputation (with my students at College if not the Management) depended on it and latterly I have felt proud of this hard won ability.

So, when I read in last month's Archive that I stood accused of "a severe case of buzzword disease" I was saddened. It was not my intention to inflict an onslaught of obscure acronyms on any of you and, to those of you who couldn't follow what I was trying to convey, I offer my most sincere and heartfelt apologies.

Please let me try again.

Standards

Standards are a mixed blessing. I don't want to concentrate of the way in which they limit technical development—I shall let Nick or someone else argue that case. I want to point out to you some of the benefits of Standards.

Whatever the platform, Mac, Windows or Acorn, we all use the same ubiquitous 3.5 inch floppy disc. At one time Amstrad used a 3.0 inch floppy and it was almost impossible to get discs for those drives at a reasonable price. Eventually they became unobtainable.

The original Sinclair computer did not use ASCII coding for its characters so that only a Sinclair printer could be used to printout text from a Sinclair machine.

Until the A5000 the Archimedes serial port was non standard so it was essential to ensure that the cable used to connect anything to those earlier machines was the special 'Acorn cable'. These cables were more expensive than a Standard cable and nowadays, if you have one of the earlier Archimedes machines, you will have to make up your own cable because they are no longer available.

The Acorn machines from the BBC computer of 1980 onwards used a non standard monitor. It is only in more recent years that Acorn machines have been designed to use a Standard monitor. These days it is almost impossible to get a monitor which will work with those earlier Acorn machines.

Even now the three button mouse on my Risc PC is non standard. I can not go out and buy a Standard three button mouse (costing about £5) and plug it in to my Risc PC.

My A540 (and earlier Acorn machines) uses a non standard keyboard. The cost of a replacement is about double that of a Standard keyboard.

On earlier Archimedes machines the parallel port was uni-directional whereas the Standard for many years has been bi-directional. Many of the more modern printers rely on the bi-directional nature of the parallel port so you must be careful which printer you buy for an older Archimedes.

The Risc PC does have a Standard serial port, it does have a Standard parallel port, it will drive Standard monitors and uses a Standard keyboard. Mind you, I shall have to look after my spare mouse in case replacements become unavailable before the machine is pensioned off!

Machine Design

In an earlier edition of Archive I included a wish list for a new RISC OS type machine and it is because I used a plethora of acronyms that I was taken to task. My acronyms were dubbed "buzzwords". One of the reasons why I used the acronyms is because each of them represents a Standard. It was never my intention to compare the performance of Phoebe with a machine which was filled with many Standard components. It was never my intention to imply that a Standard component would provide a 'better' performance than a non-standard component tailored to a new design of RISC OS machine.

My badly made point was that it is sometimes a good thing in the short, medium and long term to sacrifice some performance by including Standard components rather than specially designing customised components which would maximise performance.

One of the points I was trying to make was that in the short term development costs are lower, development time is shorter and the finished product is cheaper. Another point which I didn't make is that in the long term the machine lasts longer because of the continued availability of Standard parts and maintenance costs are lower because replacement parts are cheaper.

My main point, badly made, was that I would prefer to buy a new machine which uses Standard parts even if the performance of such a machine is not as high as it could be if specially designed, more expensive and more exclusive components were to be used.

The acronyms were meant to imply that a Standard exists and that I would prefer the next RISC OS machine to use as many Standard parts as possible (whilst retaining its unique features); it was not meant to imply that Standard parts would make the machine better than if it used the special designs that Acorn have always tended to build into their excellent machines.

Finally

Please write to me at the Abacus Training address which you'll find in Paul's Fact File at the back of Archive. That Fact File includes email and fax addresses. I would prefer that you don't telephone. If you have anything of more substance than a few lines I would like a copy of the file on disc or as an email attachment particularly if you are having a problem. An example file is so much easier for me than a description in words which I might misunderstand. If you write rather than email me then please include return postage if you want a reply. A self addressed sticky label is helpful.