Gerald's Column
by Gerald Fitton

Thanks once again for all your emails and letters. Certainly the number of letters I have had about PipeDream, Fireworkz, Schema, Eureka and Microsoft Excel has been higher this month than any previous month I can remember. In part this is because there is a renewed confidence amongst the RISC OS fraternity—however, rather than recount stories about software I have decided to open for discussion a different and more general topic.

Upgrades

With great regularity I receive letters asking whether or not to upgrade. Sometimes the upgrade under consideration is hardware such as RiscPC, Kinetic or Omega machines; more often it is about upgrades to software such as PipeDream and Fireworkz. These days software upgrades have to be paid for so the decision to upgrade is no longer trivial.

As a teacher I found that answering a question with a question helps the enquirer to see what is important more clearly. It helps them to make an informed decision for themselves rather than have to rely blindly on the advice of others. When I am asked about a hardware or a software upgrade, I respond with, "Do you need this upgrade now?" The ensuing discussion expands to include the use which my correspondent makes of the hardware and software and the perceived benefits of the upgrade.

I suggest to people that they should start by believing that it might be best to wait, that is to say to not upgrade, and then try to talk themselves into believing that there are good reasons for upgrading. Most of the people with whom I have this sort of discussion start by assuming that they must upgrade unless there is a good reason for not doing so.

Upgrading Old Machines

Some people ask me whether to add upgrades to an existing system or to buy a new one. I still get letters from people who have upgraded an A310 (the original Archimedes) beyond all recognition. My reply is that it generally doesn't pay to add unsuitable upgrades bit by bit to an antiquated system. If you do then you will find yourself getting less value for money out of each subsequent upgrade. If you can wait then do so. Leave your hardware in 'standard' condition as much as possible. Save the money you would have spent on the upgrade and then, at a later time, buy a more recent (but not the most recent) model.

Of course there are exceptions. For example I upgraded my A540 from RISC OS 2 to RISC OS 3.1 because the cost was low and the benefits high. The major benefit so far as I was concerned was the font handling and printing for my document production work. The 'clever bit', as always, is to know when to break the "Wait!" rule and when to follow it.

Software Upgrades

When RISC OS 4 was released, like all new software it had teething troubles. One serious problem for us was that the new CDFS would not handle Mode 2 format CDs. A problem for others has been the new F+ filing system; there were no disc repair tools at the time.

New software, even new operating systems are rarely bug free. When PipeDream 4 replaced PipeDream 3 (it was released at a Show) it was terribly bug ridden and it was upgraded about fourteen times during its first year. In those days Colton Software gave away upgrades free of charge; they aren't free any more. My view at the time was that, in terms of efficient use of Colton Software's resources, it might have been better not to have released a bug ridden PipeDream 4.

I have received a large number of enquiries about the most recent upgrade to PipeDream and Fireworkz. For those of you who don't know I must declare an interest. We manage PipeDream and Fireworkz for the owner, Richard Colton. If you buy the upgrade then you do so from us! The most recent version of PipeDream is 4.50/23 and the most recent version of Fireworkz Pro is 1.31/05. The principal feature of this most recent upgrade is that it adds a facility for using filenames longer than ten characters. You can make use of long filenames if you have RISC OS 4 or a Long filename utility.

Most people, even if they have RISC OS 4, can manage to do what they want to do without using long filenames but there are a few people who will benefit. For example if you have networked a RISC OS 4 and a Windows machine which uses, say, the Joliet long filename system, then porting files from one platform to the other will be much easier if you don't have to 'mess about' truncating filenames. Eventually long filenames will become the norm but by then you will have upgraded to an even later version for a different reason.

Let me quote another example. Some of my correspondents still have PipeDream 4. They run it on a non StrongArm machine with RISC OS 3. They ask me whether they should upgrade to PipeDream 4.5. More often than not I advise them to stick with PipeDream 4 rather than spend £30 on the upgrade from PipeDream 4 to PipeDream 4.5.

Hardware Upgrades

I'll start with an example. Most of what I do is document production (desk top publishing, word processing and spreadsheet work) rather than image manipulation or games. For many years after the RiscPC was released I continued to use my A540 rather than upgrade because my answer to the question "Do I need it now?" was that the A540 (in particular its speed, the limitation of 8 Mb RAM and 120 Mb hard disc) would do what I wanted and would do so for at least another year. My situation was very different from those who used their Archimedes for digitising video. Those people were able to make use of the extra speed and so they arrived at a different answer to the question, "Do I need it now?" They did buy a RiscPC and it served them well.

I bought my RiscPC when the price fell sharply. It fell because of the publicity given to the high specification but ill fated Phoebe machine. Of course I don't have a Phoebe—but then neither does anyone else—however I have a bargain priced RiscPC! I was lucky.

Now back to the Hardware/Software linkage to which I referred briefly in the previous section. As I said, my advice to many who have PipeDream 4 on a non StrongArm machine has been "Don't upgrade yet!". However, I make sure that they understand that if they do upgrade to a StrongArm machine or to RISC OS 4 then they will need to upgrade from PipeDream 4 to PipeDream 4.5. So my more detailed advice is: "The right thing for you to do at the moment is to save your money and then later buy a new combination of hardware and upgraded software. Buy the upgraded software later—when you need it!"

Of course, the time comes when they do need to upgrade their hardware. I tell those people that the cost of their proposed upgrade is not limited to the cost of the hardware but will include the cost of upgrading their software so that it will run on their new machine. By the way, there are many other software packages which need to be upgraded to run on a StrongArm or RISC OS 4 machine.

Maturity or Novelty

The process of upgrading is not a once and for all decision; it is one which has a time dependent element. This time dependence is important not only from the point of view of the operational benefits ("Do you need it now?") and cost (often prices fall) but also it is important to consider what is euphemistically called 'stability' (meaning the degree to which the upgrade is free from bugs). Generally more mature hardware and software are more stable (bug free) than more newer products.

Recently I have been asked by correspondents with a pre RiscPC machine (who can demonstrate a need to upgrade) what sort of a machine they should buy. They list amongst their choices an Omega, a Kinetic or a RiscPC. I ask them, "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 they consider buying not the newest machine but the more mature RiscPC.

My rational is that it is much easier to predict how well a RiscPC will do the things they want to do than, say, an Omega. Of course, unless the Omega goes the way of Phoebe, all will be revealed in time, but even when it is released to the public (and with the best will in the world) it is unlikely that it will be 'bug free'. Undoubtedly some cherished piece of software (or even hardware) will not work and will have to be upgraded before it runs smoothly on the new machine. So, unless you have an immediate use for the new facilities offered by the Omega then my advice is that you should wait and see how it performs.

Of course there will be others who have an immediate use for the new features of the Omega. Perhaps they really do need the extra speed or graphics handling and this need is such that it outweighs the risk. My advise to those people is that they should buy one of the newer machines (but not until they have seen it working). These people who have a greater need for the new facilities are prepared to take the risk and discover how to get the machine running smoothly with, say, the usual Internet, Spreadsheet and Games software.

To those who find the novelty of the new specification irresistible I say, "Be patient!" Give it time and you'll find that the initial difficulties will be resolved as the innovations of the new hardware stabilise and the product becomes more mature.

Phoebe

And don't forget what happened to Phoebe!

Finally

Please write to me at the Abacus Training address which you'll find in Paul's Fact File at the back of Archive.