

Gerald's Column

by Gerald Fitton

Last month I invited you to have fun using my website at <http://archive.abacusline.co.uk>. Please note that this is a 'Third Level Domain' so that there is no "www" in this address. It is a protected site so you will need to enter the username "archive" and the password "amusement" (in lower case and without the inverted commas). That invitation still holds.

Feedback

I have received a lot of feedback about this site, some via Archive-on-Line but mainly in private emails. I would like to thank everyone who has sent me feedback and suggestions.

The Internet

If we were to go back, say, fifteen years (1990) and ask you what you used your (RISC OS) computer for, most of you would reply that you used it for producing documents such as letters, home produced local magazines and for doing some home accounts or tax returns. Applications which do these things (such as Impression, Ovation, PipeDream and Schema) were the "must have" packages on everyone's RISC OS computer. Let me say for the record that RISC OS computers were very good at these tasks; indeed, some of us (me included) would say that RISC OS computers were "The Best" computers for these jobs at that time.

Graphics packages for producing pictures were only slightly lower on RISC OS users' wish list. Perhaps, like me, you have used (and still use) programs such as Draw Plus, Vector, Artizan and Art Works?

An Internet connection with an external dial up modem is something which you might have listed as one of your peripheral uses of fifteen years ago. I suspect that even if the Internet is on your fifteen year old list, its main use would have been to send emails to your friends.

Nowadays the emphasis has changed from producing documents at home to surfing the Internet for information. Textual documents in the form of written words is currently the most popular form of Internet information.

This is changing. Words are being augmented by pictures, usually in JPEG format. Browsers (the software you use to surf the Internet) have to support JPEG images if they are to keep up with this trend.

At the sharp end of this sea change in computer use you will find not only still pictures, but also information in the form of sound and moving pictures.

In the near future, in order to benefit fully from the information available on the Internet, your browser will need to be able to handle not only text (HTML) but also 'streaming' sound and video which does not need to be fully downloaded before it starts playing.

Hardware and software

I have no doubt that RISC OS hardware is well up to this task. Even computers of the RiscPC era have sufficient power and speed to handle images as well as streaming sound and video. The newer RISC OS machinery such as the Iyonix, etc have more than enough speed.

Packages such as Fireworkz and Ovation will accept images in JPEG format. This is a step in the right direction - but not enough. What seems to be missing is software which will allow RISC OS aficionados to benefit from the huge amount of 'media' material (streaming audio and video) which is to be found on the web.

Of course, it is possible that I am mistaken and such software does exist. If you know of any which you can recommend then please let us all know about it.

Speed

Only recently have I been converted to broadband.

The difference between dial up and broadband may only be a difference in speed but the difference is so great that this change in my method of accessing the Internet has encouraged me to look at the Internet in an entirely different way.

Initially, when I first had it installed in February 2005 the nominal speed was 300 Kbps. NTL did a free upgrade to 1 Mbps shortly afterwards. This increase has again transformed my use of the Internet.

I see in other parts of the world that 10 Mbps and even 100 Mbps is available and, by these standards, 1 Mbps must be regarded as 'slow'.

There is no doubt in my mind that here in the UK speeds will increase rapidly. I anticipate that 10 Mbps will be common and affordable by 2006.

You might like to consider (with me) the implications of (and applications which can use) speeds around 10 Mbps.

Let me repeat that I am sure that the RISC OS hardware we have is more than usable at streaming rates of 10 Mbps. RISC OS hardware is reliable and lasts for a long time. What we need is software to take advantage of our most reliable and durable RISC OS hardware. In particular we need software which will handle the common image, audio and video formats which are available on the Internet as well as the textual formats we are all become familiar with over the last decade.

Let me put this another way. This increasing use of pictures, sound and video on the Internet is a new opportunity for RISC OS machinery to capture a rapidly expanding market. These days people don't buy a Windows computer primarily to produce documents. They buy a computer to surf the Internet. Document production, at which RISC OS machinery is superb, is now a secondary application.

<http://archive.abacusline.co.uk>

On <http://archive.abacusline.co.uk> I have deliberately introduced small amounts of what I shall call 'special' code into my HTML pages in order to generate some feedback about what can be interpreted using different browsers.

I think I have achieved what I set out to do because, on Archive-on-Line, there has been intense discussions about support (in RISC OS browsers) for features such as Java Script and Cascading Style Sheets as well as minor features such as animated gifs and the syntax of tags such as width=100%.

Of course, I have been taken to task for making this website unfriendly to the older RISC OS browsers. As a consequence, what I have decided to do is to provide two versions of some of the web pages with one being what might be described as RISC OS friendly and the other including some feature which may or may not be supported by the older RISC OS browsers.

It is my hope that this will encourage those loyal to RISC OS machinery to lobby for software which will interpret some features which, currently, is either flaky or non existent.

As a by-the-way I see that Firefox is coming in for some criticism because it will not work properly on some sites. One site mentioned as being a problem for Firefox is the Odeon Cinema site at <http://www.odeon.co.uk>. You might like to see what happens with your RISC OS browser.

Anyway, my point is that RISC OS users are not alone in finding sites which give problems.

Thumbnails

A common feature of many websites is to provide thumbnails (small pictures) as a visual link to a different, much higher resolution version of the same picture. I have used and shall use this technique on my <http://archive.abacusline.co.uk> website.

The minimum HTML code which will do this is:

```
<A HREF="flowers01.jpg">  
  <IMG SRC="flowers01_tb.jpg">  
</A>  
<P>Flowers to Plant</P>
```

An interesting thread on Archive-on-Line revolved around a thumbnail with a width of 190 pixels. With some browsers this thumbnail was not visible. In the end we tracked this down to what is called an "advertisement blocking utility". This utility makes the assumption that thumbnails having a width of 190 pixels are advertisements!

On my website (which I hope you will investigate) I shall deliberately include a thumbnail having a width of 190 pixels so that you can test your browser and see if it supports this (unwanted?) feature.

Width

I am in the process of changing my thumbnails to a fixed width of 160 pixels.

Some browsers, particularly RISC OS browsers, have trouble with widths expressed in percentages. For example, I have on my my website the HTML code

```
<IMG SRC="flowers01_tb.jpg" WIDTH="70% ALT="Flowers">
```

The advantage of expressing the widths as percentages is that as the width of the window (on the screen) is varied the size of the thumbnail changes in proportion.

The disadvantage is that some browsers do not understand "width" and make the thumbnails either too large or too small.

I shall leave one or two thumbnails with width expressed as a percentage (so that you can see what happens with your browser or browsers) but, in the main, I shall change the HTML code to read `width= "160"` (or something like that) and my thumbnails to about 160 pixels wide.

Animated GIFs

There is a piece of HTML code with the syntax

```
background= "bg.gif"
```

which creates a background for the whole page from a small graphic. Typically a background gif will be a textured, 100 x 100 pixel graphic which is tiled (repeated as often as is necessary) all over the page. However, it is possible to create an animated gif which changes between three or four different pictures.

As a deliberately provocative animated gif I created a sequence of 21 frames (each 100 x 100 pixels) which run as a short movie sequence. I set this up as the background gif but I had to delete it very quickly because many RISC OS browsers couldn't handle it. For some browsers the rendering of the page completely crashed!

I shall include one such page on my website so that you can test whether your browser can handle animated gifs.

Another day

I am very pleased with the extent of the feedback I am receiving as a result of setting up this website for Archive users.

I do not have space this month to tell you about streaming sound and movies but you will find various files on the website which will allow you to discover whether your browser will handle them. Discussion will have to wait until another day.

Communication

The website at <http://www.abacusline.co.uk> is working satisfactorily now and I am in the process of closing forever <http://www.abacusline.demon.co.uk>.

One consequence of my leaving demon (for NTL and my own domain names) is that any emails addressed to me at "abacusline.demon.co.uk" will not be delivered to me any more.

My website for Archive readers is at the subdomain <http://archive.abacusline.co.uk/> it is a third level (no "www") protected subdomain. The username is "archive" and the password "amusement" (both in lower case without inverted commas).

For Archive correspondence please write to [<gerald.archive@ntlworld.com>](mailto:gerald.archive@ntlworld.com).

At some point in the near future I shall abandon this address in favour of something like archive@abacusline.co.uk so "watch this space" please.