Plus ça Change
by Gerald Fitton

"Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose"

Les Guêpes, January 1849
 - Jean-Baptiste Alphonse Karr (1808 – 1890)

It was Jean-Baptiste Alphonse Karr who coined this memorable phrase. It is often shortened to the anapodoton, "Plus ça change", of my title. This saying is often mis-translated as, "Everything changes but everything stays the same". A more accurate translation is, "The more things change, the more they stay the same". Whilst the former translation has as its subject 'Everything' and asserts the permanence of everything, the latter refers to the extent and the consequences of what, on the surface, might seem to be radical changes but in reality are manifestations of the same thing. Two examples come to mind. One is advertising hype and the second is political manifestos - or leaving the EU.

The Killer App

In computer marketing terminology, a killer app is a computer program (application) that is so necessary or desirable that consumers buy the hardware or use an operating system just to run that application. The use of RISC OS depends upon its killer apps for its continued existence. For some their killer app is PipeDream, for others it is Impression.

Lotus 1-2-3

The first computer spreadsheet was VisiCalc; it ran on the Apple II. When IBM entered the home computer market, the far superior Lotus 1-2-3 (launched in January 1983) became the killer app which allowed the IBM hardware (and its operating system) to overtake the established Apple II. Lotus 1-2-3 was the first multi-function integrated program; the three programs were spreadsheet, database and graphics (charts). It became the de-facto standard for all spreadsheets. The computer magazine, InfoWorld, said that what buyers of computer hardware wanted was, "not so much hardware with MS-DOS as its Operating System, but a machine which would run Lotus 1-2-3"

Throughout the 1980s Lotus 1-2-3 was the spreadsheet of choice. Microsoft introduced a rival spreadsheet called Multiplan in 1982. Whilst it was popular for the early, 8-bit CP/M machinery it never took off in 16-bit MS-DOS. It was in November 1987 that Microsoft launched Excel for Windows. Gradually, over the next two decades, Excel took over as market leader from Lotus 1-2-3. In June 2013 IBM announced that from October 2014 there would be no further support nor development of the Lotus spreadsheet. It had died.

PipeDream

PipeDream originated as View Professional on the BBC computer. View Professional was known internally as PipeDream 1. It was ported to run under MS-DOS with the name PipeDream 2. In addition to the MS-DOS port, PipeDream 2 was ported to run on the Acorn Arthur OS (RISC OS 1) so that it was available for purchase when the first, single tasking Archimedes computer was sold. PipeDream 2 couldn't compete with Lotus 1-2-3 on the MS-DOS platform but, at the time when the Archimedes was launched, it was the only spreadsheet worth considering for Acorn's new Arthur OS (RISC OS 1).

RISC OS 2 was the first multi-tasking OS of Acorn; PipeDream 3 was the multi-tasking development of PipeDream 2.

Gradually, over the years, PipeDream was developed through the stages of PipeDream 4 and later PipeDream 4.5. The most recent version (18th July 2016) is 4.55.02.

There were spreadsheet competitors for the Acorn machines such as Eureka and Schema but PipeDream was the most popular. One of the features of PipeDream which made it popular was the inclusion of an application called !PD123 which converted spreadsheets which were in PipeDream format to spreadsheets in the market leader, Lotus 1-2-3, format.

On the Windows machines, in spite of the growth of Excel and decline of Lotus 1-2-3, this conversion of PipeDream format files to Lotus format files was still useful because Excel could import Lotus 1-2-3 format spreadsheets. Many RISC OS users preferred to use PipeDream rather than the other RISC OS spreadsheets because PipeDream with its !PD123 application allowed RISC OS users to send their spreadsheets to Windows users in Lotus 1-2-3 format. Lotus 1-2-3 files can be converted to PipeDream files with !PD123

The Lotus 1-2-3 format of PipeDream files can be imported to both Lotus 1-2-3 and Excel.

PipeDream for RISC OS is now Open Source and can be downloaded from:

  http://croftnuisk.co.uk/coltsoft/

There is no PipeDream for Windows.

Fireworkz

In 1992 the same team that developed PipeDream released Fireworkz for RISC OS.

The principal difference between the two is that Fireworkz is page based so that 'what you see is what you print' whereas PipeDream does not give any idea of where the page margins are.

All PipeDream format files will load directly into Fireworkz. Sometimes there are layout problems; these arise because PipeDream has fewer layout features than Fireworkz so that, in Fireworkz you have to tweak up the format you want.

Later, Fireworkz was ported to run under Windows. All Fireworkz for RISC OS files will run in Fireworkz for Windows. They can be loaded, modified and saved in either RISC OS or Windows. PipeDream (for RISC OS) files can be loaded into Fireworkz for Windows with occassional minor layout problems which are easily overcome.

Using Fireworkz for Windows, files can be saved in Microsoft Excel or Lotus 1-2-3 format. A spreadsheet created by a RISC OS user can be saved in an Excel format that can be read easily by a Windows Excel user. Fireworkz will load and read Excel files.

Fireworkz for RISC OS and Windows are now Open Source and can be downloaded from:

  http://croftnuisk.co.uk/coltsoft/

Open Office and Libre Office

Excel is part of the Microsoft Office Suite.

If you or your Windows correspondents don't want to buy Excel from Microsoft (and don't like using the free of charge Fireworkz for Windows) then you can load Excel files (created using Fireworkz) into the Windows Open Office Spreadsheet or into the Windows Libre Office Calc. Furthermore, you can save from Open Office and Libre Office in Excel format (for loading into Microsoft Office). This format can be loaded into Fireworkz for Windows and saved as a Fireworkz format file. Of course, the Fireworkz format file can be used in either Fireworkz for Windows or Fireworkz for RISC OS.

Plus c'est la même chose

All spreadsheets have the same set of arithmetic functions such as add, subtract, multiply and divide. Nearly all current spreadsheets, including PipeDream and Fireworkz, contain trigonometric, statistical, date-time, financial, logical and matrix functions. Some, including PipeDream and Fireworkz, contain engineering functions and complex number functions. These pre-loaded formulae are entered into cells which reference other cells or sets of cells. To this extent at least, nothing in spreadsheet design has changed.

Examples of what does change from spreadsheet to spreadsheet are the syntax used for entering formulae and the means of replicating formulae in absolute or relative versions.

It is all too easy to get to know how to do something quickly in one spreadsheet than in an unknown spreadsheet - and then refuse to even consider the merits of using a different spreadsheet. If you are familiar with the way in which Schema works then changing to Fireworkz takes both time and determination.

In my previous article I discussed fear of the unknown. This can be the fear of using Fireworkz when you are used to Schema or Eureka or the fear of using Windows 10 when you are familiar with RISC OS. I suggested that it was good training (for the acceptance of change) to 'try something new every day'. Decades ago I started applying this strategy in a small way by stirring my coffee left handed instead of right handed. Doing this and other 'new to me' things each day made it much easier when I decided to give Windows 10 a try. It is surprising how many features both RISC OS and Windows have in common.

When to Give Up

When I have had face-to-face discussions with friends about this policy of trying something new each day, they ask me how long they should try the new thing before giving up? My answer is that they are allowed to give up once they have found some advantages in the new thing; you can't give up just because you find disadvantages. When you are willing to forego the advantages offered by Excel when compared with Fireworkz, then you are allowed to reject Excel in favour of Fireworkz - but not before.

Box Out - Knowledge and Wisdom

When we are children, everything is new to us. We neither are, nor do we expect to be, familiar with the many things with which we interact. Quickly we learn a strategy which allows us to survive all but the most destructive of these new things.

We learn to taste before swallowing, we learn to interact with people, we learn that operating switches can have wonderful or fatal consequences, we learn that hot things hurt and we learn how not to fall off a bicycle! Unless something terrible happens to us, unless our parents are over-protective, then we learn how to build up our knowledge of what is dangerous, what is safe and, above all, what can be intensely exciting. We experiment in order to expand our knowledge of this new, unfamiliar world. Some of our experiments are those we choose for ourselves; others are forced upon us.

When we are children we have an outlook on life in which we embrace the unexpected because we know that it has the potential to be exciting. As we grow older we begin to cherish, with increasing frequency and boring dependency, life choices which, in truth, overwhelm (some would argue, frustrate) our childhood curiosity. Instead of welcoming exploration, we choose to live in an environment which offers us the security of familiarity. We lose our appetite for the unknown; we fear that the outcome may be something bad, something we cannot control or, perhaps, something for which we no longer have the inner resources nor the resolve to handle.

I take the view that this inertia which creeps up on us as we age, is a bad thing; we lose our ability to experience the wonder, the fun, that trying out new risky things, even when we failed, gave us as children.

Have we lost our capacity for fun forever?

Let me put it to you that as we grow older, when we bravely (or foolishly?) embark upon something new, then, at first, we will probably experience failure. We will make mistakes; we will long for the old familiar things to which we have become accustomed - and conditioned. For many people the mere potential for this initial, albeit inevitable, failure discourages them from even contemplating something new; they stick to the old ways with which they have become far too comfortable to have fun.

In growing older and more set in our ways we have lost something we had in our childhood; we have lost our taste for adventure and the joy that adventures good and bad can bring. We rationalise this rejection of the unknown by over stating its dangers and under estimating the joie de vivre which it can bring.

When you are a beginner you have no right to feel disappointed when, almost inevitably, you fail - you are not yet good enough to deserve success. Don't be deterred by how bad you are at your new venture; accept this as quite normal. Don't allow your fear of making a mistake stop you from experiencing the wonderment which, as a child, you felt when encountering the unfamiliar.

When we were children, it was our mistakes and not our successes from which we gained the knowledge that helped us improve; now that we are older, I suggest to you that it is our mistakes and not our successes which bring us wisdom. In our mature years we need to make mistakes in order to gain wisdom.

Bio-Bit

Gerald practices doing something new each day. Sometimes, after trying the new thing he finds that there is little or no benefit. Now he stirs his tea right-handed knowing that stirring left-handed has more disadvantages for him than advantages.