

Impression Newsletter

Number 1

October 2019

Introduction

I think it is time to start a newsletter for users of Impression, the RISC OS desktop publisher. The coincidence of a new impetus for development and a revamped User Manual has prompted me to start a regular newsletter to publicise this software to attract new users.

Impression competes directly with Ovation Pro but the user interface they each present is quite different. I have tried both and find myself much happier using Impression, as I feel many of its functions are quite intuitive. Some of the time I use Impression on Virtual RiscPC and some of the time on my ARMX6 or ARMbook running under Aemulor 2.52.

Over the last twenty years, marketing of Impression has been lack lustre. The principal magazine for RISC OS, Archive Magazine, which is a strong supporter of Impression (it is produced using that product) has seen only a few issues printed in the last two years.

The market place has changed significantly since 1996 when Impression was last actively marketed: then Acorn computers cost well over £1000, were just offering full colour (24 bit) screen modes and had only just broken through the 4Mbyte barrier with the new Risc PC. A premium price for the software of around £200 was unremarkable.

Now a Raspberry Pi computer can be purchased for £30 with 1 Gbyte of memory and runs much faster (900MHz instead of the paltry front side bus speed

of 16MHz on the Risc PC).

Users now expect to acquire software free of charge making heavy investment in software much more problematic. However Impression was a product of much investment of time and effort with, originally, a large user base.

It would be a shame to waste that investment by allowing it to wither and die. We now have a mature application, Impression-X, that was heavily developed from 1989 to 1996, that then languished for eighteen years but is now being actively developed once more.

In the period from 1996 to 2014, Acorn broke up (1998), RISC OS was developed from 3.60 to 4.02, 4.39, Six and now 5.26 and many new hardware platforms have appeared onto which RISC OS has been ported.

The Titanium board was designed specifically for RISC OS and offers the techie the best high end platform. The ARMX6 and ARMbook offer a very well supported, high performance platform for the discerning user. The Raspberry Pi offers good performance at a very low price for users who might not have RISC OS as their principal machine.

Impression Style and Impression Publisher both came with a lot of support material including a user manual a few hundred pages in size. The manual and tutorial have now been updated and the applications re-released at a much more moderate price point.

Early History of Impression

I'll just recap on the historical development of the Impression software. Impression Style is a robust, full feature product lacking only some esoteric features such as colour separations, guide and irregular frames, typesetting options and colour tables.

Impression-X is being converted to 32-bit operation in a slow and steady process, during which some new features are gradually being added based on user demand. From time to time updates are issued to those subscribing to the update process. Development is also being funded by RISC OS Developments Limited.

A pre-release version of Impression

was made available in September 1989, with a few features not fully implemented and the manual only half complete. By December 1989 it was being advertised at £171 complete with a 200 page manual and able to work on a 1Mbyte machine leaving over 300k free! It would be provided with a 'dongle' as hardware copy protection for the next seven years. Copy protection is important whilst development costs are still being recovered.

To compare the cost of the software and hardware, the A410/1 (upgraded from 1 to 4 Mbytes RAM and 40Mbyte HDD) was available for £2140, whereas a 'base' A310 could be had for as little as £600.

A Brief History of Impression

Version	Date	Price	Features
1	Dec-1989	£171	200 page manual, needs dongle
1.03	Apr-1990	-	reviewed in Archive 3:7
1.05	Aug-1990	-	bug fixes, etc.
Junior		£103	no dongle, replaces version 1.xx
2	Oct-1990	£194	significant improvements, needs dongle
2.04	Dec-1990	-	
2.10	Jun-1991	-	crop marks, vertical rules
2.16	Mar-1992	-	RISC OS 3 compatible
2.18	Mar-1993	-	ArtWorks compatible
3 Style	Mar-1994	£116	replaces Impression II
4 Publisher	Jul-1994	£198	significant improvements
5 Publisher+	Dec-1994	£330	incorporates Business Supplement
3.09	Apr-1996	£92	StrongARM compatible
4.09		£151	
3.13	10-Dec-1996	£92	last version by Computer Concepts
4.13		£151	
5.13		£269	Publisher Plus now dongle free
5.75	24-Oct-2014	£50†	First 32bit release by R.Keefe, includes all Publisher Plus features plus dynamic areas, artworks integration, 32bit support is 45% complete
5.76	22-May-2015	£60†	longer filenames (14 char), DELETE key PC style, bugs fixed, 46%
5.761	17-Jun-2015	£60†	bug fixes: ruler bar, maps font names and character maps on import
5.77	22-Feb-2016	£60†	new JPEG loader
5.78	28-Oct-2017	£60†	DELETE key configurable, improved JPEG handling
Note: † - price covers a total of four releases or a 12 month period, whichever is the greater, renewal is only required to receive further updates			

Version 1.03 was reviewed in Archive 3:7 (April 1990) and was described as well designed and thought out. Version 1.05 became Impression Junior (with no dongle) and Impression II was released in October 1990 at £194.

At this time the new A540 was just being released at £3440 and several hundred had been ordered by dealers but only 20 had been produced.

The principal differences between Impression Junior and Impression II were described in Archive 4:2 (November 1990):

- no master pages (new pages copy previous page design);
- no styles menu, just effects;
- no indexing facility;
- limited colour control.

Impression Junior (with no dongle but more capable than Impression I) thus competed directly with Ovation (which did still have protection until April 1992). Because Impression could run on a 1Mbyte machine it was able to build up large user base. A 'Business Supplement' was available in June 1991 for £57.

By January 1994 Impression Publisher was being announced (£198) and by March 1994 Impression II had become Impression Style (£116) and was a very capable desktop publishing package. It offered named styles which could be applied to selected regions of text and could be nested and/or overlapped. The named style could be used anywhere in the document and its features could be edited in the style editor and would then be applied automatically wherever that style was used.

Each chapter had a master page associated with it which specified the page size, column layout, header and footer frames so that an empty chapter would appear with blank, text, graphic and guide

frames already laid out.

An effects menu was provided for local application of some of the features which could be applied by the style editor: text font, size and colour; line spacing; kerning; paragraph alignment; 'keep together' (avoids orphaned lines) and text features such as bold, italic, underline, super- and sub-script.

Graphics could be panned, cropped and rotated within their frame using the mouse. A toolbar made use of the software intuitive and showed the text font and size at the cursor as well as providing icons for frequently used menu options. The style menu icon would show the named styles which were in force at the cursor position. The current margin and tab settings could also be displayed.

Object linking and embedding (OLE) was supported so that certain applications, including Equasor, FamTree and TableMate, could save their output in a form which would load into Impression as a graphic or into themselves as their native format for editing. Such files actually meet the specification for Draw files but with extra tags to provide this functionality and filetypes linked to their parent application. The advantage of such files is that the graphic will, when CTRL-double-clicked from Impression, load itself into the parent application (in which it had been created) for editing and can be saved directly back from there into Impression.

From July 1994 Impression Publisher offered some evolutionary advances: improved typographical controls and graphics handling and frames could now be irregular, not just rectangular.

By December 1994 there were over 30,000 users of Impression and Impression Publisher Plus had been added to the range. Publisher Plus added the OPI (Open Pre-press Interface) to allow low

resolution photographs to be used in the document but to be replaced during commercial printing by high resolution equivalents. The need for the OPI interface has largely disappeared as memory capacity on current machines is more than adequate for the high resolution versions to be embedded directly into the Impression document. Using the 'save as application' option, only the current chapter is loaded into memory: this technique and use of dynamic areas helps keep within the 28Mbyte limit.

Publisher Plus also has support for named colours, has a word count utility and can alter the page origin for printing (offset each page by a specified displacement in both directions).

The Style, Publisher and Publisher Plus version numbers were now in the 3.xx, 4.xx and 5.xx series respectively. Documents saved from one of these versions can only be loaded into one of the same or higher series. Thus a file saved from Impression Publisher Plus cannot be loaded into Impression Style but all versions can be loaded into Impression-X.

Acorn announced the new Risc PC in May 1994 and by September 1995 the Risc PC 700 was on sale at £1989 with an ARM710, 850MB HDD and 10MB RAM - the price dropped to £1135 by March 1997.

Complaints about the dongle were growing by March 1995. In September 1996 the StrongARM processor was released (the processor is on a plug-in board in the Risc PC). StrongARM-compatible versions of Impression were released - from this point onwards no 'dongle' was required.

Version 5.13 (10-Dec-1996) was the last version released by Computer Concepts. Many users persevered with this version for the next eighteen years, using it

on modern hardware, Iyonix, Beagleboard, Pandaboard, Raspberry Pi, ARMX6, IGEPv5 and Titanium under Aemulor so that it could run on 32 bit systems.

X-Ample Technology started the conversion to 32 bit-safe in 2003 and named the new product Impression-X. Conversion proved difficult but was eventually taken over by Richard Keefe and in 2014 the next update was released.

Aemulor

Applications reside in 'application memory' set by the WimpSlot. This is limited to 28Mbytes for all 26 bit applications running on 26 bit computers or under Aemulor on 32 bit computers.

Modules reside in a special dynamic area called the RMA and can be used by whichever application is currently 'paged-in'. They can also work under interrupts without troubling an application - for example to regulate processor speed with core temperature. Whilst Aemulor is running, all applications are limited to a maximum WimpSlot of 28Mbytes (or 52Mbytes with version 2.52) to retain access to modules.

Impression-X

Impression-X version 5.75 was released by Richard Keefe at the London show in 2014 (as reported in Archive magazine 23:10). It was supplied on a USB stick complete with all components. Since then it has also been possible to download updates from !Store, the latest of which is currently version 5.78) released in October 2017. Four updates (or a year's subscription) cost you £60 (there was an initial offer of £50) whether from Richard direct or from !Store. Although described as a subscription you can continue to use

the software when your subscription ends but to continue receiving updates you would need to renew.

Version 5.75

This is the first release compiled from the sources which have survived (some have had to be reverse engineered). These unfortunately predate version 5.13 and so some of the bug fixes in that version are having to be re-engineered - the nature of the bugs has survived but not their solution. All features in Impression Publisher Plus have been included.

Dynamic areas - where an application can use memory outside the 'WimpSlot' for holding data - was introduced in version 5.75. This helps with larger documents that will not fit into the application slot. Other memory saving techniques, such as loading only one chapter at a time, were already available in earlier versions.

Version 5.76

Version 5.13 limited the leafname of an Impression file to ten characters. This was partly because a file saved as an application had the same limits on the length of the name as an application - its application sprite name would also be limited in length. Version 5.76 increased this limit to 14 characters.

Some bugs were fixed and the operation of the DELETE key was changed to PC style rather than BBC style (i.e. would now delete to the right).

Version 5.76.1

Some more bugs have been fixed, including problems with the ruler bar. Font names and character maps are now handled better during export and import.

Version 5.77

Importing of JPEGs up to now was only possible by importing them to ArtWorks and then importing the ArtWorks file into Impression. Now a

native JPEG loader has been included. This allows better print and image quality and improves PDFs created from Impression.

Version 5.78

For those used to the old behaviour of the DELETE key, this is now configurable either 'as Style Guide' or 'as Backspace'. Another 36 of the 800 bugs that had been fixed in 5.13 have been applied. Images can now be manually scaled to a minimum of 1% vice 5% - important now that digital images are so big. There are new options, not yet fully implemented, on the Printer Setup screen.

The build method can now produce Impression-X or a 5.13 equivalent and the licensing structure has been changed so that in the next build a single build image will be suitable for everyone (rather than needing a bespoke one).

An updated version of !TransJPEG (called !TransJPG2) is supplied which improves the handling of JPEG files as you drag them onto an Impression window.

Conclusion

We now have a mature application, Impression-X, that was heavily developed from 1989 to 1996, that then languished for eighteen years but is now being developed again.

Impression-X is a powerful word processor and a fully-featured, extremely fast, DTP package - a comprehensive document processor. A 370 page manual is available for Impression, covering Impression Style through to Impression-X.

It is based on frames - a master page for each 'chapter' shows the default frames, which may contain either text or a graphic, and local frames may be added to individual pages. Text flows from one

page to the next and 'wraps around' any graphic.

Text may contain styles and can be saved as a 'story' with the various style definitions embedded so that a story can be dropped into any empty or text frame and all the styling and effects will be included. Style definitions can be applied to one or more paragraphs or parts of paragraphs and the styles in use on any part of the document can be viewed on the style menu. It is truly WYSIWYG and uses the Acorn outline fonts.

It is supported by other applications such as Equasor (which produces formulae), TableMate (which produces tabular information) and WordWorks (a combined thesaurus and dictionary).

To run on 32 bit systems it requires Aemulor which can now be downloaded free of charge.

Four of the five feature updates scheduled for the next three releases when Impression-X was launched have now been included, leaving only 'JPEG support for JPEGs embedded in Draw files' yet to be completed. The software is therefore being actively developed and the developer is listening to feedback from users.

On the negative side there is not yet any web site promoting Impression-X and extolling its virtues.

I am a very strong advocate of Impression (desktop publisher), Zap (text editor), TechWriter (word processor), ArtWorks and Draw (vector graphics). I know that some prefer Ovation Pro to Impression and StrongEd to Zap but I think it is important to have choice.

Wish List

Sometimes I find that a strange font has crept into a document from some imported text or graphics. It would be really helpful if the 'Compile font usage' menu option would record not just each font used or substituted but also the first page in the document on which it appears. Then it would be a simpler matter to find and eradicate the use of a particular font.

When a document is saved in 'application format' the content of each graphic frame is included as a separate Draw or ArtWorks file. It would be nice if the Graphic Information window (shown below) could include some extra information: fonts used; leafname of file originally imported; the filename used when the graphic content is saved (e.g. Chapter27.Story15).

Over to the user now - can anyone make any more suggestions please?

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