VIS \ Bridge/SORT, utility for sorting VisiCalc

By John V. Lombardi

Any time you mess with a classic, you have to be careful. VisiCalc, by consensus and sales, is one of the microcomputer industry's classic software success stories.

The program implements an electronic spreadsheet on a variety of microcomputers from Apples to IBMs. VisiCalc is simple to use, relatively powerful and instantly intelligible, hence its great success in convincing consumers that microcomputers are useful tools.

The original and its revisions have some missing features that users seem to need, however. The program does not let you define columns of different widths on the same spreadsheet or allow you to sort columns or rows once they are entered into the worksheet.

VIS \ Bridge/SORT, a utility program for VisiCalc, attempts to solve the sorting problem.

FEATURES: VIS \ Bridge/SORT allow you to sort the rows or columns of a VisiCalc work sheet in ascending or descending order, alphabetically or numerically, using one to five sort columns or rows. You can sort any portion of the worksheet simply by defining the rectangle you're interested in.

That's it. What could be more straightforward?

PERFORMANCE: VIS \ Bridge/SORT does exactly what it promises. It sorts the spreadsheet by rows or columns, in ascending or descending order, with one to five sort fields, alphabetically or numerically. There are some peculiarities that need to be emphasized, however.

First, the program sorts any column or row that has a nonnumeric entry as if it were alphabetic. Thus, if you set up spreadsheets with anything separating the rows, such as a line of dashes, VIS \ Bridge/SORT takes all of your lines of dashes and puts them at the beginning or end of the spreadsheet and then sorts the numbers in an alphanumeric sequence. The manual alerts you to this characteristic of determining alpha or numeric sorts.

The second peculiarity is not so clearly explained. If the spreadsheet has formulas that refer to cells within the rectangle being sorted, the sort can scramble these references so that the formulas no longer produce correct results. The classic case is the @SUM(A1...A10) command. This should add up the values from A1 to A10.

Unfortunately, when VIS \ Bridge/SORT is through sorting the rectangle that has A1..A10, the summation no longer works unless the sort did not change the position of the first and last elements in column A.

This happens because VIS \ Bridge/SORT uses the VisiCalc Move command to rearrange all the rows or columns into the correct, sorted order, and the Move command also messes up the summation and other range commands if the beginning or ending reference of the range is moved.

Is there a solution? Of course. You make sure the summations and other range commands do not reference anything within the sort rectangle.

Speed is not a major problem with this program, although large spreadsheets can take quite a while to sort.

EASE OF USE: VIS \ Bridge/SORT works in a relatively easy way, but the steps required to make it function are many and not entirely transparent.

First you construct your spreadsheet. You then insert a new row or column (depending on whether you want to sort rows or columns) that has special characters identifying the rows or columns to be used as sort fields and whether they are to be

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InfoWorld
Software Report Card

VIS \ Bridge/SORT

	Poor	Fair	Good	Excellent
Performance	☐	☐	☒	☐
Documentation	☐	☒	☐	☐
Ease of Use	☐	☒	☐	☐
Error Handling	☐	☒	☐	☐

System Requirements

- IBM Personal Computer
- PC-DOS
- 64K RAM
- One disk drive
- VisiCalc

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Firm responds to VIS\Bridge/SORT review

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the review of our VIS\Bridge/SORT product. Although your reviewer chose to use the IBM version of this product, it is also available for the Apple II Plus and IIe, the Apple III and the TRS-80 Models I, II/12/16 and III/4. It works with both Advanced VisiCalc and the earlier version of VisiCalc.

I'm glad that your reviewer found "VIS\Bridge/SORT does exactly what it promises." And I'm glad that he found the tutorial helpful.

Your reviewer points out, correctly, that VIS\Bridge/SORT would be easier to operate if VisiCalc came on an unprotected disk and the two programs could simply be merged. Actually, this is not important except on a one-drive system. On a two-drive system, all disk swapping can be avoided and the program is very easy to operate.

Your reviewer also complained about the price of the product. He does not point out that this price includes 30 days of free telephone support from the developers whether the product is bought through a store or directly. We design our products for people to whom professional quality and strong support are more important than rock-bottom prices.

We designed VIS\Bridge/SORT for those who use VisiCalc and need the ability to sort rows and columns. VisiCalc simply does not sort at all without an enhancement like ours. Moving the rows or columns of a spreadsheet by hand is an extremely laborious process.

For many busy professionals, the price of not having VIS\Bridge/SORT is higher than the price of having it.

Tom Evslin, President
Solutions, Inc.

Response

VIS\B/S

continued from preceding page

sorted in ascending or descending order. Then you create a DIF (data interchange format) file, using VisiCalc.

Now you call VIS\Bridge/SORT. You run a setup program that asks some questions about the name of the DIF file and the location of the sort indicators (row or column). The VIS\Bridge/SORT does the sort and creates a special Move file.

Once that is done, you reload VisiCalc, reload your data, load in the Move file and wait while VisiCalc does all the moves necessary to get your spreadsheet in the proper order. If your data was way out of order on a large sheet, the moves can take a while.

After this, you then delete the special row or column created to include the sort indicators, and you have your original spreadsheet sorted.

Tired? I was. You need to have a reasonably organized memory or a pencil and paper to remember what you did where, and if you should get called to the phone in the middle of this process, you might forget which phase was in what stage. Of course, many users are better organized than I am and should have no trouble with all this.

It is also fair to say that some of the clumsiness of VIS\Bridge/SORT is the consequence of VisiCalc's protected format that requires you to reload VisiCalc from the original disk. Still, VIS\Bridge/SORT can't be given a very high rating for ease of use.

ERROR HANDLING: The most prevalent error you can make with this program is misspecifying the location of the sort indicators. You get a diagnostic when you do it wrong, but the message is a bit cryptic. Otherwise, the program does not seem very susceptible to errors.

DOCUMENTATION: VIS\Bridge/SORT gives you an IBM-size, three-ring binder with about 30 typed pages of instructions.

The instructions are adequate, the tutorial is helpful, but the potential difficulties outlined above are not all clearly spelled out. The programs that make up this package are mostly in BASIC, and you can list them to the screen for more documentation.

SUMMARY: VIS\Bridge/SORT does what it says it will do. It would have considerable utility if your spreadsheets conformed to its requirements. It is neither a universal nor a particularly versatile sorting utility for VisiCalc, however. If the price were halved, it could probably be considered a cost-effective program. ■

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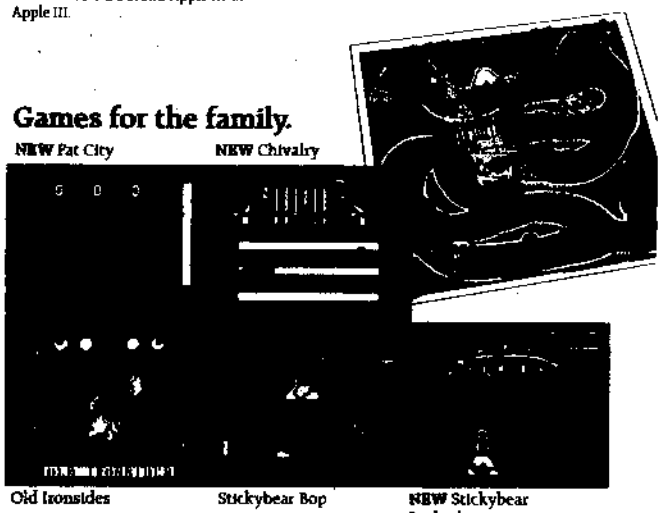

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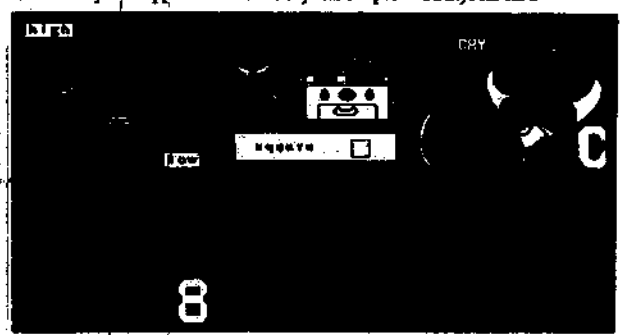

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