ConTEXt user meeting 2007: Epen, March 23–25

Mojca Miklavec

The 23rd of March was a drippy Friday afternoon, but the rain did not stop TEXies from using almost all modes of transport to gather in the small village of Epen on the Dutch-Belgian-German border. Most of the 26 attendees from 11 countries arrived by plane, train, bus, or car, but a few preferred to roller blade, to buy a new bike (because the old one broke down on the way to the meeting), or to jump over the fences all the way from Aachen.

The extremely interesting and packed schedule meant evening discussions that often continued into the wee hours of the morning. And even with the delicious food, Taco usually had problems interrupting the lively discussions and wild coding to bring us down to the dining room before the food got cold.

Indeed, we hardly had time to breathe during the meeting. Those who were not in Epen should regret missing out on the fun!

1   Tutorials

Friday evening started with an excellent tutorial by Taco on how to write a ConTEXt module. He led us from the basics of writing a module to the most important aspects, conventions, tips, and tricks. The tutorial included dozens of pages of documentation to be published on the wiki. Our assignment was to write a new `FIXME` module, which has been on the ConTEXt wishlist for more than a year. Although no module had been written by the end of the meeting (perhaps because there were too many interesting talks), the tutorial and documentation should inspire more authors to provide new high-quality ConTEXt modules.

Taco Hoekwater
Writing a ConTEXt module

Two more tutorials followed on Saturday.

Willi's tutorial was not just about setting up a page layout in ConTEXt, but also dealt with typographical traditions concerning printing, and related technical aspects like the properties of the paper sheets your book will be printed on.

Willi Egger
Page layout, arrangements and posters

In the picture you can see Sanjoy Mahajan solving some of the related questions: how many times do I need to fold this sheet to get 16 pages? And what is the grain direction of the paper?

In contrast to math where many users can start from their LATEX experience when switching to ConTEXt, XML processing is ConTEXt's specialty, and lacks a beginner's manual. That meant that every single hand was raised when Hans asked about the interest to listen to his XML tutorial, although it was almost bed-time when it started.

Hans Hagen
XML

Willi in action

2 History of typesetting & typesetting of history

Taco Hoekwater
A short history
of ConTEXt

The first talk on Saturday morning was given by Taco Hoekwater, one of the first ConTEXt users outside Pragma ADE. It was enjoyable to listen to the summary of the early revolutionary ideas Hans implemented into his system at a time when some of the attendees in Epen were still school kids who had only dreamt about owning a computer.

Thomas A. Schmitz
Classical Greek with
ConTEXt

Coming from a completely different field than most attendees (humanities), Thomas shared his experience of ConTEXt related to typesetting Ancient Greek, struggling with font-system oddities and limitations of pdfTEX. Is LuaTEX going to offer the definitive answer to the problems he had to fight with?

Idris Samawi Hamid
Critical editions

In contrast to the usual development cycles of ConTEXt and its modules, where documentation is lagging way behind the functionality, Idris brought with him a complete specification of a yet-to-be-written module for typesetting critical editions with multiple levels of footnotes, proposing a complete hierarchy of commentaries.

3 Talks from user experience ...

Mari Voipio
ConTEXting in
MS Windows —
a user's view

Mari presented all the problems a newbie faces when switching from Microsoft products to ConTEXt: no WYSIWYG editor, no drop-down menu with fonts, no copy-paste to include images, no easy way to create tables ... Would a Word2ConTEXt tutorial help?

Sanjoy Mahajan
Typesetting a physics
textbook with ConTEXt

Sanjoy described how he uses ConTEXt to typeset his mathematics textbook (*Street-fighting mathematics*), covering project structure, page layout, and figure–text integration (figure placement).

Duncan Hothersall
Using ConTEXt as part
of a larger system

Duncan's company uses ConTEXt for typesetting multilingual documents (including Arabic) from XML sources, but he showed a great deal of courage when he dared to make a presentation in PowerPoint during ConTEXt meeting, for which he has been "punished" appropriately during the live demo.

The conference room

4 Useful tools

Patrick's presentation of his TextMate extensions for better ConTEXt support could be called "a story of success" or "a good reason why one should attend TEX meetings". His first announcement about the ConTEXt bundle on the mailing list got no reply. This time, most of the Mac users at the meeting eagerly awaited the upload of the new bundle, in order to try it on their own computers. The bundle supports syntax highlighting and auto-completion of all user-level commands. It also provides an interactive list of arguments that these commands accept, and provides shortcuts for typesetting and previewing.

Patrick Gundlach
ConTEXt integration in the TextMate editor

Probably tired of the ease of typesetting PDF documents with ConTEXt, he has also written support for manual editing of PDF in TextMate, so that cross-reference tables can be calculated automatically. Interested hackers should ask him for details.

Patrick Gundlach
Creating a PDF document, the hard way

5 Discussions

All attendees agreed that our shelves lacked a well-written "The ConTEXtbook" and/or (online) Cookbook, but no one volunteered to write it. It was also agreed that TEXSHOW is incomplete. Filling the gaps in this area is mostly up to the users.

Mojca Miklavec
Documentation

Some suggested to clean up and improve the wiki pages: to create a site index, to point to the most important recent changes and advances since the last update of ConTEXt manual. More samples should be provided, and submitting test files should be made easier.

The one who makes few mistakes makes little progress. Because ConTEXt development is progressing apace, a repository with test suites has been set up, and Sanjoy has been developing tools to check for broken functionality between different ConTEXt releases. Simplifying submissions of test cases should be one of the first steps towards a better quality control before new "γ releases", as some jokingly called them.

Sanjoy Mahajan
Regression testing

6 A glimpse into the future

Arthur Reutenauer
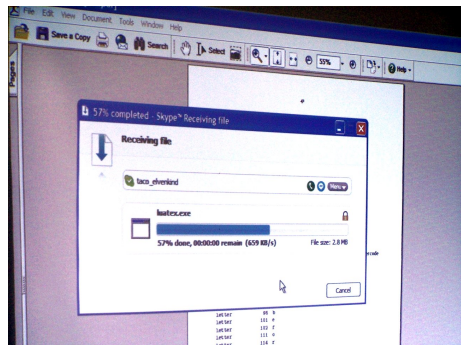**An introduction to**
OpenType fonts

Unfortunately, OpenType fonts are not as open as one would expect them to be, but luckily enough both Hans and Patrick have been open enough to ideas and requirements for proper font support in ConTEXt and on the garden, some of which had secretly been added to `live.contextgarden.net` during the night before presentation, while Patrick himself was sleeping.

Idris Samawi Hamid
Oriental TEX

If typesetting Ancient Greek is problematic — what about Arabic? After (mis)using Aleph for quite some time, Idris claimed that no existing system was able to meet his requirements to typeset old Arabic texts, and applied for a grant at Colorado State University to fund Taco's development of LuaTEX. Without such a grant, we would probably not be seeing the rapid development of LuaTEX, aiming for the first beta release during the TUG conference this year.

We are now eagerly awaiting his next tutorial about writing funding proposals (hopefully applicable to Euro currency as well).

Hans Hagen,
Taco Hoekwater
LuaTEX,
ConTEXt MkIV,
fonts,
& typescripts

Last but not least, Hans and Taco filled in the remaining time not already reserved for other presentations. Although I've seen quite a few of their talks already, they always keep us surprising with some really special slides — both in visual appearance and contents. The development has been progressing almost at light-speed — even during the conference.

The picture shows a (non-scheduled) live demonstration of bugfixing in LuaTEX during Hans's tutorial.

The most special thing of the meeting was that most of us have known each other from vivid discussions on the mailing list without ever meeting before. So the introductory discussions that would otherwise start with platitude phrases asking for names, location or profession, were usually replaced by hitting the core of the subject:
"Wait! You are the one who did . . . !"
The meeting was a great success and left a deep impression on everyone. Most attendees left Epen saying "See you next year".

How to fit five nationalities into one car? Well, TEXies have lots of experience with packing boxes. So as long as they go well with each other, they always find a solution.

7 Invitation to Slovenia

The second ConTEXt user meeting, in 2008, will take place in Slovenia, near the Slovenian-Austrian-Italian border, and last probably a day or two longer than this one, in order to leave you more time to discuss the fascinating topics, to exchange ideas, and to breathe fresh air while sightseeing or doing sport. As the date approaches and planning crystallizes, the time and location will be announced on the mailing list and `contextgarden.net`.

Participants in the ConTEXt 2007 user meeting:

Front row (from left to right): Luigi Scarso (it), Mojca Miklavec (si), Zofia Walczak (pl), Taco Hoekwater (nl), Duncan Hothersall (uk), Arthur Reutenauer (fr).

Back row: Bernd Militzer (de), Willi Egger (nl), Thomas Engel (de), David Roderick (uk), Oliver Buerschaper (de), Patrick Gundlach (de), Mari Voipio (fi), Steffen Wolfrum (de), Luuk Beurskens (nl), Alexander S. Berdnikov (ru), Jano Kula (cz), Idris Samawi Hamid (us), Hans Hagen (nl), David Kastrup (de), Michael Guravage (nl), Karel Horák (cz).

Missing from the photo: Sanjoy Mahajan (us), Tobias Burnus (de), Thomas A. Schmitz (de), Jelle Huisman (nl).

⋄ Mojca Miklavec
Slovenia