Typographers’ Inn
Peter Flynn

Fast startup with \LaTeX{} — a video challenge

It’s usually unfair to compare \LaTeX{} with other typesetting systems such as InDesign or FrameMaker, and the old DTP favourites like PageMaker, Ventura, 3B2, and QuarkXPress, some of which are still in use. The reason is not just in some way that ‘\LaTeX{} is “better”’ — whether you believe that to be true or not — it’s that they work differently, and \LaTeX{} has a level of programmability and style of automation not as easily accessible in other systems.

Other systems do of course have macros and styles, and many have an internal scripting language. InDesign uses Extendscript;\(^1\) XPress uses AppleScript; Frame uses Extendscript also; PageMaker uses VBScript; 3B2 offers its own scripting language as well as Perl. But \LaTeX{}‘s programmability is not an add-on or plugin or third-party language, it is the \TeX{} typesetting language, inherently a part of the design from the ground up; and Lua\LaTeX{} provides a language with external acceptance.

So when my attention was drawn to a YouTube video put out by Los Angeles online design educators Type-Ed, called Typeset a page in under 10 minutes in InDesign \[^2\], I wondered how that would compare to \LaTeX{}. We’re not talking here about including the learning curve in either case — that would stretch it to an hour or so for \LaTeX{} and I have no idea how long it takes to learn InDesign to the level needed. There is no voice-over, just music and clicks.

The video (Figure 1, youtube.com/watch?v=VVIQE6kht8c) is speeded up for brevity, and has a lot of clicking on and off of menus, selecting options and values. It starts as a single-column text document on Letter paper, and they import the material from an external plain text file all about typography. The text is set in Minion Pro and is edited to elide multiple spaces, and then cast into two columns . . . and then three, then the size is changed from 10pt to 12pt to 8¼pt to see the effect. Styling follows, first with paragraph heads, then with section heads, and finally the title. There is a lot of adjustment to the appearance of the paragraphs: changing the set and the spacing; but the end result is very good, and makes an excellent one-off example document to sell people on the idea that InDesign makes it easy to lay out one-off documents.

A few stop–start viewings made it clear that most of the formatting is fairly standard, and can easily be done in \LaTeX{} using standard packages.

I’m not sure about the practice of narrowing the set within a multi-column page on a column-by-column basis (the objective seems to be to regularize some parts of the ragged-right setting), but without any narration, the objectives are sometimes unclear.

To test this, I made a small proof-of-concept using the Wikipedia text on Typography, but there is significant editing work needed to get it into line with the text used in the video, and a need for abilities in creating a video from screen captures which are outside my skill-set. If there is a \LaTeX{} user out there who is also fluent in InDesign, I’d be interested to see someone dissect the video with a view to making one for \LaTeX{}, as I think it would be a good example for users to see a real-life document being brought into a popular format.

Footnotes as never before or since — a text challenge

A historian on Twitter tweeted (at twitter.com/garius/status/1570771789827166208):

It’s Friday. Have some history.

So you know Hadrian’s Wall? Well for over 1000 years everyone thought it was built by someone else.

Until, in 1840, John Hodgson, an unknown Northumbrian clergyman published the LONGEST footnote in history.

It ran to 173 pages. After the footnote, the main text simply carries on with the subject of the local history as if nothing had happened. If you can’t read the thread, there’s a spoiler in this footnote.\(^2\)

\[^1\] InDesign provides access to its own Document Object Model (DOM) so in theory you can use other scripting languages like AppleScript or VBScript.

\[^2\] Hodgson was embarrassed by the fact that his magnum opus on Northumbrian history would likely be overshadowed...
The book [1] is now online in Google Books at books.google.co.uk/books?id=D1IGAAAAQAAJ, where you can download a PDF; and there on p.149 Hodgson starts his explanation (Figure 2).

**Figure 2: The start of the longest footnote.**

As with the InDesign video, I had to see what \LaTeX would make of 173 pages of a single footnote, but pdftotext does not convert Google’s PDFs to plaintext well, as multiple lines of text from one column get interleaved with similar-sized blocks of text from the other, despite the vertical rule. Unfortunately Apache PDFbox fared no better, interleaving almost every single pair of lines. This appears to be a problem with the way in which the Google scan and OCR have been synchronised, presumably done for the purposes of searching, not reprocessing.

Looking through the pages, there are footnotes within the footnote; run-in subheadings; lists; bibliographic references between paragraphs; tabular settings; embedded graphics, including typographic reconstructions of inscriptions across both columns; and genealogical tree-charts — in fact almost the entire panoply of typographic requirements needed for a whole book.

By comparison, the page layout itself would be unproblematic, except that the dblfnote package appears to reset to single-column after a page-break, and would in any case need modifying to allow reversion to single-column mode in mid-page for an illustration, like `multicol` does.

However, the simple answer to my original question is that \LaTeX has no problem whatever in maintaining scope for 173 pages of footnote. However, a lot of work would be needed for a full reconstruction to test if all the formatting can be done, if someone [else] would like to take it up.

**Afterthought: List spacing**

Just browsing the documentation for an old TomTom VIA 52 satnav and discovered that the main screen diagram has eleven callouts (icons labelled 1–11) but the list explaining them runs from one to nine, and then restarts at one (Figure 3).

**Figure 3: Callout list misnumbered**

It looks very much as if the width of the indent provided for the list geometry was set to allow just a single digit... but if that was so, truncation on the left-hand side would have given zero (from the 10) and one (from the 11); truncation on the right-hand side would give two ones. So we must conclude that at 10, the list was actually reset to start at one. Just a little thing to be aware of when you design list indents. And, of course, use \LaTeX, not Word, InDesign, or anything else.

**References**


[2] Type-Ed. Typeset a page in under 10 minutes in InDesign, May 2016. youtube.com/watch?v=VVIQE6kht8c

◊ Peter Flynn
Textual Therapy Division, Silmaril Consultants Cork, Ireland
Phone: +353 86 824 5333 peter (at) silmaril dot ie blogs.silmaril.ie/peter

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