From the president

Arthur Rosendahl

What’s in a TeX?

The trip test defines precisely to what a program must conform for it to be called tex, in order to achieve compatibility across operating systems. But the name TeX has for a long been time been used in a less strict way in common parlance, to mean the algorithms of TeX, its “engine”, that have been reused in many of its extensions; or, in a yet looser way, the set of programs and tools surrounding TeX, its “ecosystem”. That’s why we can speak of what “TeX” does as opposed to, for example, Lua in LuaTeX — where many parts of the engine can be rewritten — or as opposed to HarfBuzz in XeTeX and LuaHBTeX.

This polysemy reflects not only the flexibility and adaptability of the algorithms of the original “TeX, the program” — the one that passes the trip test — but also, to put it in somewhat immodest terms, its success. It has extended far and wide beyond its originally intended use, gaining in the process not only users but also a sometimes mystical reputation of being the Midas of computer programs, that turns any document into gold. (I would argue that the other part of the Midas legend also applies.) At the same time, the proliferation of extensions of TeX has led to an often confusing choice, starting with the many names that look like “somethingTeX” and that, in the words of a long-time contributor to several of the programs thus named, make some TUGboat articles look a bit like a high school magazine. Just have a look at this column if you’re not convinced!

This diversity is, however, much more of an asset than a liability, as it gives newcomers a choice — as daunting as that may seem — and enables more advanced users to experiment with different approaches. It is of course a little schizophrenic, though, as was illustrated once at the BachoTeX series of conferences, where in one session entitled “TeX contra TeX” we tried to enact the opposition between the different extensions of TeX as a Western-style duel (as well as a trial; we couldn’t quite make up our minds). We didn’t issue a judgement, other than it was good that all these different options existed and were somehow united under the banner of “TeX and friends”. Very recently, I had the opportunity to discuss the use of TeX in a real court of law; more on that later.

The same ambiguity exists for our organisation, the TeX Users Group, that gathers members from all walks of life, who use TeX and its variants for many different reasons. The prevailing feeling among many long-time members of TUG is that we’re more of a developers’ group, even though we have “users” in our name. This is not necessarily a problem, though, since it is natural that those who are more involved in the organisation become specialists in some area. It is however essential that we continue to attract new users and that they feel welcome. I have never personally had the impression that newcomers were made to feel unwelcome, but this is something to bear in mind.

I was once asked at a conference why there was no LATEX Users Group and, after being initially startled, outlined some of the above as an explanation of why a user group dedicated specifically to LATEX would be a bad idea (or perhaps I did actually say my initial thought out loud, namely “what a stupid question” … belated apologies). As the first TUG president out of the ConTeXt community, I can of course regret that TeX is so often equated with LATEX, but it is a reality that most users of TeX systems use it through LATEX (and also, even though they might not be aware of it, pdfTeX).

Whatever road led us to TeX, though, we are all united by a love for typography and beautifully typeset documents, that may take very different shapes and forms. The TeX Users Group has been a place to express this love for over forty years, and it is my hope that it will continue to be such a place for a long time to come. Go forth now and create masterpieces of the publishing art!

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1 Editor’s note: For another take on this perennial topic, see the tug.org/levels web page: LATEX vs. MiKTEX.