
From the president

Arthur Rosendahl

What’s in a T_EX?

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 T_EX has for a long been time been used in a less strict way in common parlance, to mean the algorithms of T_EX, its “engine”, that have been reused in many of its extensions; or, in a yet looser way, the set of programs and tools surrounding T_EX, its “ecosystem”. That’s why we can speak of what “T_EX” does as opposed to, for example, Lua in LuaT_EX — where many parts of the engine can be rewritten — or as opposed to HarfBuzz in X_YT_EX and LuaHB_TE_X.

This polysemy reflects not only the flexibility and adaptability of the algorithms of the original “T_EX, 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 T_EX has led to an often confusing choice, starting with the many names that look like “somethingT_EX” 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 BachoT_EX series of conferences, where in one session entitled “T_EX contra T_EX” we tried to enact the opposition between the different extensions of T_EX 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 “T_EX and friends”. Very recently, I had the opportunity to discuss the use of T_EX in a real court of law; more on that later.

The same ambiguity exists for our organisation, the T_EX Users Group, that gathers members from all walks of life, who use T_EX 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 L^AT_EX Users Group and, after being initially startled, outlined some of the above as an explanation of why a user group dedicated specifically to L^AT_EX would be a bad idea (or perhaps I did actually say my initial thought out loud, namely “what a stupid question” ... belated apologies).¹ As the first TUG president out of the ConT_EXt community, I can of course regret that T_EX is so often equated with L^AT_EX, but it is a reality that most users of T_EX systems use it through L^AT_EX (and also, even though they might not be aware of it, pdfT_EX).

Whatever road led us to T_EX, though, we are all united by a love for typography and beautifully typeset documents, that may take very different shapes and forms. The T_EX 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: L^AT_EX vs. MiK_TE_X.