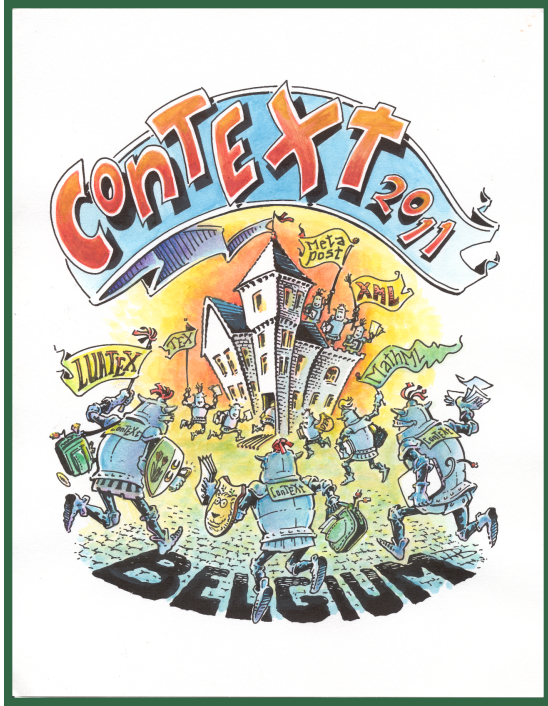# 5th ConTEXt Meeting

Michael Guravage

1. Chateau Jekervallei

My first thought as I arrived at the Chateau Jekervallei was, 'Listen to how quiet it is here.' This sense of peace and quiet persisted, and the chateau proved to be a respite from the hustle and bustle of everyday life for all of us who were there for the fifth annual ConTEXt meeting.

The chateau is located a mere fifteen kilometers south west of Maastricht on the southern edge of the Belgian village of Bessange-Bosis. The chateau lies in Wallonia, but the border between French speaking Wallonia and Dutch speaking Flandars meanders through the countryside, between, and even through villages. It is strange sight to drive through a village and see a *te koop* sign on one side of a street and a similar *a verndre* sign directly across the road.

The chateau was built in the mid 19th century for Baron de Moreaux de Melen. A large and rambling place with spacious rooms and large rectangular windows, it could comfortably accommodate twenty people, and I think we filled each and every bed.

Meals and meetings took place in an carriage house adjoining the chateau that dates from the mid 18th century. Speaking of meals, besides his many other talents, our host Jan proved to be an excellent chef. Throughout the week we enjoyed meals whose flavors delighted our palates while their named sounded sweet in our ears: 'Cochelet (haantje) avec lentilles et puree', 'Poisson grille et Paella au fruits de mer' and 'Lapin avec prunes et pour dessert poires au chocola!'

2. Lectures

The technical portion of the program took place on Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday.

I will review three of the nearly thirty lectures in order to give you a taste of the fare that was on offer. I will not go into much detail. For a detailed description of the presentations, I recommend you lay hold of a copy of the ConTEXt Group's first proceedings. Better yet, join the Context Group for an annual free of 40 euros and receive the proceedings as part of your membership.

2.1 xml in ConTₑXt mkiv

Thomas Schmitz gave two complementary talks. The first was an introduction to typesetting xml in ConTₑXt mkiv. After remarking about xml's simplicity, readability and generality, Thomas enumerated several advantages xml has over other formats including how xml: encourages separating content and presentation, how it can be read by myriad applications and how it can be processed to produce various outputs.

ConTₑXt mkii uses a xml streaming parser, which means that elements are processed exactly in the order in which the parser reads them. ConTₑXt mkiv introduced an xml DOM parser that reads an entire document into memory. You now have access to every element of your xml document at every moment. This makes reuse, selection and manipulation much easier.

One consequence of typesetting xml in ConTₑXt is that you need to write a set of macros telling ConTₑXt how to associate the various xml elements in your document with their corresponding ConTₑXt commands. Writing this additional layer between your source and your output requires careful work. The complexity of this layer is directly proportional to the amount of fine tuning you require. The time and effort required to write this layer is only justifiable when your documents have a predictable or repetitive structure, when this structure is translated into a repetitive look and when you want to generate several output formats from each source.

These are precisely the criteria for Thomas's lecture notes, and the subject of his second talk.

2.2 Presentations in xml with the simpleslides module

In his second talk Thomas described how, after hearing Han's xml tutorial at the first ConTₑXt user meeting, he resolved to code his lecture presentations in xml. His goal was to produce three distinct documents from a single xml file: the presentation itself, a simpler `printable' version that students could easily download and print and a set of cards containing his notes for the presentation.

Thomas led us through an example presentation style where we progressively added code first to recognize and then to process various xml elements and their contents. Matching and processing individual elements allows you steadily and step-by-step to expand your style's breath and depth. I will not show any code here, rather I suggest you read Thomas's article in the C5M proceedings. Additional information can be found in Thomas's `TEI xml' entry on contextgarden and in Hans's manual `Dealing with XML in ConTeXt mkiv.'

One clever aspect of Thomas's style that must be mentioned is how he keeps multiple presentations in a single file. So how does he differentiate between them? He specifies a mode on the command-line which the presentation style compares to an attribute on the presentation elements, and processes only that presentation where the mode and attribute match.

As an added attraction on the printed version, Thomas automatically adds a word cloud on the last page. He uses a Lua program to extract the text from a presentation, and feeds it to the IBM Word Cloud Generator - a java application that creates the word cloud. A word's size in the resulting cloud is dependent on how frequently it appears in the text.

One advantage of maintaining several styles, one for each output format, is that it is easy to redefine commands and thus customize your result.

One drawback of maintaining several styles is that you tend to copy blocks of code between your various styles, and maintaining consistency across a number of separate yet similar style files quickly becomes bothersome.

If you have to process a single document pro-

ducing several different forms of output, xml is for you. XML processing in ConTEXt mkiv is very cool. Thomas's two presentations at C5M are a good starting point for anyone interested in using this technology.

2.3 E-Books

Last October Julian Barns used the occasion of his Man Booker Prize acceptance speech to make an impassioned plea for the survival of printed books. Andrew Miller, last year's recipient of England's prestigious Costa Prize for Literature recently lamented that he soon expected most popular fiction would be read on screen. If you can believe the hype, printed books, along with we who collect them, are soon to be consigned to the dustbin of history; replaced by a new generation of techno savvy youngsters with e-books.

In his talk entitled 'Old Wine in New Bottles' Hans surveyed the current state-of-the-art of e-readers and e-books. Hans began by remarking that e-books are just books; which is true. Consider the results when publishers first scrambled to scan their printed books and re-market them as e-books. OCR content was poured into text files with little or no concern for structure or design.

There are essential differences though. Traditional books offer resolution, portability and longevity; while e-books offer economy, searching, indexing and reflow. We are familiar with how to read printed book. We feel its weight and can flick through the pages to find a favorite poem. E-books offers us a different experience. Some critics contend that by eliminating all variations in the appearance and weight of the material object in our hands, we are freed to focus on the words themselves. Whatever your persuasion, it appears that ConTEXt can readily accommodate both audiences.

ConTEXt has been producing PDF for paper and screen for quite some time. But Hans demonstrated how ConTEXt, with a slight processing overhead, can now also produce xhtml and css output suitable for an e-book.

The key is structure. Most novels and non-fiction books can be typeset with only an handful of structure elements, e.g., paragraphs, headings, emphasis, lists and images. Verbatim text and hyperlinks are a bit more problematic. Hans showed how the new mkiv structure style can facilitate both tagged PDF and xml output.

ConTEXt can also convert an e-book directly to PDF. Publishers, unfortunately, are not consistent in how they markup their xhtml, and each `style' has to be typeset separately. Still, ConTEXt's ability to directly process an e-book is eminently preferable to the usual double translation from html to Ms Word to Adobe InDesign to print an e-book.

Looking to the future, Hans envisions e-books and e-reader technologies maturing and expanding to become the dominant way we consume the written word. If this happens, it would necessarily mean the demise of many a bookstore, and perhaps also the publishers that supply them. One unintended consequence of which might be a decentralization of the whole publishing industry where self-publishing becomes a viable option for both aspiring and accomplished authors.

I like to think that printed and electronic books are sufficiently different to comfortably co-exist for a long time to come. *Vive la différence!*

3. Excursion

Regardless of how pleasant the chateau surroundings were, after two days of lectures we were ready for a day out. We began our day's excursion with a walking tour of the nearby village of Canne. The village is split in two by the Albert canal that connects the industrial city of Liège and the port of Antwerp. While on the map you will see only one name 'Canne,' the local residents refer to that part of Canne north of the Albert canal as Opcanne; and to the south Neercanne.

3.1 Mergel Caves

We began by walking from the center of Neercanne across the Albert canal to the caves of Opcanne. Like all the caves in the region, these caves are underground queries from which mergel, a local limestone, was extracted.

The tunnels of Opcanen stretch for sixteen kilometers. Signs of the labor exerted to extract so much stone are visible both in the daily block tallies written on the walls and the myriad smudge marks on the ceiling from lanterns that were placed on the top row of the tunnel face.

Interestingly, the tunnels are owned by whomever owns the ground above them. Some owners have formed cooperatives while others remain independent. Today, the spaces are used for cold storage, mushroom cultivation, even winter stalling for a local dairy herd. One enterprising individual has carved out an entire *feestzaal* replete with central heating.

One grotto that caught everyone's attention was where hundreds of bottles of Grottenbier were stored in pupitre. We were told that sugar and yeast are added to this beer so that it undergoes a second fermentation in the bottle. The beer is then stored in the grotto to mature for several months before sale. Needless to say, we stopped at a wine and spirits shop to sample the local brews.

3.2 Fort Eben-Emael

We then visited the fortress of Eben-Emael. Constructed between 1931 and 1935, it was considered the largest fort of its kind in the world, and could accommodate more than a thousand men. Its purpose was to prevent the Germans from crossing the Albert canal, which links the industries of Liège with the port of Antwerp. Unfortunately, like the Hollandsche Waterlinie or the French maginot line, these relics of the first world war proved ineffective in the new war. In the wee hours of Sunday 10 May 1940 German troops landed by glider on top of the fort, disabled its two large guns and forced the surrender of everyone inside. While the bridge over the Albert canal at Canne was destroyed, others were taken intact. With the threat of Eben-Emael removed, the German entered Belgium unhindered, flanked the maginot line then turned north to capture Belgium and France in a matter of days.

General George S. Patton said that, ``Fixed fortifications are a monument to man's stupidity'' Fort Eben-Emael remains as a testimony to its conception and construction, the bravery of its defenders, and its ultimate inadequacy in the face of modern warfare.

The photo of the main stairwell of Fort Eben-Emael courtesy of Kris Van Herzeele.

3.3 Chateau Neercanne

I didn't know that the Netherlands had a balcony, but it does. It's name is Chateau Neercanne. On December 9th 1991 Queen Beatrix of the Netherlands welcomed the government

leaders of the member states of the European Union there to sign the Maastricht treaty. Chateau Neercanne is now a restaurant boasting two Michelin stars. It is the only terraced castle in the Benelux, from which one has a panoramic view of the Jeker valley, and its baroque garden has been restored to its original glorious design.

3.4 A Renaissance Ball

Thursday evening we were whisked back in time five hundred years to partake in an evening of Renaissance music and dancing. The music was provided by Maaike Boekhout and Regina Albanez of the Dutch Renaissance/Baroque ensemble La Primavera, and our choreographer was Mari Voipio. Dressed in a period costume Mari looked every inch the Renaissance courtly lady. A handful of brave souls ventured to join

the ball and learn the various sequence of steps Mari demonstrated. And regardless whether you were an aspiring dancer or a reluctant wallflower, everyone had a convivial and enjoyable evening.