Good old times?

Taco Hoekwater

If my memory is correct, it was sometime in the Autumn of 1996 that I convinced my bosses at what was then my employer –Kluwer Academic Publishers– to start using ConTEXt instead of LATEX for the in--house development of an automated XML typesetting system for scientific articles.
There were three big deciding arguments in favor of ConTEXt at that time:

- Floating figure placement, especially in combination with a two column layout, was much more reliable in ConTEXt. LATEX at the time had the nasty habit of putting all the figures at the very end of the article when it ran into trouble during float placement.
- ConTEXt's interface for setting up specific layouts was much cleaner than LATEX's, which meant that small layout tweaks could easily be carried out by a non-guru.
- Last but certainly not least, it was possible to negotiate a support contract with the actual developer: Pragma ADE. In this, it also helped that Pragma ADE is a Dutch company. Earlier, we had tried to work with overseas support companies, but correct and swift communication was not always easily obtained.

Hans Hagen personally delivered ConTEXt to the office in Dordrecht. I assume it was on a floppy disk, but I cannot recall for certain. What I do remember is that it came with a single 4-ring binder containing 'the manual'. At that time, that was all of about 400 pages of 10pt type with fairly large margins. I still have the binder, but at some time during the zeroes I threw out the manual for being hideously obsolete. In hindsight, that was a mistake, as it would no doubt be worth some money in a ConTEXt Group auction by now ...
I am quite certain that the ConTEXt sources that Kluwer Academic Publishers got are still on a backup disk somewhere hidden in my office, but searching through boxes of unlabeled 3.5 inch floppy disks and burnable CD-Roms is too daunting a task. Nor does it help that none of my current computing machines can read either types of hardware!

After some digging on-line, I did manage to find a ConTEXt release that is reasonably close. On the NTG's 4allTEX4, there is a ConTEXt release from October 1997. There is no exact date, because at the time the `\contextversion` command was defined like this:

```
\edef\contextversion
  {\the\normalyear.\the\normalmonth.%
   \the\normalday\normlspace}
```

in other words: the date of format generation. While it was released a year later, not all that much seems to have been changed in that time, because I have definite memories of digging through the massive –as it appeared to me then– `core-01a.tex` source file to find specific macro definitions.
At the time, there were 93 files in the distribution zip, but this included a few non-ConTEXt files as well: included are a full copy of `plain.tex` version 3.14159, as well as a redistribution of Michael J. Wichura's `table.tex`, and a readme file. The zip comes in at just under 600 kilobytes.
This version of ConTEXt was somewhere between Mk0 and MkI, I think. Running ConTEXt involved starting `(pdf)tex` on the commandline yourself with the proper format preloaded. pdfTEX was still very new in 1997. I remember from the earlier release we used at Kluwer Academic that it was based on emTEX's `tex` binary and still counted on Y&Y's Dvipsone driver to generate high-quality PostScript from DVI files.
In between those hand-started TEX runs, one had to call `texutil.exe` to process the `.tui` file into a `.tuo` file. This was quite cumbersome, and

if I am not mistaken `texexec.exe` was released soon afterwards (first under the name `ctex`), only to itself be replaced later by `texexec.pl`, then `texexec.rb`, until its current incarnation as a stub for `mtxrun`.

Those early programs –there was also `texedit.exe`, an integrated development environment, as well a few others like a spell checker– where written by Hans in Modula.

Was this the 'Good old times'? Maybe. Hans still had hair, I still had my own teeth, and certainly ConTEXt was easier to understand back then even if it was a lot less powerful. But how much has really changed? Here is the end of the `context.rme` dated October 5, 1997:

```
Don't hesitate to ask questions.
ConTeXt can do a lot, and
the manuals are always way behind
and incomplete.

Hans Hagen
pragma@pi.net
```