Electronic Documents Give Reproducible Research a New Meaning

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SUMMARY

A revolution in education and technology transfer follows from the marriage of word processing and software command scripts. In this marriage an author attaches to every figure caption a pushbutton or a name tag usable to recalculate the figure from all its data, parameters, and programs. This provides a new standard of reproducibility in computa-

In 1990, we set this sequence of goals:

- Learn how to merge a publication with its underlying computational analysis.
- Teach researchers how to prepare a document in a form where they themselves can reproduce their own research results a year or more later by "pressing a single button".
- Learn how to leave finished work in a condition where coworkers can reproduce the calculation including the final illustration by pressing a button in its caption.
- Prepare a complete copy of our local software environment so that graduating students can take their work away with them to other sites, press a button, and reproduce their Stanford work.
- Merge electronic documents written by multiple authors (SEP reports).
- Export electronic documents to numerous other sites (sponsors) so they can readily reproduce a substantial portion of our Stanford research.

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We met all these goals and set new ones:

- produce all new documents in this form, including lab reports in formal classes and "lab notebooks" of research progress.
- make incremental improvements in electronic-document software
- seek partners for broadening standards (and making incremental improvements).

Our basic goal is reproducible research. The electronic document is our means to this end. In principle, reproducibility in research can be achieved without electronic documents and that is how we started. Our first nonelectronic reproducible document was a textbook in which the paper document contained the name of a program script in every figure caption. The program scripts were organized by book chapter and section so they could be correlated to an accompanying magnetic tape dump of the file system. The magnetic tape also contained all the necessary data to feed the program script.

Now that we have begun using CD-ROM publication, we can go much further. Every figure caption contains a pushbutton that jumps to the appropriate science directory (folder) and initiates a figure rebuild command and then displays the figure, possibly as a movie or interactive program. We normally display seismic images of the earth's interior, but to reach wider audiences, Figure 1 shows a satellite weather picture which the pushbutton will animate as seen on commerical television. We include all our plot software as well as freely available software from many sources, including compilers and the LaTeX word processing system. Naturally we cannot include licensed software, but with the exception of Fortran and C compilers and the UNIX system itself, our publication includes source code for everything needed. The CD-ROM, at 680 megabytes, is so large we have had room for many executable programs on popular brands of workstations. The presence of these executables gives our readers a fast start.

Nearly everyone would rather read a paper book than the bitmapped page images on a screen that you see with an electronic document. But the illustrations in the electronic book are mostly in color, many are movies, and some are interactive. So the electronic book gives the reader a better understanding of the results. We typically use an interactive movie program to compare seismic sections where successive frames include processing with various parameters. The movie medium is much more informative than comparing seismic sections side by side. 3-D volumes are much better exhibited by movies than static paper illustrations. We are delivering a volume of software that is accessed like a book.

[1]SEP-CD-1 is available from Stanford University Press, $15 plus shipping, tel 415-723-1593