March Project Of The Month – Scribus

By March 1st, 2012

The March 2012 project of the month is Scribus (http://sourceforge.net/projects/scribus/). Scribus is a cross-platform document layout application, used in a variety of publishing ventures. I spoke with Peter Linnell, one of the founders, about the project.

(I'll be posting something next week about what went wrong with the voting process, for those of you who expressed some curiosity about that.)

Rich: I'm speaking with Peter Linnell, and we're talking about the Scribus (http://sourceforge.net/projects/scribus/) project. Let's start by: what is Scribus?

Peter: Scribus is an open source page layout application. It's used for laying out magazines and books. Especially the type of publications that are highly graphical in nature. You can use it to create posters, all kinds of different publications, for example greeting card, things like that, of any arbitrary size and format. Its most powerful aspect is the ability to create commercial grade PDF, which goes to a commercial printer, and just works.

Rich: Can you give some examples of some of your, shall we say, customers – some people that are using the software and what they're using it for?

Peter: There's a wide, diverse base of users, but we know that, for example, inside some open source companies they use they use it to develop all their marketing materials – catalogs, advertisements which then go to other magazines or publication. It's used significantly for making newsletters.

(https://sourceforge.net/blog/communityhub/uploads/2012/02/denistar_catalog_printed.jpeg)

It has been used in actual commercial publications. For example, in France, there's a national magazine called Le Tigre (http://www.le-tigre.net/), which uses open source software exclusively, and has been based on Scribus since its very first edition. They publish something like 50,000 copies per month. It was originally black-and-white now they've moved to full four-color. It's quite a high-quality publications, in the sense that the graphic layout is very sophisticated, and it's very demanding in terms of the print process. That one of the commercial ones I can think of.
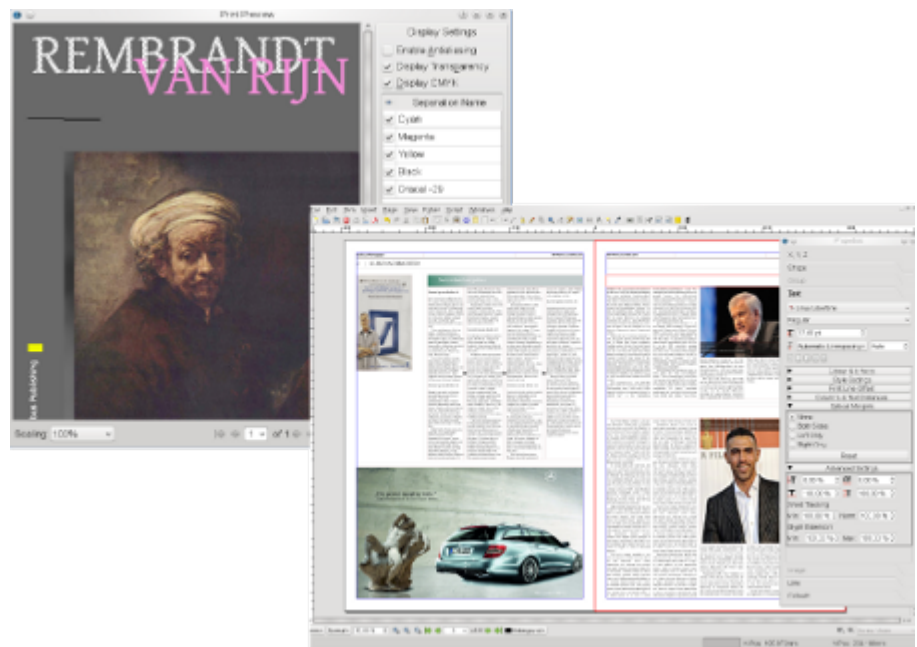
We have on our website a link on our wiki which lists Scribus success stories (http://wiki.scribus.net /canvas /Success_Stories_2011) from users from all over the world, outlining all the different ways they use Scribus. So it's very versatile in that sense.

Rich: What's coming up in the future for Scribus?

Peter: Well, we just released Scribus 1.4.0, which is a stable release we worked on for quite a long time. Mostly to port it from QT3 to QT4, but it has a significant number of enhancements. We were able to take advantage of the new features in QT4.

Down the road, we're working on our development version now is concentrated on couple of things. Enhancing the text storage to make it faster, so that we can use the text more flexibly, and make the layout more robust in terms of long document handling. And more features in the document handling like footers – more sophisticated things like header and footers that wordprocessing program have, where we are somewhat lacking.

The other thing that we're working on is what we call non-Latin Scribus, which is allowing Scribus to handle non-Latin, non-Cyrillic, non-CJK formats better. For example Indic script is very difficult and complex to handle in page layout, and we're tackling that.

The refactoring that we've done allows us to enhance and add any arbitrary non-Latin script or complex script in the future. Right now we have a working example code that display typographically Arabic with all of the Arabic layout features correctly. We're quite pleased with that, because it's a very complex and difficult to tackle in software. Even Microsoft, and Adobe, and companies like that have to invest significant resources to do that.

Rich: Tell us something about the upcoming LGM conference.

Peter: LGM – Libre Graphics Meeting (http://libregraphicsmeeting.org/2012/) – is a meeting where all – not all, but a significant chunk – of the open source graphic application development community meets once a year. We alternate between North America and Europe generally. And that's been ongoing since 2005 or 2006. It's a very healthy thing to happen, because it allows all the Open Source graphics applications to work together better.

We work on two things: to demonstrate new features and new code and new ideas in our programs, and as well as having time to allow the individual teams to meet face-to-face, do some hacking sprints. For example, we'll be looking to have the Scribus developers meet with the Inkscape (http://sourceforge.net/projects/inkscape/) team, so that we can work on things like SVG
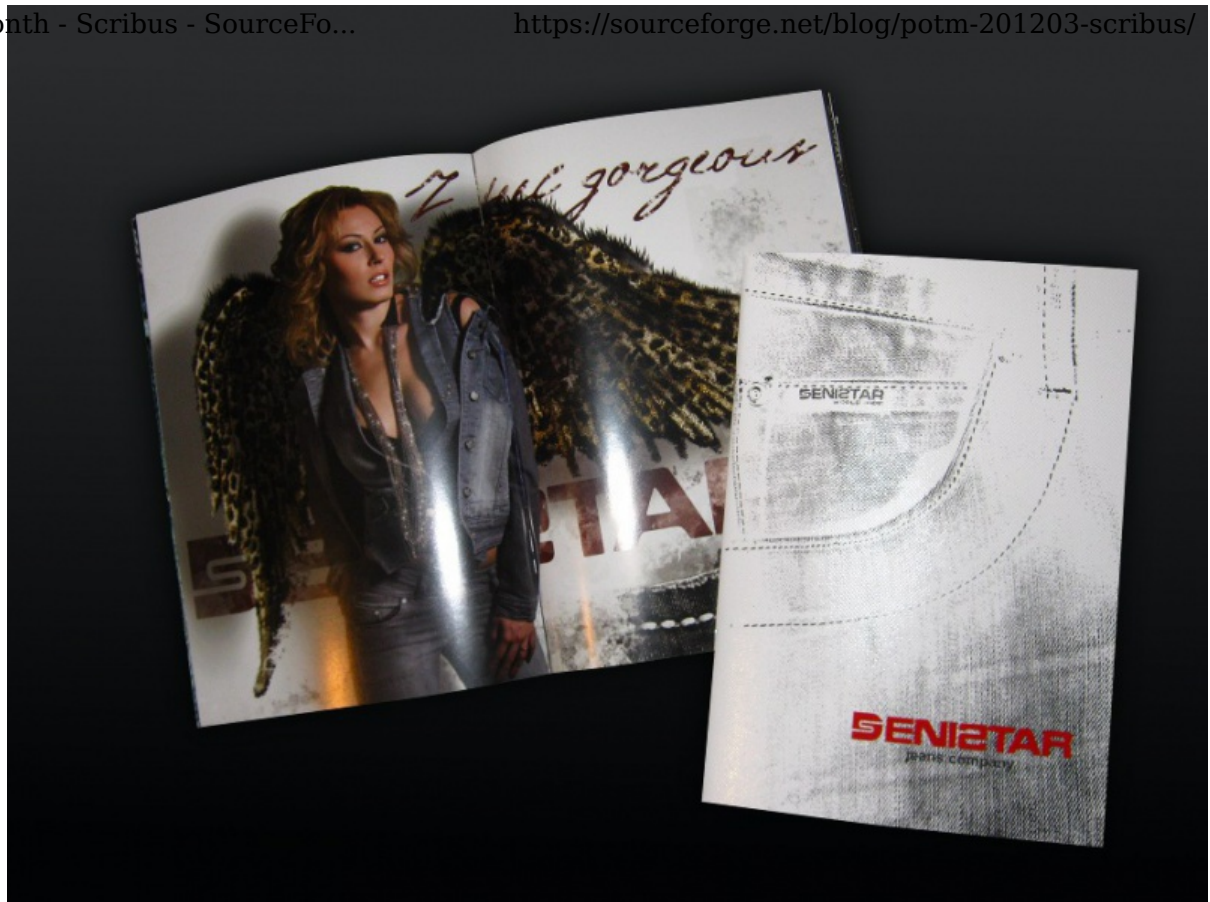
interoperability. SVG is a complex specification, and therefore we will work with the Inkscape folks to try and see what's going on in the future with SVG, and standards, and ensure that our implementations are as compatible as possible.

Rich: How large is your development community?

Peter: There's a core team of about eight or nine members who have direct commit rights to our SVN. Outside of that, we have a number of contributors who contribute things like patches, and scripts. Because Scribus has a python scripter.

That's another new thing in the new version, is a new implementation of our scripter, which can use multiple languages, not just limited to Python. The other new feature I forgot to add, in the next version of Scribus, will be greatly enhanced table handling. It allows more complex and speedy creation of tables inside the page layout.

(https://sourceforge.net /blog/communityhub /uploads/2012/02/ignu- les_jetes_de_l_encre- bologne.jpeg)

Getting back to the core team – There's probably, I'd say, about 20 contributors who contribute in various sorts of ways, whether it's documentation, or help on the mailing list or writing articles about Scribus in other publications and online forums and the like.

And we're always looking for new developers. The barrier there is that the code of Scribus is quite complex, and you have to have some knowledge of the domain of printing and page layout, because it is a complex subject.

That's why we joke, we're a bunch of old gray beards in the relative age of the team because we first need to have a fairly well-g rounded understanding of the domain of printing, and page layout, and publications and pre-press, before you can actually address the subject.

The core team works very well together. We actually know each other, even though we're spread around the world, we know each other on a personal level.

We have a very vibrant and friendly and open community, which is very welcoming to new users as well as people have sophisticated and demanding uses. It's very open in that sense, that all are welcome. We maintain that, and that comes from the core team itself. We don't have many flames on our mailing list, and we're always open to new ideas.

We welcome people to give us suggestions and ideas about how the program should work, and work better.

Thirdly, I would say that we're constantly evolving. Scribus, as a project, is steady, and we're the snail, not the rabbit. We're not

And we have fun doing it. We do it just for fun.

Rich: That's important! That's the only reason I'm still in open source!

Peter: To give you an idea, Franz Schmid, who started Scribus, and I – we weren't really a team until we had a third person, , but basically the first two years of Scribus' life was Franz coding, and me testing every couple of weeks, and then we started becoming a team and building an infrastructure, and a community, and things like that, and Franz and I are doing it ten years later.

That says something, when you start something, and ten years later you're still interested in doing something and participating in it. That says a lot about the community we have around us.

Rich: Yeah, it certainly does. What was the initial impetus for starting the project?

Peter: Actually Franz back then was running Suse seven on on old Mac, and he was frustrated by the lack of drawing and graphics tools in Linux. So, to scratch an itch, he did a prototype in PYQT (http://wiki.python.org/moin/PyQt), which is the Python scripting for QT, and he ran into performance issues and then ... he'd never never coded C++ before so he started using QT, and we have done so since then.

That was one of the impetuses – a lacking application on the open-source desktop.

And now it runs on OSX, it runs on Windows, and all the Linuxes and BSDs. It even runs on OS2 natively. All thoroughly cross-platform. We could port it to other platforms as long as it is supported by the QT libraries.

Rich: Thanks so much.

Peter: Thank you for the opportunity, and thank you for our selection. We're quite proud of that.

You know, we don't don't have a professional development team ... although the coders within Scribus I consider professional, in the sense that they are professional developers, in their daytime job for big enterprises.

Tags: page-layout (https://sourceforge.net/blog/tag/page-layout/), project of the month (https://sourceforge.net/blog/tag/project-of-the-month/), publishing (https://sourceforge.net/blog/tag/publishing/), scribus (https://sourceforge.net/blog/tag/scribus/)

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