

The Interview Project

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The Interview Project

This book is a work-in-progress. It gathers transcripts of interviews I have recorded / conducted, as well as notes of events and conferences.

It has been inspired, among others, by Hans-Ulrich Obrist's *Interview Project*¹ ("an oral history of contemporary art", running since 1996 with nearly 2000 hours of interviews); by the book *Conversations*² edited by Constant and Christoph Haag in 2015; by a book by Markus Miessen³ (*East Coast Europe*)... and many more.

Principles:

- conduct interviews
- transcribe (or use online transcription services)
- publish

¹See Wikipedia: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hans-Ulrich_Obrist#The_Interview_project

²*Conversations*, Constant Verlag, Brussels, 2015, conversations.tools

³Markus Miessen (Ed.), *East Coast Europe*, Sternberg Press, Berlin, 2008, sternberg-press.com/index.php?pageId=1222

Background:

During the 1990s : taped interviews conducted for music fanzines (Crépuscule, Transit magazine), with Das Ich, Velvet Acid Christ, Olivier Moreau, Stelarc, Mother Destruction, Zbigniew Karkowski...

More recently: interviews with Libre Graphics Magazine (2011), OSP (in the frame of Aether9 book, 2012), Dave Crossland (2014).

On Aether

Interview conducted by Pauline Eiferman

June 6, 2010

An interview for an article about “how the internet is changing the way artists collaborate and work today.”

Pauline Eiferman — Firstly, I am interested in how the project started and what exactly it aims to do.

Manuel Schmalstieg — technically, the project was initiated during a workshop given by the N3krozoft Media Group during Mapping Festival in Geneva, May 2007. the objective of the workshop was to devise methods for realtime visual collaboration in a performative context (Mapping Festival is an event dedicated to VJing).

During this workshop, a few people met on-location for the first time, and a group of people joined remotely (after a massive call-for-participation mailing) from Paris, Berlin, Brussels, the US, Colombia, Slovenia.

After the workshop, the group continued the work and new members joined the effort. We try to keep it very open, following methods that are used in open source software development.

Our objective: achieving new forms of art, by mixing existing forms (video, cinema, theatre) with current technical tools, most importantly the various

network protocols. there are many “one-to-one” audiovisual communication tools, also a few “one-to-many” tools, but it’s very difficult to achieve “many-to-many” communication. so our project is a practical/artistic attempt to solve this problem.

I also like to point out that my main inspiration for the Mapping Festival workshop were projects carried out in the very early 80s by several artist groups, such as “Electronic Cafe” by K. Galloway and S. Rabinowitz in 1984, or “the world in 24 hours” by Robert Adrian in 1982 (see <http://1904.cc/timeline/> for sources).

PE - What role do you believe the internet can have in the creation of art today?

MS - what is most significant to me, is that Tim Berners-Lee originally conceived the www (and the first browser) as a “read-write” medium, where every user would have the ability to write, therefore to create. this philosophy (or “feature”) was quickly dropped by the main browser producers. fortunately it’s been returning with the rise of wikis and “content management systems”.

one barrier for artists, is that wikis and CMSes are text-based. video on the web still suffers from many issues, as we see with the current struggles between h264, ogg, etc.

one excellent example of “video management” by/for artists is <http://pad.ma>

PE - Could you talk about one specific video that is part of the project, and how it used the internet in its creation?

MS - i was never really satisfied with our “video archives”. it’s like with most performance art, you cannot understand the intensity of the work when watching archival recordings. maybe they will be interesting to watch in 10 years.

I will mention the “Aether9 LRRH archive remix”, though. One function that we implemented in our streaming tool, during the “Little Red Riding Hood” performances in 2008, was an automated script that uploaded one video frame per minute to a special “archive” server.

After a few months, i retrieved those thousands of images, and combined them into this “automated remix”, that consists in many little fragments of rehearsals and performances. The soundtrack of the video is the live sound-mix that I made for the Montreal performance (at Perte-de-Signal, August 2008).

Wiki-Sprint

Interview conducted by Juliana Brunello

June 29, 2010

Manuel Schmalstieg has recently directed an event called *Wiki-Sprint*. The sprint concept derived from the code-sprints of the FLOSS communities, in which a team of developers came together in order to engage in some serious code-writing. Only this time, there would be no code-writing, but article writing for Wikipedia.

For this, a team of contributors was gathered to take part in the event's workshop, which consisted of rewriting and improving the Wikipedia article of VJing. I ask Schmalstieg about this experience:

Juliana Brunello — Most Wikipedia articles are written in collaboration by people who have not met. Why did you choose to make it a face-to-face event? What are the benefits in writing an article this way?

Manuel Schmalstieg — I should make clear that my main target was actually not the improvement of this article... That was the alibi, but the actual objective was to explore the performative act of collective writing, in the tradition of Surrealism... and also informed by the “reading performances” of artists such as Arnold Dreyblatt or Rainer Ganahl, as well as the recent practice of collaborative technical “writing-sprints” that has emerged from the free software

scene, exemplified by the Flossmanuals project.

The public reading of the article, and its inclusion in Wikipedia (as an audio article), was the crowning of this performative aspect.

To answer your question, the benefits of this method of writing are: a) a much faster writing process, b) strict time management, and c), the unique experience of human interaction that derives from such an intensive work situation.

JB — Were the people involved in the sprint already involved with Wikipedia?

MS — Most of them were not. When searching for volunteers for this project, I targetted different groups: specialists in the field (audiovisual performance and VJing), who had already written on that topic; heavy contributors of the existing Wikipedia articles (in English and French version). From the 11 people who participated, 3 had some previous editing experience on Wikipedia (one of them, Sleepytom, was a major contributor of the VJ article in 2006).

JB — How was it to work with the previous editors of this Wikipedia article, who did not belong to the sprint-group?

MS — As far as I am aware, the article has practically no regular editors. It is the result of initial work by a handful of wikipedians in 2006-2007, who aren't active anymore. The rest is the result of "drive-by editing". So we didn't have any response from the original editors of the article (with the exception of Sleepytom).

One exception: during the writing-sprint, I had the chance to meet Anthere (Florence Devouard), who had contributed photos from Pixelache festival to the French version of the article. But she isn't a specialist of visual art, so she didn't contribute to the text of the article.

JB — Have you been following the changes on the VJing article in Wikipedia? Were there any? How do you feel about them?

MS — Yes, I have been watching the changes – a bit like a gardener who planted vegetable seeds, and observes the slow growing process. There were some small corrections, minor additions, a bit of cleaning up. I think it's a good sign – it would prove that a “solid” article with consistent references can act as a barrier against spammy self-referential edits (which were very frequent on the previous version).

JB — How difficult was it to organize such an event? Do you recommend it and could you give us any tips?

MS — The project was organized in a very short timespan, which was a problem for getting any institutional funding partners (also the fact that it doesn't fit into any category does not help). In the end, everything was done on a shoestring budget, all the logistics being handled by the Mapping Festival team who loved the project. On the other hand, it was great to see how easily people from the “general public” understood the idea and how positively they responded to it. We had a lot of enthusiastic feedback.

However, I wouldn't repeat the project in this format, as it really was a context-specific experiment.

JB — Anything else you would like to add?
Comments, ideas, thoughts?

MS — The most recent news: we are currently preparing a print publication of the article, with some statements and reflections from our participants. This very weird relationship between Wikipedia content and print distribution is something I'm looking forward to work on in the future (the next planned step is a printed edition of my favorite Wikipedia article: The KLF).

For more background information on the wiki-sprint, here is a FAQ page that I wrote during the preparation phase: wiki.greyscalepress.com/FAQ

Finally, if after this interview you want to actively engage with Wikipedia, I suggest creating some of the missing articles on pioneering media artists, such as Kit Galloway and Sherrie Rabinowitz, for instance.

Libre Graphics Magazine

Published January 5, 2011

An interview with Ana Carvalho, ginger coons and Ricardo Lafuente, editors of **Libre Graphics Magazine** (ISSN: 1925-1416).

In May 2010, the first edition (#0) of Libre Graphics Magazine was created during the 5th annual Libre Graphics Meeting in Brussels. It was followed by the #1 release, published in November 2010 and available at libregraphicsmag.com. The magazine, as well as the yearly meetings, are an outgrowth of the community of coders, artists and activists that surround the software projects GIMP, Blender, Inkscape, Scribus, Krita, and many more.

This interview was conducted over IRC on Thursday December 30 2010. The interview is licensed under CC-BY-SA.

Manuel Schmalstieg — First of all, I would like you three to introduce yourself, and also give an overview of the main contributors to the Libre Graphics Magazine #1.

Ana Carvalho — I have a degree in Communication Design. I currently work as a freelance web and



UI interface designer. I became involved with the Libre Graphics Community and the Free Software Movement in general in 2006. Since 2007 I'm working mainly with free software. I'm involved in a small press venture—<http://planapress.org>—that I present at last LGM. It is dedicated to publishing comics and illustration using free software and open licenses. I live and work in Porto, Portugal.

Ginger Coons — I trained as a graphic and web designer (BFA in Design, Concordia University, Montreal) but, after working for a very commercial web design firm, got fed up pretty quickly with the design for hire approach. I still do freelance work, but what interests me more is design research. I started working with F/LOSS graphics in 2001, but only got involved in the community in 2009, when

I gave a talk at Libre Graphics Meeting in Montreal. Now I'm finishing my Masters degree, working on a thesis about colour standards for print. And I do advocacy work, introducing designers and artists to F/LOSS. My own work is at <http://adaptstudio.ca>. And these days, I'm based in Toronto (Canada).

Ricardo Lafuente — My name is Ricardo Lafuente, and my academic background is communication and media design (BA at Porto Fine Arts, MA at Piet Zwart Institute in Rotterdam). I've been doing stuff as a designer, hacker, artist and coder. I made the switch to FLOSS tools in 2006, and since then i've been mostly working with code for design purposes, as well as coding for the web and other kinds of hacks. Since September i'm a teacher at Porto University's Fine Arts College, teaching code to design students. (I have a rather sparse and incomplete portfolio website at <http://ricardo.koizo.org>). I'm now mainly working together with Ana, at an informal design research studio that we call Manufactura Independente. We also help run Hacklaviva, a Porto hackerspace where we try to make connections between FLOSS culture, social intervention and cultural activity.

I also live and work from Porto.

MS — Thanks. I understand that you three are the core editorial team. What other people were involved, to what degree? And was the work done via online .CA / .PT communication, or rather in one geographic place?

Ginger Coons — For our very first (trial) issue, we were actually in one place at the same time. That's

issue #0, which we completed in May 2010 at the Libre Graphics Meeting in Brussels. Even most of our contributors for that one were actually in the same room as us. But things have been very different since then.

Ricardo Lafuente — (as an aside, it was done in 3 days from start to finish, and is available here⁴).

MS — So #0 was done in the context of a “local” event. Was that different for #1 ?

Ginger Coons — This time around, almost all of our work was done by distance. We met once, for a few hours, in Barcelona, in November. Our contributors are from around the world (although both interviews in the issue took place in person). And most of our collaboration was helped around by a shared git repository.

Ana Carvalho — We have a mailing list we use frequently.

Ricardo Lafuente — And also a community advisory board, made up of 5 people who are connected, in some way or another, to the Libre Graphics scene. The board’s purpose is to advise us when we reach some hard-to-decide editorial decisions.

MS — Was the release date linked to some special context - festival, conference ...

Ginger Coons — The release date actually was chosen strategically, although we overshot a little. The plan was to have print copies of the magazine on hand in November so that we could take them to a

⁴<http://libregraphicsmeeting.org/2010/index.php?p=en%2Fnews%2Fmagazine>

number of events. At the beginning of November, FOSSASIA⁵ took place in Vietnam. The DIY Citizenship conference⁶ happened in Toronto and the HTMlles festival⁷ happened in Montreal. All in one weekend. We had hoped to send magazines to all these events, as well as to the Expozine⁸ small press fair. Unfortunately, we didn't get all of our printing sorted out in time. But that was part of the strategic reasoning behind November. Plus, it works with our release cycle. We released an issue last May, we knew we wouldn't be able to get one ready in August, so we decided to go, from November, with a November-February-May-August release cycle.

MS — Regarding the release cycle, I read sometimes 1.1 and sometimes #1 - which is correct?

Ricardo Lafuente — Both are, in a way. Our idea was to use 1.1-1.4 for our first year run.

Ginger Coons — 1.1 is the volume and issue number. #1 is the issue number. What it means is that there'll be another #1, this time next year, but it'll be the #1 of volume 2. Hence, 2.1

MS — As I see it, the mag was born in the context of the LGMeetings, but is structurally independent from it.

Ginger Coons — yep.

MS — But it's through that meetings/conferences that your team came together.

⁵<http://fossasia.org>

⁶<http://dycitizenship.com>

⁷<http://www.htmlles.net>

⁸<http://www.expozine.ca>

Ginger Coons — For sure. But we realize that we need to grow a presence beyond the confines of an annual meeting.

MS — Now a bit more about content ... what were your founding ideas, when you decided to do a “magazine” - what does this term mean actually, today.

Ginger Coons — We see the importance of a print magazine as being largely in its accessibility and immediacy. We really have to trace ourselves to two different start dates. And two different ideas. In May, someone (Femke? a.le.?) came up with the idea of doing a magazine for LGM. Ana and Ricardo took the lead on that and then brought me in to handle the editorial stuff. After that mad rush, which didn't have a huge amount of thought about philosophy, we sat for a few months and then brought the idea back in August. For me, it was because I'd been traveling around, meeting artists, designers and developers, and realizing that we had a community without a voice. So we discussed it and decided to do it again, better. And we wrote a manifesto. So in that sense, we thought about format and audience first, because the format is really tied into the audience

MS — Here I would love to have input from Ana and Ricardo as well.

Ricardo Lafuente — Sure. We jumped on the opportunity to work on #0 since we were very energised by the pre-LibreGraphicsMeeting spirit. Also, we were helping OSP with organizing the meeting, and the idea of having a magazine that could be released during the conference was too

exciting not to try. We had seen Ginger's work and texts before, and asked her to work together since she was much more seasoned in editorial contexts, while we were more comfortable taking over the design side.

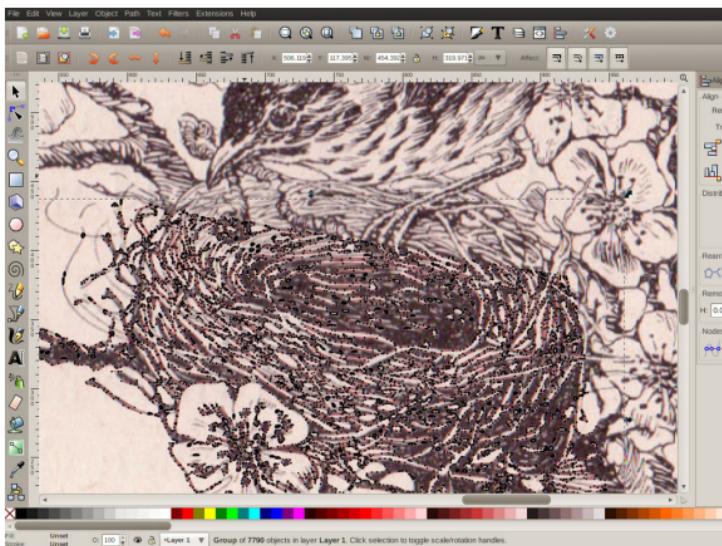
Ana Carvalho — Even though it was a ‘mad rush’ the libre graphics mag #0 was a great way to test our improvised team. A few months after we started discussing how we could take this project farther. We all knew it was a significant turning point and that it would be a great chance to put out all the great graphical work being done with free software

Ricardo Lafuente — And such a publication was definitely something that we wanted to see happen. Designers who use FLOSS are a rarity in our part of the world (and not abundant in other places either), so the opportunity to create a project to further this agenda was something that we quickly jumped on.

MS — it’s striking that your mag is unifying so many different aspects: samples of graphic work done with FLOSS, interviews, cultural discourse, and a little bit of tech stuff.

Ricardo Lafuente — Of course, it’s not only about designers; the whole idea of Libre Graphics extends to the arts in general, and other peripheral areas of thought and action (social studies, writing, etc.)

Ginger Coons — We’re really trying hard to bring in the best of what we’ve seen (and consumed!) in traditional arts magazines, too. There’s the idea that we need a little criticality and thought in our practice. But at the same time, to be useful and palatable



to people new to this world (and to ourselves) we need to be able to show off some really beautiful, professional work. And it doesn't do to be afraid of our technology, either. So we're not. Which is why we do things like include code. Because it's worth seeing the code under the image.

MS — Each time I pick up a Linux magazine in some newspaper shop, I'm astonished by the absence of cultural discourse. I guess that might have been a motivation for you too?

Ginger Coons — We're certainly pleased to see ourselves offering something Linux magazines aren't although we like to think that we serve a slightly more generalist audience. Anyone working in a visual field should be able to pick it up and enjoy it.

Ricardo Lafuente — Definitely, we've been on both sides, reading both arts publications and computer magazines. One of the first questions was how to have something that could bridge those worlds together without becoming an awkward collage of tech and culture. And it does beg the question of why tech and culture should be so much apart as they are in the current editorial landscape.

MS — In your manifesto, you mention a possible “online version” that would differ from the print mag. And when reading the PDF of your mag on screen, it's obvious that it works best as a printed item.

Ricardo Lafuente — Not that there's an easy answer, but that's one of the challenges we decided to take on in building Libre Graphics Magazine. Also, that issue pertains not only to editorial content, but to the design aspect as well—namely, we had to play with the conventions associated to both arts publications and computer magazines, again trying to combine them into something that is more than a mishmash between the two.

Ginger Coons — And we are very committed to the (forthcoming) web version, because there's something a little absurd about reading on a screen something that's meant to be held.

Ricardo Lafuente — We did plan (and are planning) for different magazine formats suited to different use cases. For instance, it's okay to have a PDF version, but maybe we can think of something better than a print-like PDF for people to print the magazine at home? We didn't have the time to work on those for issue #1, but there will be news in the next issues.

Libre Graphics Magazine issue 1.1								
Dummy								
1 front cover PROGRESSING	2 front cover source PROGRESSING	3 index PROGRESSING	4 index cont. & matched PROGRESSING	5 pro bono ad	6 letter from editor RECEIVED	7 production colophon	8 event calendar PROGRESSING	9 event calendar PROGRESSING
10 new releases	11 new releases	12 new releases	13 reviews	14 reviews	15 reviews	16 reviews	17 pro bono ad	
18 columns	19 columns	20 columns	21 columns	22 pro bono ad	23 dispatches	24 dispatches	25 dispatches	
26 first time RECEIVED	27 first time RECEIVED	28 frequently asked question	29 frequently asked question	30 pro bono ad	31 interview PROGRESSING	32 interview PROGRESSING	33 interview PROGRESSING	
34 interview PROGRESSING	35 house ad	36	37	38	39	40	41	
42 house ad	43	44	45	46	47	48 pro bono ad	49 Showcase	
50 Showcase	51 Showcase	52 Showcase	53 Showcase	54 Showcase	55 pro bono ad	56 Showcase	57 Showcase	
58 Showcase	59 Showcase	60 Showcase	61 Showcase	62 pro bono ad	63 Showcase	64 Showcase	65 Showcase	
66 Showcase	67 Showcase	68 Showcase	69 pro bono ad	70 Ila feature RECEIVED	71 Ila feature RECEIVED	72 Ila feature RECEIVED	73 Ila feature RECEIVED	
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82 feature PROGRESSING	83 feature PROGRESSING	84 feature PROGRESSING	85 feature PROGRESSING	86 feature PROGRESSING	87 feature PROGRESSING	88 feature PROGRESSING	89 feature PROGRESSING	
90 feature PROGRESSING	91 feature PROGRESSING	92 glossary & resource list PROGRESSING	93 glossary & resource list PROGRESSING	94 glossary & resource list PROGRESSING	95 glossary & resource list PROGRESSING	96 back cover		

Ginger Coons — Once we have a little more stability, we'll be working on it. At the moment, we've been focusing on populating, publishing and being able to afford the printing costs of the print edition.

Ricardo Lafuente — I'd add that our main focus would be the printed mag; there's something in that object that a website cannot replace.

Ginger Coons — For sure. We can hand it out, it can be shared, distributed, kept, catalogued...

MS — I assume that you have used a pretty non-standard workflow for print publishing, using Git for unifying / syncing the different contributions ... how did that work, what were the problems you met, unexpected discoveries...

Ricardo Lafuente — Yes, we did use a few unorthodox procedures...

Ana Carvalho — Well, the most important thing I can remember is that we need a README for the layout document, stating which version of the software were using. Also a centralized place to keep all the relevant data relating the magazine. From content to production and planning documents.

Ricardo Lafuente — Git was a godsend. In the design world there's not much awareness about version control systems, but using one was a huge help in that all our contributions and corrections are catalogued. And Scribus, our tool of choice to create the magazine layout, held out very well from start to end. We ran into quite a few bugs (not only in Scribus), which we gathered into a list and will send to the respective bug trackers.

Ginger Coons — Plus, the nice thing about git is that it allows us all to tailor it to our personal preferences, in terms of frontends. As a case of extremes, one of our columnists likes using git from the command line, whereas I prefer Sparkleshare.

Ricardo Lafuente — Finally, to be honest, we didn't run into significant problems in that workflow. Our content was synced between all of us, we could quickly share corrections, as well as be able to change the layout at will without risk of conflicts between our versions.

Ana Carvalho — We used Git from the command line. It's quite simple.

MS — and so the git repository contained the binary Scribus files, and graphic files.

Ginger Coons — everything

Ricardo Lafuente — Yes, as well as the content in plaintext format. (little nitpick – Scribus files aren't binary, but XML ;-)

MS — good to know :)

Ricardo Lafuente — We even keep our planning documents in the repository. From end to end, it's all in one place, which is really handy.

MS — Was that method a first, or did you use it already before LGM?

Ricardo Lafuente — It was a total first for us 2, at least. We had never worked on a non-programming project using a VCS. And now we're wondering how we ever lived without that :o)

Ginger Coons — Same here. And for #0, we weren't even using it yet. This was something we started in September or so.

MS — And how did the print production work .. I guess people often wonder about that when working with FLOSS tools ..

Ricardo Lafuente — I'd start by dispelling a very common misconception: we had absolutely no problems with file formats, with regards to sending output to the printer. Usually I hear many criticism of FLOSS tools in that it doesn't output proper PDF files for print, but I never found any case where this applied.

Ginger Coons — We were also lucky enough to work with a really amazing printer. Mardigrafe, which is owned by one of the developers of Scribus, tends to be incredibly accommodating. Basically (as I like to say), we kept it in the family. Louis Desjardins, who owns Mardigrafe, has also organized two LGMeetings and is working on a third right now. So we didn't have any misunderstandings or mis-communications that might be possible with other print shops. Although, in an ideal world, the printer would never notice what software we'd used to create the magazine ;)

MS — You are using “crowdfunding” (Pledgie, Flattr) to gather resources for the printing costs. What is your experience with this?

Ginger Coons — The crowdfunding is a wee bit of a sore point. It's quite a small crowd, for a start, which means there isn't much money going around. Our

main source of revenue isn't actually donation based. As it breaks down, we make some revenue from sales of print copies.

MS — So what is the main source - cultural funding?

Ginger Coons — The main source at the moment is us. Issue #0 was funded by several levels of Belgian government. Issue 1.1 was out of our own pockets for the most part. At the moment, we have about half of the cost of printing recouped, which is nice. But we're aiming, in future issues, to offset the cost of printing with advertisements. Although not many. And once we've published two issues, we'll be eligible to apply for cultural funding in Canada (since we are, structurally at least, a Canadian publication). The real goal is to take revenue from sales completely out of the equation. So that we're actually able to give away as many as possible, without having to think that we need to hold back x amount in order to make our money back. So in that sense too, it's a pretty traditional print publishing model. Except we're not "filling the content hole". We're very careful about the balance of content and advertising.

MS — One thing about Scribus, your main layout tool : has the fact of being in contact with that software's developers trigger some exchange, in one way or another ? such as features specifically needed for your work being implemented etc ..

Ricardo Lafuente — Not yet, but that's definitely in our plans. We worked by ourselves on this issue so that we could get used to a magazine workflow inside Scribus. And from there, realise where we could streamline some bottlenecks that we found.

With that, we now have quite a few feature requests, we'll be approaching the Scribus team about those.

Ginger Coons — It's worth mentioning that Scribus is in a really interesting place right now. They're just finishing up a period of really intensive work, funded by the *Organization Internationale de la Francophonie*, to implement a number of new fixes and features. Three developers have spent the last several months working very nearly full time to put in some exciting work. So we're pretty excited to see what'll be coming out the pipe from Scribus in the coming months.

MS — Across the articles, I notice a certain focus on Fonts : are fonts a key element of broadening the impact of FLOSS in the graphics sector (with CSS3 webfonts notably)?

Ginger Coons — In this case, it's a matter of a lot of interesting and high profile work being done in fonts. There's a sort of convergence at the moment, among many F/LOSS design people, in the area of type design. but it's certainly not our sole area of focus.

Ricardo Lafuente — As well as typography being a field where a libre approach can bring some really interesting additions. We ran with this for the 'official' magazine typeface, which is a fork of OSP's *NotCourierSans*⁹. Being able to work on someone else's typeface and make it yours, without having to bother with authorisation, is something that's just not present in traditional type design. Either

⁹<http://ospublish.constantvzw.org/foundry/notcouriersans/>

practically or philosophically.

MS — Is there anything you want to add, regarding the future or your project?

Ginger Coons — in terms of the future... we've got most of our year a little planned out already, which is quite promising. In February, 1.2, *Use Cases and Affordances* is coming out. And we've got some pretty exciting stuff for that already. Although the call for submissions is still open. In May, we'll be releasing (in time for LGM 2011) the *Collaboration, Collaboratively* issue. Which is, as the name implies, a collaborative approach to collaboration. And in August, an honest to goodness, actually *Type Design* issue. Devoted to type design.

What links all of these topics is that we believe they're areas which can be uniquely approached by F/LOSS. We feel that things like workflow, collaboration and indeed type design, are areas in which F/LOSS already has some expertise.

Meeting with Attila Bujdosó

February 2012

Attila Bujdosó writes:

“This year again I am participating the great Lift conference. It is one of the most exciting and inspiring events in Europe, so I am happy to be back.
(...)

Funnily I met Manuel Schmalstieg, the originator of the wonderful concept wiki-sprint, which we adopted last year when organizing McLuhan wikisprint¹⁰ at Kunsthalle Budapest. Somehow he discovered that I’m in town, and contacted to meet up for a beer. He showed me a tiny-cute bar, La Petite Reine, and we had a nice discussion about wikipedia art projects, speculative wikipedia entries, and generally what we do.”

Source: <https://bujatt.com/2012/02/23/lift-conference-workshop-and-meetings/>

¹⁰<https://vimeo.com/22137508>

OSP on aether9 book

Conducted over Etherpad, november 2012

Manuel Schmalstieg – Pouvez-vous situer, en quelques mots, le travail du collectif Open Source Publishing (OSP)?

Ludivine Loiseau – OSP est un groupe de travail produisant des objets de design graphique uniquement à l'aide de logiciels libres et/ou open source.

Fondé en 2006 dans le cadre de l'association Constant¹¹, la caravane OSP rassemble aujourd'hui une douzaine d'individualités de parcours et pratiques différentes.

MS – Depuis combien d'années collaborez-vous en duo, et en team dans OSP?

Pierre Marchand – 3/4 ans

MS – ...et ce livre est le combientième ouvrage que vous ayez conçu?

PM – Pour cette équipe, c'était le premier livre livre, on avait eu l'occasion de travailler ensemble auparavant sur un projet un peu similaire d'exploration d'archives mais sans matériel imprimé au bout¹².

¹¹<http://www.constantvzw.org/site/>

¹²<http://www.ooooo.be/interpunctie/>

MS – Similaire dans le type de contenu, ou plutôt le processus ?

PM – Le processus, on a développé des scripts pour “scrapper” les archives du projet, mais la restitution était plus abstraite, il s’agissait de récolter les fontes utilisées dans l’ensemble des fichiers et d’en produire un graphe. Et, ces archives là n’étaient pas structurées, d’où une voie d’exploration moins linéaire.

MS – Le choix de l’environnement logiciel utilisé pour “générer” ce livre, s’est rapidement porté sur **TeX/ConTeXt**. Etais-ce un choix évident au vu du projet, ou avez-vous hésité entre différentes approches?

LL – La construction du livre s’est fixé autour de 2 axes/ fils conducteurs : chronologie et champs de mots clés “Traceroute”.

Dans cette optique de lecture et de navigation par références, ConTeXt est apparu comme un outil approprié.

MS – Le monde de TeX (logiciel écrit en 1978 par Donald Knuth) est très intrigant, en particulier pour des graphistes. Il me semble que c'est à chaque fois une sorte de combat pour repousser les limites de ce qui est “prévu” par le logiciel.

PM – ConTeXt est une lutte de tous les instants! Je n’en dirai pas de même d’autres instances de systèmes TeX.

Avec ConTeXt, on s’est trouvé en face d’un projet très personnel, dans le sens où des décisions de

composition sont codées en dur, parce qu'elles seyent au mainteneur principal du paquet. Et lorsque l'on se heurte à ces décisions, on se trouve dans la position un peu étrange d'usage d'un outil avec le facteur duquel on est en désaccord.

LL – Comme exemple très concret, on peut mentionner les réglages automatiques d'interlignage avec lesquelles il nous a fallu batailler pour les lignes comprenant des mots clés typographiés dans les fontes custom des "Traceroutes". ConText voulant "bien faire" il augmentait l'interligne de ces lignes comme pour éviter les collisions.

MS – Avez-vous eu de "vraies" craintes, que ce que vous vouliez obtenir n'était pas faisable? Y-a-t-il eu des choix - dans le graphisme, mise en page, structure - qui ont été rejetés en raison de limites logicielles?

LL – Oui. La mise en page en 2 colonnes s'est révélé assez raide avec le contenu, introduisant des sauts. À un moment, nous avons fait le choix de resserrer le format sur une simple colonne.

Pour obtenir une mise en page en doubles colonnes à la fin, le tout est recomposé au moment de construire le pdf, par l'intermédiaire d'**OSPImpose**.

PM – Cela nous a permis des micro ajustements en fin de production, et aussi introduit de nouveaux jeux, en particulier le glissement des images en double page.

MS – OSPImpose - je présume que c'est un logiciel conçu par OSP, pour l'imposition de pdf?

PM – Well, c'est a peu près ça, une re-écriture du logiciel d'imposition que j'avais composé il y a quelques années pour PoDoFo.

MS – Encore au sujet de ConTeXt: ce système a été employé pour d'autres travaux d'OSP - notamment le livre *Jonctions* (distingué par le Prix Fernand Baudin 2009). Est-ce actuellement un “outil de base” principal au sein d'OSP?

PM – C'est plutôt une plongée initiatique :)

LL – Mais ce n'est pas encore devenu un standard de notre workflow. Actuellement chaque nouveau projet de mise en page conséquent, de type livre, repose à chaque fois la question de l'outil. Scribus et Libre Office (tableur) font aussi partie de notre boîte à outils livres.

MS – Une chose que nous avons constaté, durant notre session de travail à ConstantVariable, était la difficulté à simplement obtenir un environnement TeX/ConTeXt/Python suffisamment complet pour pouvoir générer le livre ... est-que la machine de Pierre est toujours la seule, ou avez-vous pu configurer d'autres postes?

PM – On a fini par avoir tous des setup semblables, et donc une génération généralisée. Mais il est juste que cela a représenté une difficulté à certains moments.

MS – Le code source, les scripts (python?) créés pour produire le livre, sont ouvertement accessibles sur le serveur Git de OSP. Est-ce que ces sources seraient réalistically ré-exploitables? Un autre projet de publication pourrait-il réutiliser des parties

de code? Ou, en l'absence de documentation, cela serait hautement improbable ?

LL – Effectivement la partie documentation reste toujours sur la to-do liste. Cependant une bonne partie du code est assez directement réexploitable. Les fichiers permettent de parser différents fichiers. Mails, chats font souvent partie des archives d'un projet. Ici les scripts python permettent de les ordonner suivant les infos dates et vont automatiquement styler les différents champs de contenu.

PM – Le code lui-même est une source de documentation, autant sur des aspects très concrets, tel que parser un e-mail, que sur une architecture possible, usage de certains motifs de programmation, etc. Encore plus, il constitue une forme d'expérience commune.

MS – Est-ce que vous pensez ré-utiliser certaines de ces fonctions générales de traitements d'archives (mails, chats) pour d'autres projets?

PM – Difficile à dire, nous n'avons rien en perspective qui se rapproche du projet aether9. mais pour sûr, si le besoin de tels traitements revient, nous irons rechercher ces composants logiciels.

LL – Peut-être pour une publication / compilation des aventures OSP.

MS – Est-qu'il y a eu des “révélations”, des fonctions insoupçonnées de python/context découvertes durant ce développement?

PM – Je ne me rappelle pas avoir eu ce genre de plaisir. La révélation, au moins de mon point de

vue, se passait plus dans cette articulation très riche d'un propos graphique acté dans des objets de programmation. Ça reste un territoire peu défriché dont l'exploration est toujours une aventure, excitante.

MS – Dans ce livre ont été employées trois fontes, *Karla*, *Crimson*, *Consola Mono*. Trois fontes assez récentes, nées il me semble dans le contexte des webfonts. Quelles considérations ont conduit à ce choix?

LL – Notre recherche et choix typographiques s'est tourné vers des fontes comprenant plusieurs variantes de graisses. Le contenu texte étant assez riche et de déployant sur plusieurs niveaux, la questions des variantes était première. Ensuite, chaque projet étant aussi l'occasion de tester de nouvelles fontes, nous avons opté pour des publications récentes, publiées effectivement entre autre sur Google font directory. Cependant *Karla* et *Crimson* ne sont pas des fontes dessinées spécifiquement pour un usage web. *Karla* fait partie des quelques rares grotesques libres, et son autre spécificité est de comprendre des glyphes Tamil.

MS – Vous avez dessiné - en dehors des glyphes originaux créés spécifiquement pour ce livre - le glyphe Ç qui manquait à *Karla* ... va-t-il être adopté par la distribution officielle ?

LL – Aah, c'est une proposition à faire à Jonathan Pinhorn. Nous ne l'avons pas encore contacté. Pour l'instant cette cédille s'est fait happer par la collection de variantes Traceroutes.

MS – Dans le passage à l'impression, y a t-il eu des surprises? Je pense notamment à l'usage d'une encre colorée à la place du noir, ou la définition généralement faible des images 72 dpi.

PM – Cette décision spontanée en fin de processus d'échanger l'encre noire par un bleu était une source de surprise assurée. On pensait bien que ça n'allait pas détruire le livre, et on ne prenait pas trop de risques en travaillant justement avec des images en basse définition. Mais on n'avait pas vraiment idée de comment les images ressortiraient d'un tel outrage. Ce fut une excellente surprise de voir que cela lui donne en fait un éclat tout particulier.

MS – Quels sont vos prochains travaux en perspective?

LL – Nous opérons actuellement comme collectif invité aux Beaux Arts de Valence dans le cadre d'une série de workshops intitulée "Up pen down". Nous préparons une performance pour le théâtre de la Balsamine¹³ qui programme cette saison 5 rendez-vous sur la thématique du bootstrap. En avril, nous serons en voyage groupé à Madrid pour LGRU¹⁴ et LGM[^LGM].

En continu nous avançons sur "Co-position", projet de constitution d'un outil de typographie post Gutenberg.

[^LGM] rencontres internationales autour des logiciels graphiques libres - <http://libregraphicsmeeting.org/2013/>

¹³<http://www.balsamine.be/>

¹⁴<http://lgru.net/>

VdR - Power Tracks

Genève, 17 avril 2014.

Un court entretien avec Vincent de Roguin, au sujet de l'exposition *Power Tracks Vol. 1* (curateurs: Vincent de Roguin et Jérôme Massard) montrée dans le contexte du festival Electron.

Manuel Schmalstieg – Qui est-ce qui a fourni tous ces disques? C'est ta collection personnelle?

Vincent de Roguin – Non, c'est surtout des achats.

MS – Ebay? Discogs?

VdR – Plutôt Discogs. Disons que 80% des archives présentées a été acheté et 20% provient de prêts de collectionneurs romands.

MS – Et quelle est la réception, l'avis du public?

VdR – Pas mal d'avis tranchés et aussi d'étonnement face à l'étendue du sujet et au nombre d'artistes qui ont joués de ces codes. Ce qui est étonnant, c'est qu'entre le début de ce projet, les premières recherches et sa finalisation, ma propre opinion s'est développée dans un sens qui va du préjugé au doute le plus complet. Mes opinions sur la question sont de plus en plus vagues, comme diffractées devant toute cette complexité. Donc c'est vrai que ça m'a plutôt amené de l'inquiétude, plus que de la certitude.

MS – Au début, tu avais un peu une intention de “statement”?

VdR – C'est ça, exactement, quelque chose d'assez affirmatif. J'ai rapidement réalisé que c'était évidemment plus compliqué que ce que j'avais initialement en tête; une sorte de cartographie de différents mouvements culturels et histoires liés à cette thématique militaire ou guerrière, comme un historique de ces réseaux d'influences qui s'incarnent à travers le design graphique, la mode, sous l'influence des contextes politiques des diverses époques qu'on a traitées. Mais derrière tout ça, il y a évidemment des forces qui sont extrêmement complexes à identifier. Et notamment des choses fondamentales ou archaïques, qui touchent à l'humain, à la violence, à la masculinité...

C'est très tortueux comme histoire et donc, globalement, j'ai plus de peine à en parler maintenant qu'au début (rire). Le statement du départ, c'était quelque chose comme: «*Quand est-ce qu'on va sortir de ce capital imagier, qu'on va cesser de recourir à cette symbolique guerrière? Est-ce qu'il n'y a pas un moment où on va réussir à passer à autre chose? Et comment?*» C'est plutôt ça. «*Pourquoi les gens continuent d'exploiter toujours ce puits d'images, d'idées?*» Voilà. Peut-être qu'il y aussi un fond un peu pacifiste.

MS – L'objet des conférences, c'est de faire l'analyse des faits exposés?

VdR – Non. Ça serait plutôt de prendre des bouts de cette histoire, et de faire des zooms. Mettre en lumière certains aspects de l'exposition, regarder de

plus près.

Dans le cas de Eimert, Stockhausen et les débuts de la WDR, l'intérêt c'est évidemment les références au contexte d'immédiat après-guerre, des liens entre création radicale et enjeux politiques.

Entre «*l'invention*» de la musique électronique, et les outils militaires laissés par exemple en Allemagne par les américains.

Et Dave Tompkins, avec l'histoire du Vocoder, c'est finalement assez proche de Stockhausen et des studios de Cologne, où la création musicale s'inscrit dans un contexte lourdement militaire, où l'imaginaire se nourrit de cet héritage, qui navigue entre la recherche guerrière, les avant-gardes, l'ésotérisme, les politiques culturelles de la guerre froide.

MS – Je trouve que l'exposition questionne la lecture de l'histoire musicale par « genre ». On y constate des similitudes de codes graphiques dans des genres musicaux très distincts.

VdR – Je crois que la quantité fait émerger l'évidence qu'on est beaucoup moins original et libre qu'on le pense. Quand on met les années 1980 un peu en perspective, on réalise que de la pop mainstream la plus crasse, la plus exploitative et son pendant underground et radical, jouent souvent avec les mêmes codes, avec les mêmes stratégies de provocation, de mobilisation de l'attention. Les intentions sont peut-être différentes mais mis côte-à-côte, la thématisation de la guerre froide est par exemple très uniforme, on a recours aux mêmes slogans et métaphores. Les choses se ressemblent, au

point d'être carrément souvent interchangeables.

MS – Le focus sur les genres électroniques, est-ce que c'était au final pertinent? Est-ce qu'il y a un fil rouge conducteur, ou bien finalement c'est une délimitation arbitraire?

VdR – Cela a permis de délimiter les choses. Parce que je pense que si on s'était ouvert, notamment au metal...

MS – Oui, vous avez exclu le métal et le punk, par exemple.

VdR – Oui, aussi parce que le festival Electron est ciblé sur les musiques électroniques. Donc c'est clair qu'on n'allait pas mettre du metal. On aurait pu ouvrir cette histoire au metal – mais du coup, si tu ouvres au metal, tu ouvres à tous types de musiques. Pourquoi pas, mais ça sera pour une autre fois.

Ce qui est important avec la musique électronique, c'est qu'il s'agit d'une musique dans laquelle la technologie a une place plus importante que dans n'importe quelle autre musique. La technologie *fait* la musique, dans le sens où la musique devient souvent un outil pour "*mettre en son la technologie*". Ce n'est pas la même chose avec une guitare, ou une voix. C'est pas les mêmes problématiques.

Ces problèmes spécifiques à musique électronique – la prédominance de la technologie dans le discours et les esthétiques – amènent des questions justement liées à l'origine de cette technologie. Ses ramifications métaphoriques, dans l'imaginaire... Par exemple dans la techno, l'élément martial est autant

le fruit d'un imaginaire mytho-poétique que d'un imaginaire technologique.

C'est-à-dire que la technologie amène aussi cette dimension militaire à travers les origines militaires de ces machines. Mais aussi à travers la simple activité de la machine, du *beat* qui continue jusqu'à ce qu'on l'arrête, qui a une autonomie, et qui pose plein de questions spécifiques à la technologie. Ce qui n'est pas le cas d'une guitare. Si on ne la joue pas, la guitare, elle ne joue pas, la plupart du temps. A part si on la fait en feedback... et là, ça devient peut-être de la musique électronique.

MS – Peux-tu dire quelque chose sur la conférence de tout à l'heure? C'est une invitation de ta part?

VdR – Oui, c'est une invitation spécifique. Dave Tompkins est un journaliste américain. Il habite à New-York, mais il vient de Caroline du Nord, je crois. C'est un mec vraiment passionnant, et passionné. J'espère que sa conférence sera un peu à l'image de son livre, qui est vraiment inspirant, qui s'appelle *How to Wreck a Nice Beach* et qui est, pour moi, un jalon dans l'histoire de l'écriture musicale de ces dernières années. C'est donc l'histoire du Vocoder, depuis les premiers systèmes de brouillage de la parole, jusqu'au Vocoder utilisé dans la pop des années 80 — la disco, puis la pop, Alvin Lucier, la musique électronique savante...

MS – Le graphisme de l'exposition, c'est l'œuvre de qui? Le livret, la typographie?

VdR – C'est Todeschini et Mamie. Nicola Todeschini et David Mamie, qui sont des amis, et des

professionnels aguerris, à l'œil et aux choix que je trouve toujours pertinents.

Dave Crossland - Future Type Tools

Interview with Dave Crossland about the floss type design ecosystem, recorded April 30 2014. Conducted for Libre Graphics Magazine, the Type Issue.

on FontForge
Metapolator
font bakery
type testing tool
...

FontForge

So, George Williams started FontForge¹⁵.

From his perspective, it was technically complete. This is similar to the way Inkscape emerged from Sodipodi. The Sodipodi developer, as I understand the story, was very much involved in the technical development of the SVG editor. Things which were mathematically interesting for him to develop, but it wasn't really focussed on making a tool for end users.

¹⁵<http://fontforge.github.io/>
<https://github.com/fontforge/fontforge>
License: GPLv3+

M: That was the person who developed **Spiro**?

D: No, no. Raph Levien, who wrote **Spiro**, initiated the project, the code base that is now most widely recognized as **Inkscape**.

He made a program called **Gill**, as in Eric Gill, which was the “Gnome Illustration program”. Raph also developed a very simple font editor, which I don’t think he ever published. This is about fifteen years ago.

So, when Raph moved on, and got into his PhD, I think he was working around this time on his first PhD, which was on *“Attack-Resistant Trust Metrics”*. And he dropped these projects, stopped developing them.

Gill, the SVG editor which he developed, was taken up by Lauris Kaplinski, I believe in Russia, and it was called **Sodipodi**. And then, there was some Americans, who wanted to make the program more user-friendly: key bindings, actually they removed some functionality ... this kind of thing.

A couple of years ago, I was looking on **FontForge** in a similar light. I was going to start using FontForge to teach type design to beginners. It’s technically very complete, but for new users, it has a lot of rough edges.

And so, it’s not much effort to polish that up. So, similar to Inkscape, we did the key bindings system, so that all of the hotkeys are defined in one simple text file. The most recent workshop I ran was at a design school in Sweden called Hyper Island, and obviously most of the students there had swedish

keyboards, and so the US keyboard of the FontForge native package wasn't working for them. And so, it was very easy to take minutes, and step the class through shutting down FontForge, opening the MacOSX application bundle, navigating to the text file where the hotkeys are defined, and editing the hotkeys.

realtime collaboration mode

M: At LGM Madrid (2013), you presented that “Fonts of Doom” mode in FontForge.

D: There has been a lot of tiny little changes made. We redid the icons on the toolbar. We redid the hotkeys. We fixed a lot of crashes. We added that you could interact with the metrics in a more easy way. I have been fairly shy of actually adding any major features to fontforge.

This is the irony, everyone's like “Wow, Fontforge is so much better than two years ago.” But actually we didn't change anything in the functionality. We just made a lot of little changes to the user interface.

One of the bigger things is that we packaged it for Mac OSX, and we also packaged it for Windows, although I haven't really been promoting the Windows version yet. So the packaging was kind of a big deal.

And then, about a year and a half ago, I proposed to add a major feature to Fontforge, to see how that would go. So we added this realtime collaboration

feature, which hijacks the undo system, and uses the ZeroMQ library to basically broadcast the undo stack across a network, so that people can have a realtime collaboration experience. If you set it up right, then it works very well. We polished it up a little bit after the LGM 2013, but we didn't really make it rock solid.

This threw up all kinds of problems, it crashed a lot, it was pretty difficult for Dr Ben Martin to develop. He has a PhD in computer science, and he could do it. But there's very few other people in the world, comparatively, who can contribute to that codebase. So it's been a bit of a dead end, because if I can raise money, through running workshops or other means, to fund development, then it's ok. But that's relatively difficult to do. Whereas, if it was a web application, then there's millions times more people who have web development skills, and who will also be users of a font editor. Not every user has development skills, but enough users would have those skills, and would be able to contribute directly to the improvement of the editor.

So I considered, after Madrid, (...) We had a working basic prototype level, so I could do the demo on stage, and it basically works. We polished it up a little bit after the LGM last year, but we didn't really make it rock solid.

After LGM last year, I met Simon Egli. Simon and I had been discussing about that previous **Metaflop** project, which had been developed by some other people in Zurich. I had also done quite a lot of research into Metafont, when I was a student at

University of Reading, and I had abandonned my experiment with Metafont, when I was a student, because it was taking too long. I didn't end up with anything practical.

So, Simon did follow a very similar path. When we met in New York, a year and a half ago, a couple of months before the LGM 2013, we discussed how Metafont could be used in a way which would be more accessible to designers. And from that conversation, Simon came up with the basis for **Metapolator**. And so, I shifted away from Fontforge, in a way, because my attention has been on Metapolator.

FontForge is a very capable font outline editor. But it's focussed at the *letter* level, or the *word* level. It doesn't really provide any functionality for dealing with families. And actually this is very common.

The **Glyphs** font editor, which is a proprietary Mac OSX editor, has some support in it's user interface, for working on families. But other editors don't. Fontlab and Robofont. I mean, Robofont obviously copies Emacs' design to be very extensible, so it's difficult to make categorical statements about Robofont. But still.

So, with FontForge, we had that realtime collaboration feature. If you set it up right, then it works very well. It can crash, but then it has time crash protection. But it's just not pleasant to use. The user inteface of FontForge is difficult to work on. And working on the Fontforge user interface toolkit doesn't just make any sense whatsoever. Because *the web* is the default dominant

user interface toolkit for software these days. That leads me to the conclusion that we should be writing web based font editors.

One of the things that we did, at the LGM, and at the *Interactivos* workshop, the week after the LGM in Madrid, was to work on a kind of web interface to FontForge. And the way that this worked in the collaboration mode was that, everytime someone in the collaboration session does something, if the font is in a buildable state, then the font is built, and pushed, using web sockets, to a web page. So that you have a live *web-document preview* of your typeface, as you're developing it.

A problem that a lot of software (both libre and proprietary) has, is that when developers decide to make a rewrite, they often stop development of the old thing and start development of the new thing. And this often frustrates users, because they aren't getting improvements to the version that they're using, and although the new version may have a lot of potential, and maybe some advanced features that wouldn't be possible in the old version, its lacking a lot of the refinements and little features that the users depend on.

Font editors have often been plagued by this, and Fontographer and Fontlab have reached a very dominant market position, where all professionals are depending on them. And then there isn't really any growth in licensing, because all the professionals have licensed it. And so they run out of money for further development. And so the codebase languishes. In Fontographer's case, it was abandoned

completely. In Fontlab's case, they have been working for 5 or 6, maybe 8 years, on a total rewrite, and they haven't released anything so far.

I'm very keen to not see that happen to FontForge. So, the way I see the development proceeding, over this year and next year, is that we are developing *plugins* for FontForge, for additional functionality.

FontForge Plugins

Making a completely new font editor from scratch has this dilemma that you need all this functionality that is in FontForge, but at the same time, you want the new interface, to do what the new interface can do. To run these things concurrently is ideal.

We started with Lasse Fister's **iPython**, as a plugin for FontForge, so that you can to interactive scripting development, while running fontforge.

Then Juraj Sukop has developed **Even**¹⁶, which is a very simple little Qt IDE, very similar to the classic *NodeBox* or *DrawBot*, where you have a three-paned window, with input, output and display. You can write a Python program in the input area, you can run the program, you can see its standard output in the tray underneath, and on the left you get a canvas where the program output is drawn. It can be used to produce test document PDFs from within FontForge.

¹⁶<http://xxxyyz.org/even/>

We also added this to the FontForge codebase, as a plugin. So we now have GTK and Qt plugins bundled with FontForge. Therefore, it's possible to develop functionality for FontForge, using either GTK, or Qt, or the web, as your toolkit.

What I would like to see, over the next year or two, is to replace the FontForge user interface by web or Qt or GTK plugins.

My preference is the web as a toolkit.

Web-based Font Editors

Currently, various web based font editors are being developed. There's *Glyphr Studio*¹⁷, which is developed by Matt LaGrandeur, a UX designer and developer who works at Microsoft. *Glyphr Studio* is a classic font editor, based very much on the TrueType spec. Even if it has some nice features.

Then there is *Prototypo*¹⁸, which has been running a successful kickstarter in May 2014. The basic idea of Prototypo, as I see it, is to apply Mustache style templating to SVG fonts.

MS: Which means?

DC: In web development, there's been hundreds

¹⁷<https://github.com/mattlag/Glyphr-Studio/>
<http://glyphrstudio.com/>

License: GPLv3

¹⁸<https://github.com/byte-foundry/prototypo/>
<http://www.prototypo.io/>

License: GPLv3

of templating syntaxes developed over the last years. The one which has really come to dominate is called Mustache. There's lot of derivatives of the Mustache syntax. Liquid Templates is also quite popular.

Prototypo is putting that kind of templating together with SVG. So you can have a SVG path syntax, and the point positions, the x and y positions on an SVG path, rather than being defined literally as integer values, are defined through a templating syntax. That gives you an algebra-equation power of specifying point positions, parametrically.

This being web based, it's a self contained *node.js* application. What I am interested in doing, is making that kind of thing possible to turn into a FontForge plugin. So that you would be able to click "export" in the web app, and then have that immediately appear in FontForge.

Metapolator is in a very similar position to this. Simon Egli has done quite a lot of research into Metafont, how Metafont could be used in a way which would be more accessible to designers.

Metapolator imports and exports UFO fonts, so it can fit into any UFO-based workflow. It has a parser, which parses UFO into Metafont, and allows you to store Metafont parameters and values in the UFO format. This means that you can "round trip" fonts in and out of Metapolator, into any UFO tool.

Metapolator is a font family design tool. It's not about drawing the masters - that would be done in FontForge, or any other UFO editor. Metapolator is about multiplying those masters into families. It's very much a type designer's tool, same as Prototypo

and Glyphr Studio.

Another big thing we have been working on since LGM 2013: the UFO support in FontForge.

MS: Is this working now in FontForge?

DC: It's working a lot better than it used to. And we started to implement UFO version 3, which at the moment still isn't supported by any other font editors. We will see how that goes.

MS: when at LGM 2014, you pointed out the similarities between the interface of Metapolator (a sidebar with *design* parameters, and a specimen card), and of the Google Fonts directory (a sidebar with *search* parameters, and a specimen card).

DC: The basic idea of a font directory is that you have specimen cards for each card. And similarly, in **Metaflop**, which is kind of a Metapolator version one, you also have these three cards, where a glyph palette is showing all letters, then there's another card with one letter scaled up very big, and there's a third card where you can have a couple of lines of text.

This is conceptually very similar: you have this main staging area, showing type, to the left you have the sidebar with sliders. The Prototypo user interface is also very much like this: there's a sidebar with sliders, then you have the main stage area, with different views of type at various scales.

And these tools are all very much focused on the type designer. There's a couple of other tools that I have been interested in, which are for different

kinds of users. For myself, as a kind of curator of the Google Fonts library, I am hopeful for a couple of tools to validate the technical quality of the fonts, and manage the process of making updates - this is the **Font Bakery**¹⁹ tool. And then I'm also interested in validating the *design quality* of the typefaces, not just the technical quality.

Pablo Impallari has been developing a testing tool, that he uses doing his type design development. I would love to ramp that up. So I have been discussing the possibility, working with various foundries, taking the knowledge of how they test type, and bring this together in a kind of Master Type Testing page, or rather testing application.

And again, you are having little cards, there is typography on each card, where instead of sliders to change the type rendered in the card, you have a sidebar with questions. When you have a typeface, and want to put it through its paces, then you have dozens or hundreds of test cases, that allow to evaluate various aspects of the typeface.

MS: this is the thing a designer will do, before he submits the font?

DC: They can be used as a part of the type design process. There are different kinds of users. Someone who manages a collection of hundreds of fonts, is different of someone who is trying to originate a new design.

MS: TTFautohint - this has now reached a stable

¹⁹ License: Apache 2.0 License

<https://github.com/googlefonts/fontbakery>

version number?

DC: Yes, that's right. Werner Lemberg has been doing a great job during the last few years. He is probably the leading example of somebody working on libre font tools who has been able to sustain it financially. I made a little video for him when we started the project, for the initial fundraising, a campaign that was run on Pledgie. We managed to find funding from Fontlab, Extensis, Webink, the Android project, the Google Fonts project, and also hundreds of individuals.

That has been working very well, it's now the point when you can design with ((TTFAutohint)) to be able to hint as part of your development process from day one. So that you can draw a glyph, and TTFAutohint it, and preview how that's rendering in browsers. And by integrating TTFAutohint in your design process, you can produce designs which render extremely well on legacy windows platforms, without needing to do any hinting.

MS: is this integrated into existing design software?

DC: There is a very simple graphical user interface to TTFAutohint. You can load a font file, and check the boxes with the options, rather than reading a manual. I would expect all these programs to integrate TTFAuthint , build process, options.

And one of the things I am very excited about in technology is Enscripten, and (())dot js. So, Enscripten is transpiler, that allows you to take a C or C++, or even Python, or another scripting language program, and it allows you to compile

it into Javascript. And specifically, (()) Javascript, which has been highly optimized in Firefox and in a few other browsers. This allows us to take a lot of existing free software, and run it in the browser. It should be possible to take TTFAutohint, and have that hinting process done as part of a web application.

MS: as part of Metapolator, or whatever?

Obviously with FontForge, since FontForge is a binary application, this isn't totally necessary. But what I would like to see, over the next year or two, is to replace the FontForge user interface by web or Qt or TTK plugins. I'm kind of agnostic to whatever wins out, personally I'd be betting on the web stack. But if people jump in, develop Qt or TTK functionality, then that sounds great to me.

MS: There was one last thing: **Kernagic**. What's happening with that?

DC: So, **Kernagic** (pronounced 'Kemagic') is a project by Pippin (*Øyvind Kolås*). He has pretty much come to the point where he's happy with it. It is very much an intellectual exercise to him, as a kind of hacker nomad, who was trying at the LGM 2013 in Madrid to crack at the spacing. Here we are a year later, and he has done an amazing job.

Kernagic has two modes. It has the *table of cadences*, from Frank E. Blokland's letter model. And then it got Pippin's own independent thinking, which was informed by Frank's model, but is an independent perspective on the whole problem.

Pippin's gone forward with fonts now, he has also

done **Fontile**, which is his “puzzle style interface” for creating pixel fonts. It’s pretty amazing stuff really, you see a lot of functionality, in Fontile, which you only see in major web applications, and it’s something that he was able to put together in a couple of months.

Kernagic is a C application, it’s TTK2, so it’s not that easy to package for Windows or Mac OSX. So the best way to use Kernagic is to run it on a GNU system. And obviously, most type designers are using Mac OSX, so it’s got a somewhat limited audience. But the results that designers, like Vernon Adams, achieved with Kernagic are very compelling.

MS: so, Kernagic is an independent application?

DC: Yes, it’s a standalone TTK application. It uses UFO for input and output, and it follows the UFO live-file-system-watcher model, so that you have one UFO file, and you can open that in several UFO applications at the same time. And when you click the “save” button in one of the applications, the other applications are watching the file system, and allow you to select how you want to take the update. So it doesn’t really make sense to have Kernagic as a FontForge plugin, because it is cooperating with FontForge by the file system.

Something that underpins all of this is: all of these projects are developed on Git version control, and almost all of them are developed on GitHub. So, becoming familiar with Git and GitHub is essential for designers, especially type designers - because that’s really the dominant collaboration channel of today.

((Payment model of FontForge))

As I said, we packaged a Windows native build of FontForge, which runs pretty good. And the Ardour audio editor has been quite successfully working to provide a “pay libre software” model, where users are asked to pay for a copy, or to buy a subscription, so that they get updates on an annual subscription basis. I’m very keen on this idea, because I think that freedom is valuable, and we live in a capitalist system where people pay for valuable things. So I think that free software should be more expensive than proprietary software - because it’s more valuable.

I definitely think that not enough free software developers are funded to work on it full time, and that’s a major stumbling block for the free software movement.

((Q: how is the decision taking done in FontForge))

Only a couple of people had commit access on Sourceforge. Somebody brought FontForge over to Github. Then we set up FontForge as a GitHub organization. And there’s 35 members in the organization right now. But only a few of them are really active contributors.

Boris Kish - The NETworkshop

In a meeting in summer 2014, Manuel interviewed Boris about Julian Oliver and Danja Vasiliev's (of the Critical Engineering Working Group) *NETworkshop* that Boris attended earlier that year. The discussion was recorded on Manuel's phone and subsequently submitted to CastingWords to obtain a written transcription (the transcription is remarkably accurate, safe for Apichatpong Weerasethakul who was transcribed as "Artie Shappong ou Vanessa Tcool").

M: Tu parlais du workshop.

B: Oui, le workshop.

M: Tu as fait des rêves pendant ce workshop.

B: Je t'ai dit ça ?

M: Ouais, ouais.

B: C'était stimulant, quoi.

Ensuite, ce que je craignais s'est un peu passé, c'est qu'après, ça part très vite. C'est un peu comme quand tu fais des exercices spirituels de méditation. Quand tu as des expériences profondes, métaphysiques comme un concert de Karkowski ou bien certains films de Artie Shappong ou Vanessa Tcool. Tu en

gardes quelque chose de profond, mais ensuite la question, c'est comment conserver cet état dans le temps.

Parce que, petit à petit, ça s'émousse, ça s'effrite et tu perds... C'était un peu... il y avait une sorte de conscience nouvelle qui était ouverte des espaces liberté de conscience... c'était un agrandissement de la conscience ce workshop, et ensuite, petit à petit ça part, parce que c'est quelque chose de pas familier, de très étrange, et ensuite, petit à petit, ça se bouffait par l'inertie du quotidien, quoi. [rire]

Il y avait des... il y avait deux ou trois très jolies étudiantes de St-Luc. Il y avait elle, évidemment des Macintosh dernier cri et des ongles rouges... qui étaient dans l'art digital et qui étaient, ouais, en nouveau média ou – je ne sais pas quoi – en digital art à leurs écoles, qui semblaient absolument pas... enfin, à la fois politisées, mais à la fois pas du tout.

C'est un truc étrange. Mais jeune, tu vois, entre 20 et 25 ans. Il y avait une série un peu de vieux gars un peu [indecipherable 00:01:41], solitaires, un peu... et puis il y avait des activistes... et puis il y avait des provinciaux un peu, qui venaient, qui étaient en formation infographie ou des trucs comme ça dans des centres technologiques dans les villes de province wallonne qui eux étaient plutôt les représentants de Windows... [indecipherable 00:02:04] les vieux [indecipherable 00:02:05] c'étaient des gens sur Linux, des activistes. Il y avait Danja et David [indecipherable 00:02:18], c'est ça? Non.

M: Julian.

B: Julian et Danja, ouais. Très complémentaires.

M: J'adore leur style vestimentaire.

B: Oui, oui, oui. Non, ils ont un style monstrueux. Il y avait la copine de Julian qui est passée aussi... en tout cas, une copie de lui, qui semblait très proche, intime, extrêmement stylée. Elle a pas dit un mot jamais. Même effrayée avec des gens.

M: Néo-zélandaise ?

B: Elle avait pas l'air, disons. Elle parlait anglais. Mais elle avait plutôt un type asiatique. Ils avaient l'air d'être très contents, les deux d'être là en général et de partager tout ça... d'ailleurs, très contents. Très excités en général, très énergiques. Évidemment, il y avait des gens qui connaissaient le code, à différents niveaux, des gens absolument pas... qui avaient jamais créé une ligne de code de leur vie.

Plutôt proche, moi. C'était rigolo, par-ce que, du coup, tout le monde... en fin, il fallait finalement compter un peu sur les autres. En fin, des fois ça allait assez vite... ça allait vraiment assez vite et il y avait souvent des gens complètement paummés. [laughs] Ça a créé beaucoup d'échanges.

M: Il y avait des rencontres intéressantes ?

B: Pas pour moi, non, j'ai pas rencontré des gens... mais, je sais plus [laughs] ... attends, comment il s'appelle ce gars ? Il me semble que c'est un gars qu'on avait déjà vu à l'iMAL qui avait fait... qui faisait un truc de radio. Mais, c'est des gars qui étaient dans le son. Il y avaient plusieurs gars qui étaient dans le... il y avaient plusieurs gars et filles qui étaient dans

le son, plutôt des français. Mais, par contre, ce qui m'a... ce qui est un peu décevant aussi, c'est qu'il y avait un... il y avait une mailing list, et... mais il y a jamais rien eu. J'ai jamais été tenu au courant de quoi que ce soit sur les activités de Julian et Danja. Et puis, aussi, ils devaient aussi envoyer toute une doc sur ce qu'on avait fait. Ils l'ont pas fait. C'est un peu étrange.

M: Ce que vous avez fait, c'était quoi ?

2014-03-31 10.34.43

B: Qu'est-ce qu'on a fait ? [laughter] Je me souviens pas ! [laughter] On a fait un réseau local... on a fait des pings. On est sorti... on a appris à capter du WiFi qui passait dans le coin. On est... et à le décoder... ils ont donné toute une série de... d'outils pour ça. On a installé une version de Linux stand alone. Attends, comment ça marchait cet [indecipherable 00:05:08] ... bon, bref...

M: Un truc virtual box.

B: Voilà, c'est ça. Exactement. Et qui était préparé pour... avec toute une, série d'outils de bibliothèque... pour faire ce qu'on faisait.

M: Du "war driving" ?

B: Oui. J'ai toujours sur moi... Ah oui, on a aussi installé Tor. On a fait ça. On a "toré" aussi. Il y a eu tout un moment où ils ont pas mal parlé de Tor théoriquement. Un grand moment, c'était quand on est sorti dans la rue et chacun était à gauche, à droite avec son laptop, son dieu sait quoi, et a enregistré une chiée de flux WiFi qui passaient. Ensuite, on rentre et on décode tout ça. Ça, c'était hyper fun.

M: Il y avait des trouvailles ?

B: Oui.

M: Genre ?

B: Des selfies. Souvent c'était un peu "glitché", très "glitché". Souvent les images n'étaient pas complètes, ou des trucs comme ça, c'était recomposé en partie. Ce qui était spectaculaire, c'était les images. Il y avait aussi quelques fragments sonores. C'était assez convaincant. Cela marchait vraiment. Ensuite, maintenant, si je devais... Je crois que sur mon ordi, il y avait un problème. Je ne sais plus quoi.

Je n'ai pas tellement réussi à le faire, à capter moi-même du "matos" intéressant. Je ne sais plus pourquoi. Si je voulais le refaire moi-même, il faudrait que j'y passe vraiment un certain temps pour refaire marcher l'histoire. Ce que je n'ai pas essayé, parce que ça alors... Mais c'était super intéressant de le faire, et de voir que c'est possible, et que ce n'est pas très sorcier. En fait, les outils existent et sont là, accessibles.

M: OK. J'arrête le fragment.

B: Oui.

Appendix A: Talks

A Book isn't a Book isn't a Book

Abstract:

Would a time-traveling author from the past centuries stumble upon our everyday read/write tools, he would envision a techno-utopia that allows anyone to act as an archivist, librarian, content curator, or publisher. But the electronic publishing disruption comes with a couple of side-effects: print-on-demand spam is sneaking into our search queries, massively distributed authorship is taking the infinite monkey theorem at face value, while a generation of writers is turning SEO-aware.

In that context, Greyscale Press – a post-digital publishing house – is crafting book-like artifacts, merging the toolsets inherited from 20th century modernist avantgardes, post-structuralism, the free software and copyleft movement, up to the latest crop of crypto- and cypherpunk activists.

Transcript:

[Video begins midway through introduction] ...that he published. That he used, and in open source manner, he put it on his website. Probably it's out of date right now because the Twitter API changes every day, and this is another example of a publisher [video cuts out]

[Video resumes] form that was accepting entries. It was launched in the end of 2011. It was running during 2012, and it's not working anymore. Again, those APIs are unstable and dangerous. Those are a few examples of books that have been done by people.

This is an amazing book by [video cuts out]

[Video resumes] doesn't necessarily have to be a vanity press 2.0, but you can very well react to political events in the world, and you can put meaning into this.

This is a recent project that was done earlier this year in Geneva with students, and the objective was to make a useful book for graphic designers working with libre / open source fonts. So this is a specimen book designed entirely by students during one week of work, using the book sprint methodology that Adam Hyde, who is in this room, is pioneering across the world.

After the workshop, the book has been put on Amazon. Anybody can order it [video cuts out]

[Video resumes] mostly those are web fonts. There are about 200 of them in the book.

After those examples of exciting and enthusiastic and experiments with the technology, I'm going to look a little bit at the dark side - because every technology that appears on the world also brings with it some dangers and some responsibilities. So actually, print-on-demand quite unexpectedly has unleashed very very strange phenomena that not many people, I think, have noticed - but that have been invading the

world of books and publishing during the past few years.

Who of you is aware of book spam? Roughly 30 percent. Who of you has printed or seen a spam book physically? Good. Excellent. Any of you has made a spam book? I want to talk with you afterwards. Thanks.

So, I found this out. I came across this in early 2010
[video cuts out]

[Video resumes] thousand and some books in this inventory. All of them on very very specific and focused topic, with interesting cover art sourced from stock photography databases. Here is a brilliant example of the history of the country Georgia in the former Soviet republic, which is adorned by a stock photograph of Atlanta the capital of Georgia. It gained a lot of attention, and there was a comment of an Amazon user who wrote, “When a book has the wrong image for the cover, you know this is a big indication that something is wrong.”

Another example, and you see a pattern familiar from internet spam, where the title or the content contains a maximum of keywords. Those books spread from one platform to the other, so once it has appeared on Amazon, it will infect virally other book platforms. Sometimes it will lose some metadata along the way. For instance, the cover will be missing, which will make it more and more hard to detect what is actually about.

If we approach this scientifically, we can see that there are different types of book spam. Some of

you have maybe seen the great talk by Nicolas Nova yesterday, so this is a kind of continuation of it. We have *algorithmic spam*, where the entire book has been generated by a computer. Some of those authors are engineers, and they are proud of their invention, and they will talk about it openly - like Icon Group International, which is producing those world reports on amazing topics, like the “World Forecasts of Artificial Guts Made of Hardened Protein or Cellulosic Materials”. If you would tell me that this is an example of algorithmic poetry, I would certainly agree. This is a book search from this morning for this publisher. He has 870,000 and more books.

Another category, even more intriguing, is *human-made spam*, where actually there weren’t algorithms in play, but there were real human agents who were involved in the creation of those books. It may seem unbelievable, but we have what is called outsourcing. That’s a type of work. This is from the front page of one of those publishers advertising its location on the island of Mauritius, and as an investigative data researcher, I figured out that there was a Facebook group launched by the editors themselves. For those understanding French, the subtitle “*nu trop bon*” is an interesting case of querization. Those are photographs of the workers who are churning out the books, and those are some of the comments that they shared on this group, which was of course deleted shortly later. By the way, it’s also an interesting insight of what is happening behind all the data centers and all the digital services that surround us. To some people, if you have a service

that is transcribing your text messages, this might well be happening in some other country through outsourced work.

In a way those workers are an incarnation of [video cuts out]

[Video resumes] a quick overview of the different elements in the real world that have enabled this practice. One is the convention of academic publishing that producers very very formalized books and items that have a strict design that can be easily imitated by algorithmic or by simple intervention. This is a legitimate scientific publisher publishing books probably also with print-on-demand, and you can see that with a quick glance, it's hard to differentiate them actually from an artificial spam book that has been harvested or to figure out that is a legitimate scientific work.

Another key element is that open source free open license content is largely available on the web.

Wikipedia is the biggest example, which is used here by those books, and those books comply to the rules. On the last page, they will show, in very very small print, all the names of the contributors and the full license on one page.

PediaPress is one cornerstone. This is a start up in Germany who made an amazing job, and they created a way of getting books out of Wikipedia. It's a legitimate business. It's an extraordinary idea. You can use it on Wikipedia itself or use it as a plugin on your own Wiki, and they are being used actually by those spam printers, as I found in this little Facebook statement: "PediaPress pa bon!" The servers of

PediaPress were slow that day.

The last thing is that big book industries now have print-on-demand built in. Amazon, for instance, is printing a lot of books themselves. They will show them as being available, but actually once they get ordered, they will be printed in one or two days in one of their warehouses.

So, the print-on-demand spammer actually abuses those four cornerstones and exploits the system in a brilliant way.

Those books, unbelievably, have been infiltrating academia. You can find them in all university libraries around the world. Here in Switzerland I made a quick search. I found that there were 25 books by the publisher Alphascript about various topics: *the judicial system of the People's Republic of China* for instance or *the legal history of China*. So, those are printed Wikipedia articles on the shelf of that University. I borrowed some of those books from the University, and I brought them to the tombstone of Jorge Louise Borges in the hope [video cuts out]

[Video resumes] happening in our century.

It also means that the people who acquired those books failed the spam detection test. We all know the CAPTCHAs that we encounter every day on the web, so those are the Turing tests that [video cuts out]

[Video resumes] thing is human-made or bot-made.

Now, what has Amazon done to counter this? I noticed that recently they managed to decrease the

number of spam books in their database. They took countermeasures, and they have started to eliminate those books.

I had one interesting experience with this project. This was a book that I made. Again, with the original book sprint technology, I gathered a team during an art festival who was working during five days and producing an improved Wikipedia article on the art form of audiovisual performance (aka VJing). After one week of editing, we had a large article that we printed in book form, and I attempted later on to place this book on Amazon through their print-on-demand service. After I submitted this, I received an answer that the title had been blocked and couldn't be published because the content was against the Terms of Service of Amazon CreateSpace [video cuts out]

[Video resumes] you have to hold the exclusive rights, and the content shouldn't be available on the web. Or, in the original terms, "we will not accept content that is freely available on the web unless you are the copyright owner of that content". The way it is phrased is interesting because the first part of the sentence has more weight. The "freely available on the web" content, by default, is banned unless you can prove that you are the copyright owner, and they insisted it should be exclusive rights. This is intriguing, and I think there would be many reactions here that would question the usefulness of this rule.

I think I'm reaching the end of my presentation and [video cuts out]

[Video resumes] it's a bit too early in the morning, and I'm a practitioner and I'm saying thank you therefore.

Reviews:

Manuel Schmalstieg, Head, Geneva and Greyscale Press, kicked off the presentations (his was entitled “A Book Isn’t a Book Isn’t a Book”) and taught me several things. The first is that Jorge Luis Borges is buried in Geneva, which I hadn’t known. (The Argentinean writer spent much of his childhood in Switzerland.) The second is “very strange phenomena that not many people have noticed:” book SPAM. Spam books are “harvested” (by bots I think) from content that already exists on the web, such as Wikipedia entries. As a result of this phenomenon, some publishers of digital books now apparently say: “we will not accept copy that is freely available on the web unless you are the copyright owner.” Imagine that (note sarcasm in my comment)!

I was also amused when Schmalstieg said that POD has enabled us to “do projects that would have been completely suicidal for an editor to put in the world.” A lovely way to express the challenges editors have taken on since time immemorial – risking death indeed – let’s hear it for editors!

Source: Lynn Rosen, Radical Publishing: *Taking Apart the Book at Books in Browsers IV*, October 31, 2013 - <http://www.bookbusinessmag.com/post/radical-publishing-taking-apart-book-books-browsers-iv/>

Links:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jqaUNkWKXCU>

Black Holes in the Gutenberg Galaxy

A talk (on behalf of the Greyscale Press publishing project) given at the Off The Press conference, May 22-23 2014, organized by the Institute of Network Cultures, Rotterdam.

[beeping sounds]

[cricket sound]

Manuel Schmalstieg — Thanks for the introduction.
Did I really write that?

Silvio Lorusso — You did.

MS — OK. I am super happy to be here in WORM, finally in real. I have been here a few times, but virtually through video projections and through the interwebs. Now, it's great to be here live. It's a great space.

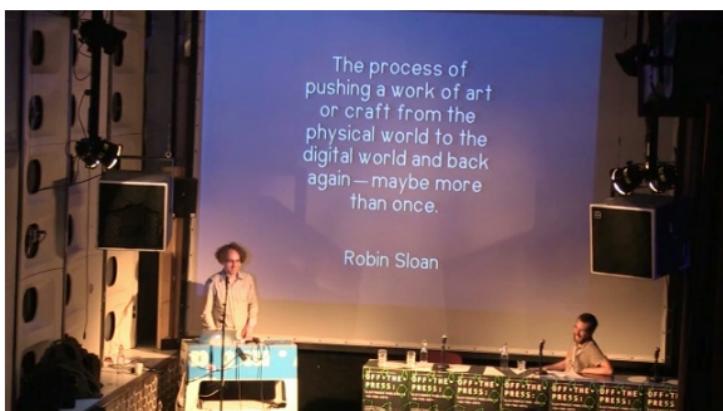
What I am talking about here, actually this title — Black Holes in the Gutenberg Galaxy — I decided to change it. I came across a new concept by reading the little glossary that Silvio has put together on some piratepad somewhere. Actually, we should share it with the audience, maybe.

SL — Oh, yeah!

MS — We will talk about it later. This is a concept that I read about in this wonderful glossary (around publishing, post-digital stuff and so on). So, the Flip-Flop. Who knows what the Flip-Flop is? Who wrote that definition, in your glossary?

SL — Robin Sloan.

[crosstalk]



Flip-Flop (n.)

SL — Yeah, that's the original definition.

MS — Flip-flop, from the physical to the digital, and then back into the physical. The more it goes against the stream, the more interesting it becomes. This is what has been happening with Greyscale Press.

Greyscale Press started randomly as a side project with no funding, no big ambitions — just the interest of actually reading some texts that accumulated in some corner of my hard drive. I wanted to have them on paper so I could sit down quietly, at some

moment, and read them while traveling or while having a bad Internet connection.

It started with a dummy text, or I thought it would be a dummy text.

I guess every one of you, when navigating the Internet, sometimes you come across some long, interesting-looking article or text that you save, somewhere on your hard drive in a corner. And then you find it two years later, and you don't remember what it was. In this case, I came across that on that blog, a typical blogspot.com whatever thing, which was written in October-December 2004, never updated since, totally abandoned.

The screenshot shows a blog post titled "report from the Desert" from Thursday, December 03, 2004. The post contains two paragraphs of text. Below the post is a comment section with one comment from "rd". To the right is a sidebar with "About Me" (Name: rd, View my complete profile), "Previous Posts" (links to other posts), and "Archives" (links to October and December 2004). At the bottom is a "Blogger" logo.

report from the Desert

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 03, 2004

The first rule of the desert is: you don't know where the desert starts or finishes.

The second rule is: you don't really know where you are when you are in the desert.

posted by rd @ 5:56 AM [5 comments](#)

Stood in this damp city makes my bones freeze beyond recognition. It's also hard to breathe normally, very much like the very hot weather of the desert.

Take out the zire from the coat pocket and read a few pages of the book of the month just to kill a little time. I don't concentrate on what I'm reading. Instead I think about the best way to get these local people to cooperate in my mission. It's not always like this, but today, this is how I feel; kind of lost in too many doubts and too much humidity.

I wonder how long does the winter lasts around here... I Hope not too much. But anyway, I'm only here for a week or two...

posted by rd @ 5:36 AM [0 comments](#)

SUNDAY, OCTOBER 24, 2004

[Possibly to discard...](#)

Report from the desert, reportdesert.blogspot.com, 2004.

It was actually a very, very long page, narrating a story, a literary work. It sounded very mysterious, truely fascinating. I downloaded it and forgot about

it. Then, when I published my first print-on-demand book, I used this as a test pattern, as a *LoREM IpSuM*.

I read it for the first time when I was proofing it, and then I figured out that it was actually a masterpiece of 21st century post-modern literature. I think really it is, even if it's maybe not in standard English, hard to publish through a traditional book publisher. It's really worthwhile to read it, and so I have been spreading it since then.

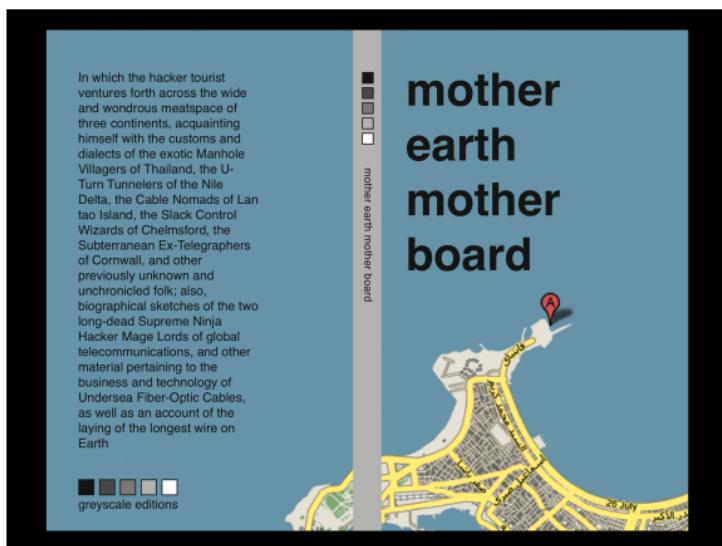
This was the beginning of Greyscale Press. I came up with that name because I had to put something on the cover of the book to make it look serious. Like those decisions that you take in just half a second, it sticks and it can become really a good thing.



Exhibit at Lokal.Int, Biel/Bienne, 2010.

Now, there have been other things added to this collection. It has been expanding, and it has always

been working on the principle that there is that digital file that is too long to be watching the screen for hours. So I print it, and I will read it at some point, actually I will also distribute that book to other people.



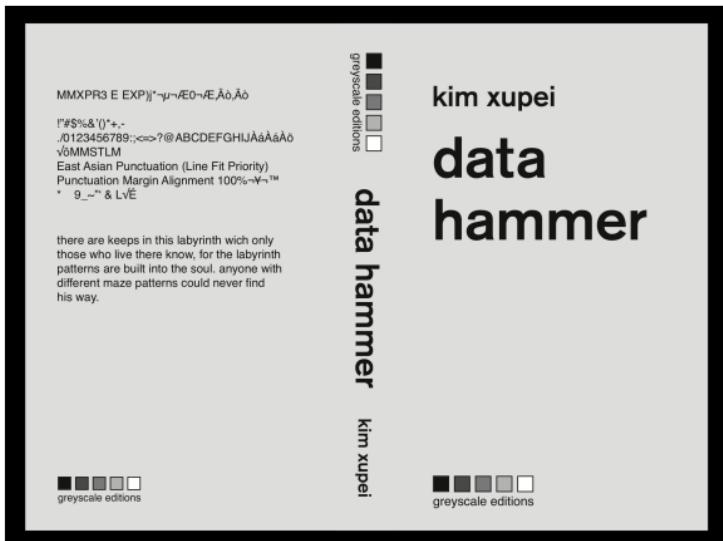
Neal Stephenson, *Mother Earth Mother Board*, print-on-demand version released in 2008, one copy.

Some of those additions are kind of undercover, without having the rights of using them. For instance, this great text by Neal Stephenson [on the screen: *Mother Earth Mother Board*] of which I made a printed edition, illustrated with images which weren't in the original.

He's writing... You know the article? It was published in WIRED magazine in the 90s²⁰. It has been superseded since, but he was mapping the early

²⁰<http://www.wired.com/1996/12/ffglass/>

Internet undersea cables. It's a really great story, and he always puts in the text the GPS coordinates. So I made an illustrated version with maps that show the locations²¹.



Kim Xupei, *Data Hammer*, 2009.

This was maybe one of the first “not found, but actually created” pieces: *Data Hammer* by Kim Xupei. This was a made-up personality and a made-up book. The concept was to write a fictional biography of a Chinese hacker, by basing the content on all that press that you have since 10 years, about the cyber threat coming from China. The Chinese hackers attacking Google, attacking American military systems, and so on.

²¹Sidenote: in 2012, software developer Dan Williams also created a personal print-on-demand edition of that article. See <http://www.iamdanw.com/wrote/i-dont-know-what-books-are-any-more/>

The concept here was to aggregate those news stories, to find some ghost writers to write a kind of novel from that, and to assemble it into a plausible biography. It's a work in progress. You can order the book if you want, but its not a really coherent story yet. If there are people interested in the topic, talk with me and it may go forward.



In conversation with Julian Assange, 2011.

This was another undercover project [on screen: *In conversation with Julian Assange*]. I came across that brilliant interview done by Hans-Ulrich Obrist with Assange²², with contributions by Ai Wei Wei and many other artists. And I really wanted to have it in print and to show it to many other people, to have many other people read it. So I made an

²²<http://www.e-flux.com/journal/in-conversation-with-julian-assange-part-i/>

edition, I added some other texts, by Geert Lovink who is maybe in this room, and Jaron Lanier who refused that I would publish it, and so it stayed a kind of undercover thing.

[on screen: *Jacob Appelbaum - Talks*]

0624-Appelbaum

This is a more recent one in that series about cypher punk activism. Those are talks, speeches by Jacob Appelbaum, who is one of the persons who are really in the know of what the NSA has been doing, and who has been covering the Snowden case for the german SPIEGEL.

He has been giving lots of talks, and also a testimony in front of the European Parliament. You can watch those videos on YouTube and on many places. They are really full of information, it's an extremely dense topic. So I needed to have that on paper, black on white, to be able to take my yellow marker and to analyze and process it.

I had those talks transcribed by online services and then, with Jacobs's acknowledgement, I published it as a print-on-demand book that you can order cheaply, for your education, or also as a propaganda piece to spread and support the cause.

It's typeset in a very traditional way, since it's not an art project. Here, it was really about curiosity, about the content, the hard facts. The point was to have it as readable as possible. It's a raw transcript so it's sometimes a bit rough around the edges, so the layout had to be as clean as possible.

Doing those books, I became interested in the technical process, and also in all the issues of proprietary file formats, expensive software that makes collaboration difficult.

For instance, this book by Jacob Applebaum has been shared on Github²³, in the intention that other people can improve and contribute to it. Many of his recent talks have been co-transcribed by lots of people through Etherpads, and put online just a few minutes or hours after the talk. There is an opportunity for collaboration. Therefore, it is important that the files are accessible, the file format is open.

I have been working for instance with **Scribus**, an open-source typesetting, graphic design software which uses an XML file format, which could potentially be used for all types of processes, transforming into Epubs and whatnot. Some people are working on that!

Once you get into that process, you start also becoming obsessed by typefaces and fonts. This [on screen: *L'Eve future*] was probably the most successfully selling book that was published by Greyscale Press, and it's called *L'Eve future - spécimens de fontes libres*.

It's a book of type specimens. It was done in book-sprint mode, during a one-week workshop with 10 or 12 graphic design students who worked on that intensively. They gathered a selection of high quality open-source free and libre fonts, that were

²³<https://github.com/greyscalepress/ioerror>



assembled in a type specimen book.

They used the novel *L'Eve future*, which is an early science fiction novel from the 19th century, and decided to make it run through the whole book. So it's not one text sample that just repeats, but it's a full novel that you can read from page 1 to page 500. It was a big challenge, and they did it. It's selling through distribution channels like Amazon quite well. It's really a useful design tool.

Now, I'm not a big fan of presenting work. If you want to see the books, come tomorrow to the Bazaar. When is it? In the afternoon? Here?

SL - It's here.

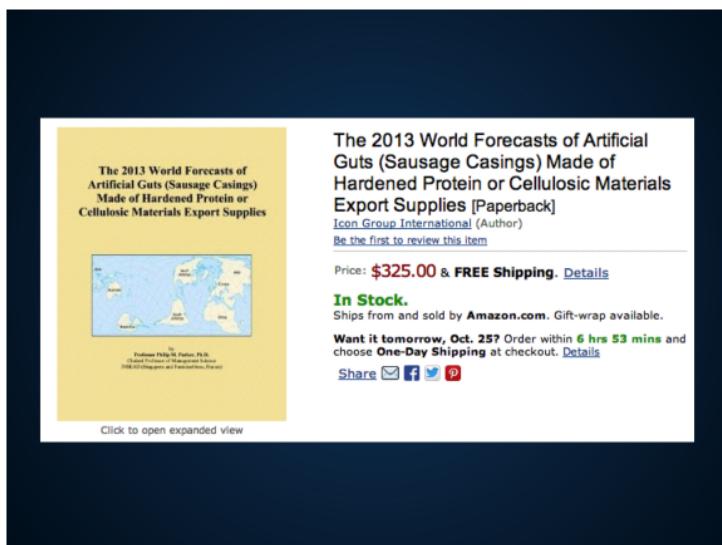
MS - So, that will be the opportunity of seeing real stuff.

1016

Now, I want to add a little bit to that great and fascinating topic: the study of “book spam”, or “spam books”. You have seen some brilliant examples by TraumaWien. When did you do that Epub/Amazon/YouTube compilation? Do you remember the year when it was?

TraumaWien — In 2012.

MS — 2012, OK. The whole story has started when print-on-demand books were really taking off. I think the earliest traces were in 2009, 2010 around that date. First examples of algorithmic, automatically produced spam started to appear on Amazon.



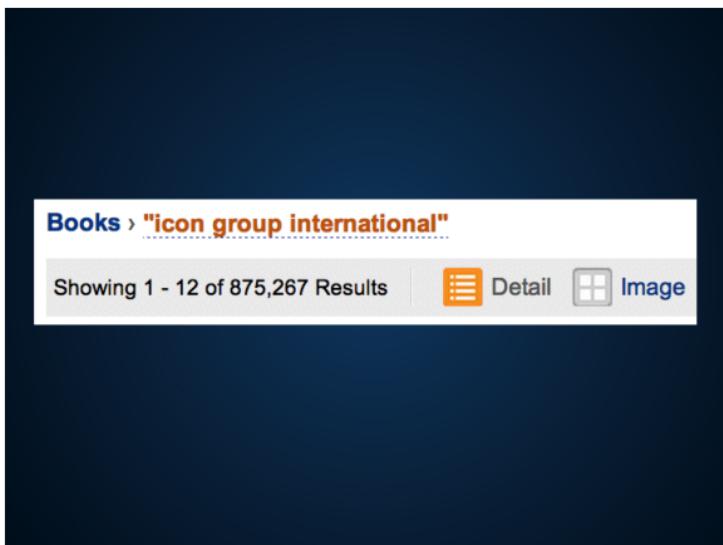
The 2013 World Forecasts of Artificial Guts (Sausage Casings), Icon Group International.

Now, it depends how you define spam. This can be useful for some people probably, and those books have been produced by one person who came up with engineering methods for producing reports by gathering data from the web and putting them together.

[laughter]

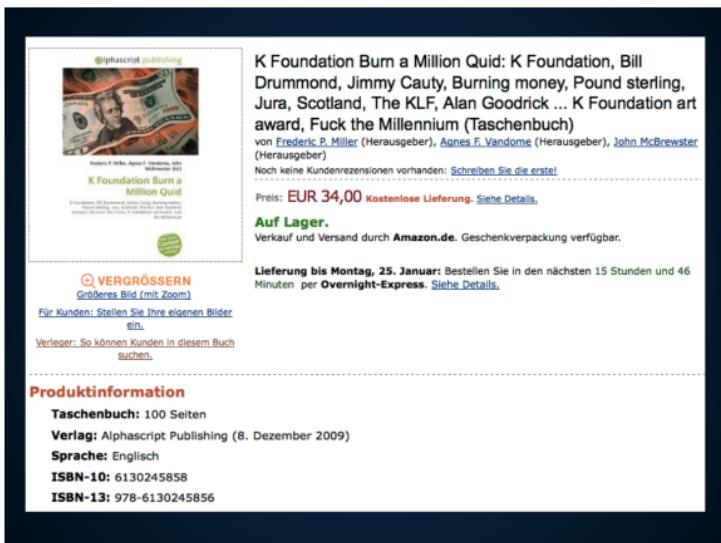
MS — It's also kind of poetry, I think. Also there is an algorithm who generates random prices, as you can see. The name of the publisher is Icon Group International.

The last time when there was a query about that, I found that he has produced quite a number of books. He has been patient, and Amazon hasn't been kicking him out, unlike you. So, they consider this to be "good enough" content.



Search results for "Icon Group International"

This is how I personally came across that phenomenon: I was looking for documentation about the great conceptual art group **The KLF / K Foundation**. I saw that book and I was very surprised by the cover, because they are famous for having burnt one million british pounds in the 90s. Here, the banknote which is on the cover is not a pound note, but a dollar bill.



K Foundation Burn A Million Quid, Alphascript Publishing, 2009

There is something very wrong... and actually upon further inspection, this book is a compilation and aggregation of Wikipedia articles by a publisher named **Alphascript Publishing**. I thought that was a really great sounding name, so I researched further. I saw that I had at that time a small number of 17,000 books...

[laughter]

MS — ...Which covered a very wide range of topics. After some time, this caught the attention of the Wikipedia community and big debates and emotions arose, wars erupted. This is a brilliant example, “History of Georgia (Country)”. You can guess what the photograph is. It’s Atlanta, so not in the country of Georgia.



History of Georgia (Country), Alphascript Publishing.

MS — Those books have been spreading through all those online distribution channels. [on screen: *Modul8*, by Betascript Publishing, at Barnes & Noble] This is a Wikipedia article that I co-wrote, about some video software. And sometimes on the way, passing from one platform to the other, they lose some metadata. [on screen: *Novels By Jerry Pournelle*, at AbeBooks.com] Here, the cover

has been lost and it becomes harder and harder to identify, if it's a serious work of research or documentation, or not.

On Wikipedia, some people have been really passionate about that, have done tons of research. They made a table of all the alternate publisher names that Alphascript Group has been publishing under.

Imprint	Editor names	Year of creation	Language	Number of titles in June 2011
Acu Publishing	Evander Luther	2011	English, French	408
Alphascript Publishing	Frederic P. Miller Agnes F. Vandome John McBrewster	2009	English, French	176919
Anim Publishing	Norton Fausto Garfield	2011	English, French	433
Aud Publishing	Eldon A. Mainyu	2011	English, French	443
Bellum Publishing	Othniel Hermes	2011	English, French	419
Betascript Publishing	Lambert M. Surhone Miriam T. Timpeldon Susan F. Marseken Mariam T. Tennoe Susan F. Henssonow	2010	English, French, German	319214
Brev Publishing	Germain Adriaan	2011	English, French	414
Cede Publishing	Barnabas Cristóbal	2011	English, French	481
Ceed Publishing	Aaron Philippe Toll	2011	English, French	527
Cei Publishing	Iustinus Tim Avery	2011	English, French	393
Chromo Publishing	Adam Cornelius Bert	2011	English, French	383
Chrono Press	Pollux Évariste Kjeld	2011	English, French	457
Plus	Zhanna Plusina	2011	English, French	424

Table of alternate publisher names

In order not to be kicked out by Amazon like you, they generated imprint names and they generated editor names.

TraumaWien — Can I add something?

MS — Yes.

TraumaWien — I wasn't blocked because of the content, but of the multiple accounts.

MS — Because of the multiple accounts? From one IP?

TraumaWien: Yeah, 50 accounts.

MS — OK! So, this has been running for some time. I think now the spam books are appearing less and less and in the search results, but at some moment, it was really massive. And if you were querying for a really obscure topic, you would certainly find some of those spam books in your results.

You see here, they had 350,000 for Betascript Publishing, 180,000 for Alphascript. It was really a serious business. They chose really beautiful author names which the middle initial, which is proven to increase the seriousness and the credibility.

[laughter]

MS — There have been studies about that²⁴. The proof that this works is that if you... Sorry what is your question?

Audience Member – Did anybody purchase them ?

MS — There are reviews on Amazon. Some people complained that the quality wasn't what they expected.

[laughter]

MS — There were some reviews also by a German guy who is probably running the business. He made

²⁴ See: van Tilburg W. A. P. and Igou E. R. (2014), *The impact of middle names: Middle name initials enhance evaluations of intellectual performance*, European Journal of Social Psychology, 44, pages 400–411. DOI: 10.1002/ejsp.2026 - <http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2026>

some reviews by hand, but he didn't manage to write reviews as quickly as the books were published. So, strangely, it seems to be harder to automate the reviews than publishing actual titles.

Proof that this spam actually does work on a certain scale is that, if you go into any university nowadays, and search for Alphascript Publishing, there are big chances that you will find some titles in the university book shelves. This was where I live in Neuchâtel, Switzerland. So they had some books on really precise topics.

The screenshot shows a library catalog interface with two entries displayed:

21

Notices 21 à 25 sur 25 Ajouter sélection au panier Sélectionner 21-25 Tout désélectionner

Sélectionner

Titre Judicial system of the people's republic of China : judiciary, people's republic of China, chinese law, legal history of China, law of the people's republic of China / Frederic P. Miller... [et al.] (Ed.)

Lieu / Dates Beau Bassin, Mauritius : Alphascript Publ., 2009

ISBN 9786130057756

Collation 153 p. : ill.

Service

22

Sélectionner

Titre Legal history of China : chinese law, law of the people's republic of China, Jiangxi-Fujian soviet, legal systems of the world, traditional chinese law, law, rule of law, confucianism, codification, civil code, jurisprudence / Frederic P. Miller... [et al.] (Ed.)

Lieu / Dates Beau Bassin, Mauritius : Alphascript Publ., 2009

ISBN 9786130045258

Collation 162 p. : ill.

Service

Alphascript books in the University library of Neuchâtel.

“The Judicial System of the People’s Republic of China” for instance. I borrowed a few of those books — just here to say that the person who acquired titles didn’t pass the spam detection test — like the Turing test, which is detecting if somebody in front of you is

human. Now, when you purchase books, you have to perform also a sort of book Turing test — has it been made by a human or not? — when you purchase them online.

Those are two titles that I got from the library, just to be sure that they really exist, and they do. They aren't that different optically from traditional academic publishing. And here I placed them in front of the tombstone of Jorge Luis Borges, the author and the inventor of the *Library of Babel*, just to make that little connection.

1710-JL-Borges

A side note about “spam as books”: writers nowadays can also be SEO aware. You know, *Search Engine Optimization*. That's also a way to attract an audience for your titles, like giving them a title that is relatively close to an existing best seller. This isn't a big movement on Amazon, so it's not as massive as the Wikipedia generated spam.

[laughter]

MS — But it happened, there are some examples. This is actually more an art prank, because inside, they are effectively 50,000 times the words “shades of grey”, so it can be considered an art project. That's why it got positive reviews as you can see.

[laughter]

MS — Or that one. “I am The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo”.

[laughter]

Fifty-Thousand Shades Of Grey Paperback
by S C Ashen (Author)
★ ★ ★ ★ ★ 30 customer reviews

Paperback
\$8.99

6 Used from \$28.54
4 New from \$8.99

Romance. Intrigue. Domination. Control. Subservience. Clarity. Epiphany. Release. EUPHORIA. This book contains absolutely none of those things - it is literally the words "Shades of grey" repeated 50,000 times, and is a practical joke - a physical prop designed to amuse and confound people's expectations.

[Flip to back](#)

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I AM THE GIRL WITH THE DRAGON TATTOO

Limited Edition

MS — That's the end, actually, of the interesting part of the presentation.

[laughter]

MS — Was it 15 minutes?

Silvio: It's fine. It's fine. If you have something to say you can continue.

MS — OK. I wasn't totally sure how this evening part would go. So I had some little thoughts regarding the general topic of that conference, like the tools, the *Digital Publishing Tool Kit* thing, that I was expecting to see a bite more what it would be. I'm curious when it will be released.

My position as a producer of books between the Web and between the print, taken in that format war that we live in, is that it's an exciting time. We have lots of unfinished tools around us, lots of tools being developed. It's a really interesting phase to be working in. Of course, there are things that are really needed and that everybody wants. Nobody's still got it really right. Maybe they won't ever be totally right.

Here are my rough notes of things I would love to see in that ecosystem of producing book-like content for print and web.

1944-Silkroad

I would love to see a Silkroad — like the illegal Tor based anonymous marketplace — where e-books get exchanged and actual books as well.

2004-Mesh-network

A mesh network of booksellers. It would be super interesting to talk about this with Alessandro Ludovico. We talked a bit during the break. He has the same idea in a more precise way. Having booksellers organizing themselves by a powerful software buying system that would be targeted, not to have another giant silo, but to put in contact small local book-selling places.

2021-Rootkit

The Digital Touch Publishing Tool Kit. Everybody wants it. Everybody has a precise idea of how it should be.

Like: it should be command line based, so that you can automate everything. You don't want to be blocked by the user interface, especially if you want to produce 300,000 books in one step.

If there is a user interface, make it be a Web user interface. It's more flexible. It will work on every platform. Be it a tablet or be it a Linux operating system. And you will have lots of coders who know the language to make it work.

Version-control everything, of course. We are really used to it right now in the field of programming. We also want it in the field of book production.

Allow us to work in offline mode. For programming, it may be OK to be all the time online. For writing, or proofing a text, or that kind of activity, it tends to work better, at least for me, when there is no Internet.

The Distributed Version Control Systems allow us to have the copy always with us. So, it has to be possible

to write offline. If the whole system has to be web-based, and needs a permanent Internet connection, it doesn't work for me.

That's the main points. Thank you.

[applause]

Reviews

by Arie Altena, in: *Off the Press, Report I*, May 25 2014, <http://ariealt.net/2014/05/25/off-the-press-report-i/>

“The last presentation I see is by Greyscales’ Manuel Schmalstieg – *Black Holes in the Gutenberg Galaxy*. He starts with the idea of the flip-flop: going from digital to analog and back. He made a couple of printed editions, sometimes pirated – for instance Neal Stephenson’s essay from Wired on the undersea cable, with new illustrations. He aggregated a novel from texts written by various ghost writers. He made the edition ‘In Conversation with Julian Assange.’ Some of these book remained undercover, as they were pirate editions, and rights were not acquired. His most successful publication is a book with transcriptions of talks by Jacob Appelbaum, – a book which can be added to every time a new talk is transcribed. He ends with on overview of spam publishing – which very nicely complements the presentation by TraumaWien.”

Notes

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