

Developing *The PracT_EX Journal*

Abstract In 2004 the T_EX Users Group (TUG) sponsored an explicitly practical T_EX conference in San Francisco. As an outgrowth of that conference, TUG decided to create an online journal for practical T_EX. The *The PracT_EX Journal* is now solidly up and running. Four issues were published in 2005, and the first issue of 2006 was just published. This article describes the decision to start *The PracT_EX Journal* (TPJ), the design and development decisions, and a sketch of how the journal operates. The article concludes with some reflections on TPJ today and some thoughts on the future.

1 History

Near the end of the 2004 Practical T_EX Conference in San Francisco, Tim Null and Robin Laakso (TUG’s executive director) discussed developing a section of the TUG web site that would contain introductory material on T_EX organized by category. In an exchange of emails between Tim Null and Karl Berry (TUG president) after the conference, Tim came up with the alternative idea of an on-line journal.¹

Karl sent the following message to the members of the TUG Board:²

Tim Null was a participant in the Practical T_EX conference in San Francisco. He’s been a technical editor for many years, and has offered to edit an online journal for TUG, working title *The PracT_EX Journal* ([other] ideas welcome).

The basic idea is for it to be short and focused on everyday problems, targeted at relatively naive T_EX users. We’re imagining something like 3–4 “issues” a year. I’ll append some of the description from him.

Besides Tim, we thought a small editorial board of helpers and reviewers would be appropriate — Lance [Carnes] offered to assist, . . .

¹November 26, 2005, email from Tim Null.

²August 8, 2004, email from Karl Berry.

Any objections, suggestions, proposals? If it seems basically ok, we'll start working on a prototype issue. I'm sure it will evolve over time.

Tim Null's description following Karl's message was as follows:

The online journal would differ from *TUGboat* in that it would solicit a different type of article from a different author pool . . . The online journal would be directed towards a different group of readers, . . .

I'm convinced that the audience we're hoping to reach—or at least I'm hoping to reach anyway—are very apprehensive about using applications like `tex4ht` and `latex2html`. In fact, I'd say they are a pretty apprehensive and cautious group—after they get their TEX system running with essential packages, they worry they might “break it” if they experiment. I believe we need to bring them along very gradually. I agree that we should eventually cover these applications—probably with several articles from different angles, but I think it should be after we have a group of established readers.

Books on TEX are task oriented. How to write in italic. How to create a display equation or theorem. I believe the online journal should be project or problem oriented. Project: I have to write a term paper with the following style guidelines. Problem: I can't get my figure to appear on the same page as the figure call out.

This is how I now see the content:

- At least one major article: (5-8 screens) based on a project that was accomplished using TEX .
- At least two short articles: (1-4 screens) presenting a problem that was resolved using TEX .
- Ask the Wizard: (1-4 screens) A column for beginners: (1-4 screens)
- Announcements/News: (1-2 screens)

Tim then went on to suggest some presentations from the San Francisco conference that he thought would make good papers for the on-line journal.

Other people volunteered or were recruited to join the new journal's editorial board.

However, within a couple of months [?], Tim Null discovered he had a work conflict that prevented him from dedicating the volunteer time necessary to get the new journal launched and resigned from being editor. At this point, Steve Peter agreed to be editor, but he also ran into problems that precluded him from following through. At that point Lance Carnes agreed to be editor,³ and he began to manage the on-going, email-based editorial board discussion that had been underway since Karl's first inquiry to the TUG board.

The Editorial Board discussions naturally were primarily centered on issues such as the target audience, look and feel, and frequency and schedule. There were extensive discussions of these topics and at least the target audience topic has been revisited frequently. These issues are described in Section 2.

Meanwhile, Karl Berry hand crafted the HTML for a prototype web site for the new journal, and other members of the editorial board made many comments on it. Karl Berry and Dave Walden⁴ then embarked on a collaboration to build a production program to generate a web site similar to the prototype. Mostly Karl told Dave what features he thought the web site should have and helped Dave quickly learn a lot more than he already knew about Perl programming. Dave did most of the actual coding of the program. In relatively short order, they were able to show the Board a new prototype web site generated by a Perl program. The discussions and mechanisms for actually generating the web site are described in more detail in Section 3.

The initial publication date was set for January 15, 2005, and Lance Carnes cajoled authors to actually submit papers. Lance and Dave shared the implicit job of production editor, actually getting finished papers posted to the web site.

Once the first issue was published, Lance and Dave agreed that Lance would handle the production editing alone going forward, and Dave would maintain the web site and help Lance use it. A second issue was published on April 15, 2005, with a number of new authors, some of whom volunteered as a result of reading the first issue. By the third issue (July 15, 2005), Lance had recruited some new Board members. By issue four (about November 1, 2005), Lance had recruiting new people

³Lance Carnes had long believed that TUG needed to put more focus on helping new TeX users and had been instrumental in motivating and organizing the San Francisco conference.

⁴A couple of weeks after Karl Berry's initial message was sent to the board, Karl Berry and Tim Null had invited Dave Walden to participate. Dave did not previously know any of the others and had not attended the conference. However, he had previous experience with an on-line journal and lots of tentative ideas about how generate the web site for an on-line journal in a way the minimized maintenance effort and maximized ease of creating new issues.

to help me the production editing.

We have now published four issues of *The PracTeX Journal* and are working on producing the first issue of the second year. Now seems an appropriate time to summarize and reflect on what we have done and learned so far.

2 Mission and appearance of the journal

In the time between when a fairly complete group of editorial board members was participating and the publication of the first issue, there was considerable discussion mission and appearance of the new journal.

2.1 Target audience

The content for the first issue was relatively set: it would mostly be papers and reports from the San Francisco conference.

- Lots of interest in addressing the needs of new users.

- Some argument for addressing the needs of intermediate users.

- An on-going issue: “Is *this* paper suitable for TPJ?”

- Sort of assumed that one issue a year would include much content for an annual Practical TeX Conference. Discussion of having occasional special topic issues.

2.2 Frequency and schedule

An on-line journal has unusual options.

- Quarterly? The benefits of a fixed schedule.

- Incrementally?

- Possibility of revisions to already published papers

2.3 Look and feel of the home page

Karl did original mockup in HTML.

We probably spent more early design time discussing the logo than anything else.

Steve P, Tim, and others all made variations. Some are saved in <http://dw.tug.org/pracjournal-practice-logos/> and Steve can probably tell us something about them.

We asked some expert [what was his name?] to look it over, and he suggested a few things [look up email], e.g., width of left margin of current issue TOC.

2.4 Ramifications of program-based site generation

There was considerable enthusiasm for generating the web site with a program by a few board members and little objection to doing it this way. However, fairly early on Dave began objecting to some board members suggestions for look and feel because they would complicate generation of the web site by a program or complicate maintenance of the web site. This became a low level running problem area for the first couple of issues until the program provided much of what people seemed to want or people came to accept the benefits of having a program generate the web site and “it will be hard for the program” as an acceptable reason for not pursuing an aesthetic suggestion (or perhaps they just got tired of the programmer ignoring their suggestions and stopped making them).

There was a good bit of discussion of the contents of the side pages, e.g., general information, editor bios, etc.

Objection to links in small left column going to page that didn't look like the home page and somewhat lengthy discussion of use of HTML frames. Dave and Karl voted against frames both in the discussion and with their coding pencils (see next section).

2.5 HTML or PDF

The most important issue was probably PDF versus HTML. Tim definitely had a concept that it would be an HTML journal. The problem is that we were (and still are) not prepared to auto-generated both PDF and HTML from a single source, or put in lots of production time to have both. So the question was, which one. Ultimately Lance made the good point that \TeX users will expect a \TeX journal, even online, to be nicely typeset. Therefore PDF. Also, not so hard we don't want to do it. (Also, it occurs to Karl now that \TeX authors obviously will know \TeX , to some extent anyway; they may or may not know HTML. He can't remember if this point came up before.)

Karl remembers creating the first version of the class file. He used Scott Pakin's

dtxtut⁵ as a base, after struggling through the base LaTeX documentation, after being unable to construct a complete example from the latex documentation. He chose Palatino as the basic typeface because Computer Modern is ubiquitous inside TeX, Times Roman is ubiquitous outside TeX, and it seemed a good idea to do something else. (Admittedly Palatino is probably the second most ubiquitous in both cases, but it had to be a free font, and choices are limited.) He chose 12pt type so it would be easier to read on screen, and use more of an 8.5x11 sheet of paper, since we weren't going to do double columns. (Karl's memory may well be faulty here – maybe Tim or others actually suggested the above. He's sure he sent some msgs about it asking for discussion.)

Arthur Ogawa did the first production version of the class file; included provision for version numbers and mailto IDs.

Will Robertson did a revision after a year of use of Arthur's version.

Whole issue PDF requests and possible approaches.

3 Web site generation

In Perl (PHP suggested but rejected). Early on need seen for HTML templates and a limited home-built capability (two short subroutines) with non-general calling sequences was written.

Idea of separating site maintenance from editorial based on HTML a) template files, b) two driver files, and c) little set of files to generate individual paper html pages. Editorial side relatively quickly began to manipulate c. (Should have been one driver file per paper.) Ultimately editorial side did begin to work with one of the driver files (for home pages), but maintenance side has continued to do all modifications to templates and staff driver file. Still, the latter two have provided useful simplicity for maintenance.

There was essentially no discussion of the structure and look of the indexes and archive of back issues other than between Karl and Dave as the web site generation program was developed.

Issues of three kinds of titles (HTML, TeX, and sort). Authors have same problem but so far not dealt with.

Subtitles: in TOC, in indexes.

⁵<http://www.ctan.org/tex-archive/info/dtxtut>

Assumption of regening whole web site each time and issues of backward compatibility. With issue 3, added capability to generate one issue rather than whole thing. Saved class files with issue.

4 Reflections

Perceived visibility of the journal in the T_EX world, lessons learned to date, future ambitions.

Acknowledgments