

Ask Nelly: What is ConTeXt?

Michael Guravage

ConTeXt is a macro package for T_EX written by Hans Hagen and Ton Otten of Pragma ADE in the Netherlands. Like L^AT_EX ConTeXt is applicable to most typesetting needs. Unlike L^AT_EX ConTeXt is monolithic, by which I mean it is designed, implemented, and distributed as a whole. Its completeness is evident in the breath of its concepts and consistency of its syntax.

Forged in the crucible of the educational publishing world, ConTeXt has grown to accommodate the most advanced and demanding typesetting needs. The practical upshot of this is that if you need a particular feature, it probably is already implemented. A few of its most noteworthy features include:

1. multiple language interfaces including: English, German, and Dutch
2. a font naming scheme that allows you mix and match different typefaces
3. a native XML parser
4. a native XML-FO support
5. native MathML support
6. integrated graphics with METAPOST
7. full color support in both RGB or CMYK
8. direct access to and control over the interactive capabilities of PDF

I would not say that ConTeXt has a steep learning curve but rather a long one. Thankfully, there is sufficient documentation, and a vibrant development community to offer support.

Visit the Pragma website at www.pragma-ade.com to learn more about ConTeXt. There you will find both examples to whet your appetite and manuals to answer your questions. I recommend you start by reading the introductory ‘ConTeXt an Excursion’ and then move onto the full ConTeXt manual. You will find additional examples of, discussions about, and documentation for ConTeXt on the community wiki at: contextgarden.net. Finally, you can subscribe to the ConTeXt mailing list at: www.ntg.nl/mailman/listinfo/ntg-context.

Michael Guravage is a consultant who specializes in content management and document engineering. He can be reached at info@literate-solutions.com.