

Editorial

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Back to the Future

Philip Machanick

Department of Computer Science

Rhodes University, Grahamstown

p.machanick@ru.ac.za

1 In this issue

This is my second issue since taking over as editor in June 2012. So far we have cleared some of the backlog in reviewing and aim to publish three issues in 2012 and thereafter to return to two per year.

In this issue, we have an equal number of information systems and computer science papers, emphasising the broad appeal of *South African Computer Journal*.

This is my final issue where I handle all technical and administrative work myself. Rhodes University has kindly funded paying for administrative and typesetting support while we wait for cash flow from open access charges.

2 Is L^AT_EX elitist?

In the meantime, I learnt some interesting things about the ways others use Microsoft Word.

Back in the mid-1980s, when computers generally used a command line and scripting languages, and such typesetting packages as existed were all markup languages, the appearance of the Apple Macintosh as the first mass-market windowing system was a pretty exciting moment for me. I had read of the work at Xerox Parc, and the Mac appeared to be a good approximation. That it had too little memory and lacked a true operating system that separated user land from the kernel was a bit of a dampener, but it seemed like a step in the right direction. My excitement was not widely shared: most computer users I spoke to insisted that the old way was easier.

Fast forward to today, and I was not so long ago told that if *SACJ* insisted that all authors submit in L^AT_EX, that would be “elitist”. Strange how the approach that was “easier” 25 years ago is now “harder” to the extent that computer science and information systems academics, let alone the broader public, consider it too difficult even to contemplate. What is so hard about L^AT_EX, really? The most difficult thing that trips me up in routine documents is setting up tables, a task that is no harder technically than, for example, learning an elementary database query language. A L^AT_EX document can be very complex, but that’s also true of a Word document – and things that are very simple in L^AT_EX can be hard in Word, like changing a numbering style throughout a document.

Back to how people use Microsoft Word. Word has

features to automate formatting that many authors never use. For example, if the first paragraph after a heading should not be indented, but all subsequent paragraphs should be, you can set up a succession of styles, a *heading*, *first paragraph* and *normal paragraph* – and as you end a paragraph of each of these styles by starting a new line, the next style kicks in. In this editorial, typed in L^AT_EX, I achieve all this by simply leaving a blank line between paragraphs and the predefined document style takes care of varying paragraph breaks as needed. This, to give you some idea, is what I have to type to make a section heading (including numbering it):

```
\section{In this issue}
```

To refer to the section by number, I label it as follows

```
\section{In this issue}\label{this}
```

then refer to it using the notation `\ref{this}`.

Word allows you to do other things many users miss, like automatically numbering sections, figures and tables, and making figures or tables float so they stay in position when the text moves. Floats can be problematic: floating items can land on top of each other or otherwise behave capriciously. Still, with a bit of effort you can get all this right. The problem is that a journal can’t control how authors create a document. Though Word has a feature to show all formatting marks (which can help), reformatting a document that could have been created many different ways presents interesting challenges.

Some journals work around this problem by requiring submission without neat formatting, with all the figures and tables at the end. At *SACJ*, we prefer submission in something close to the final format so reviewers can judge the length. We could of course require that authors undo all the formatting in their final submission, but that would make it harder for the editorial team to check if any required corrections have been made by the author.

3 What’s the solution?

So far, the best solution I have is an open access charge of R6000 to cover costs, including paying someone to reformat papers to publication standard. If you have a better idea, let me know. In the meantime, take a look at L^AT_EX. For simple documents, it’s not that hard. Imagine you’re in 1985 and it will seem very easy.
