

Aleksander Simonic and Adriana McCrea

Aleksander Simonic and Adriana McCrea are the “WinEdt team” that develops and supports the WinEdt editor popular with many MS Windows users of \TeX .

[Interview completed 28 June 2006.]



Dave Walden, interviewer: I am going to assume that readers have already read the partial history of WinEdt at <http://www.winedt.com/story.html>. Therefore, let’s start with some background information. My memory from sending you a check for my copy of WinEdt is that you are in Halifax, Nova Scotia. The couple of times I’ve visited Halifax, I’ve loved it. Are you both from the Halifax area, or did you come there from elsewhere for school?

Aleksander Simonic, interviewee: I personally don’t know any true Canadians: we all came from somewhere else

Adriana McCrea, interviewee: Awh, c’m on; the answer does not reflect the question: us in Halifax. I came here by a roundabout route. But too true; Halifax is small but beautiful

AS: Right: I came from Slovenia as a PhD student in 1990. I wanted to work with Heydar Radjavi (my advisor), whom I’d previously met in Ljubljana. I wasn’t sure (didn’t even think to check) which coast Halifax belonged to (had a vague idea it was on the west, and hearing something about a big explosion (<http://www.cbc.ca/halifaxexplosion>) having taken place there, assumed it was near Pearl Harbor [wrong war/wrong coast]). Anyway, it was a career decision which I don’t regret, despite some nasty winters

DW: And so, Adriana, from your last name I presume that you had ancestors that were part of the great Scots migration to Canada (although I guess there may also be McCreas from Ireland)?

AM: I’m a (more) recent emigré, Dave, having come from Belfast to Canada in 1977. Still have a bit of an accent

DW: Alex, I see from the Mathematics Genealogy Project database (<http://genealogy.math.ndsu.nodak.edu>) that your mathematical ancestors include Leibniz, two Bernoullis, Euler, Lagrange, Poisson, etc. — pretty impressive. Please elaborate on your motivations for developing your own editor rather than just using an existing editor? Presumably you were already using some version of \TeX to write mathematics, right?

AS: The names you mention are indeed impressive; I don’t quite consider myself in their league! As for the second part of the question: that’s easy. As your PhD studies are stretching into their 3rd year and your supervisor is gently reminding you that PhD studies are not exactly a full-time career, you tend to discover that you have talents unrelated to your studies.

In my case creating a personalized computer environment to typeset the research results (when I’d have them) looked like a reasonable way to spend the evenings.

It is true that I was considered a \TeX guru on Unix as I had used \TeX since the 1980s (on VAX at that time). At the Math department at Dalhousie I used Emacs as an editor, but

when I got my own PC with Windows (3.1) I wanted some sort of GUI for \TeX ing. That was 1993. It was surprisingly easy to make an application do exactly what I personally wanted it to do.

AM: The hard part came later when Alex had to make WinEdt do what other people wanted it to do. For example, there was practically no Help or guidance in the early days (I'm talking about 1997, now, when I was on board) as Alex's idea of guidance was "if you don't know what this is for, it's not for you".

DW: What was the reaction in your math department to your work on a new editor? Did you get your colleagues there to use early versions of it?

AS: I kept this for myself as my supervisor made me repeat an oath I made that I was serious about completing a PhD in Math.

AM: In the 1980s, in Slovenia, Alex had a tendency to drop out of school for a couple of months while working on some pretty lucrative computer/software projects. His supervisor at the Math department at Dal knew this and had asked him to be sure that he wanted to come to pursue a Math PhD.

AS: A few friends at the department (Dal) had suggested I should install one of the early versions of Linux and X Windows and use the same software as we did in the math department. I was inclined to do so, but my computer had only 8mb of memory while 16 was required for such installation. With memory at \$100 per MB, that was not an option

AM: In 1995 Alex announced the availability of WinEdt on the \TeX newsgroup. So the very first users of all the early versions came from the \TeX community, mostly in Germany. We have very fond memories of many of these early users: as we dropped out of our respective academic fields and lost touch with our peers, they became our friends and colleagues (erstwhile, alas, as many of them have since gone on to other things, leaving WinEdt behind). Truth be told, we lead a very isolated life and have done so for about 10 years now

DW: The photo of the two of you and caption about half way down the page at <http://www.winedt.com/about.html> (and reproduced at the beginning of this interview) suggests the WinEdt team is just the two of you. Do you have other people working for you or is WinEdt in fact just the two of you?

AS: It's just the two of us. Programming is done by me and Adriana is for the human touch :-).

DW: I've seen lots of math people drift into the world of computers—I myself did so. But how do you feel, Adriana, about finding yourself helping support a computer program rather than doing whatever you took the trouble to train to do?

AM: Well, five shortlistings and several squandered opportunities for tenure track positions in History departments across Canada later, as well as a strange career choice (at the end of my post-doc I took a contractual university administration position) have steered my boat into this harbour. My admin and people experience have, I think, served WinEdt well. Mind you, my typing still sucks and an ambition to actually learn \TeX is still on my to-do list

DW: The title for the unwritten part of your history at <http://www.winedt.com/story.html> suggests the path to WinEdt32 was not easy, and now you have WinEdt 5. Can you give me a few of the highlights and "lowlights" of those stories?

AS: I'll let Adriana answer this one as I tend to focus on "lowlights". Just how many times can you answer a problem report that the "L^AT_EX button in WinEdt does not work" before you lose it?

AM: "All work and no play"; Alex often feels rather burned out and suffers many lows Another role I try to fill in WinEdt is to keep things in perspective; sometimes successfully, others not. But back to the question at hand: One of the biggest highlights has been getting the Mailing List as a forum for discussion and exchange. That was in 1997 and it is still going strong. The greatest lowlights, for me at least, have been fraudulent license orders and the knowledge of the prevalence of crack codes in the Internet. I suppose the latter might be considered proof of the popularity of the program. Interestingly though: after 9/11 (September 11, 2001) we had several people contact us to register, mentioning that they had come to consider software piracy a type of terrorism (and regretting they had been using a crack)

DW: What is your feeling about the effort it takes to keep up with operating system releases as opposed to effort put into adding capability features to WinEdt?

AS: I don't try to program for tomorrow's operating systems or ever faster computers. I try to keep WinEdt suitable for the average computer of today, but eventually tomorrow comes and I have to rewrite big chunks of code and recompile them with newer and better tools — with their own set of inherited problems which have to be discovered and fixed. Always, the two issues require a compromise, and adding a new feature does not please everyone. There is always a wish list for new features (see <http://www.winedt.org>), and I keep a to-do list. I try to give priority to features that are reasonably feasible and would benefit the largest number of users. There are editors more powerful (others more easy to use) than WinEdt: for better or worse the program has evolved a certain way

AM: I have to say that Alex gets numerous feature requests and he is often caught up in deciding what *not* to do (or implement yet)

AS: New operating systems are, nevertheless, a reality and cannot be ignored if you want to keep a desktop application alive. Thankfully, there is usually a grace period of six months to a year in which I am able to catch up. Regarding XP for instance, functionality has been important, but the look counts as well: for example, people might assume that an application that does not support XP themes, is obsolete and unsupported.

DW: How about keeping up with the T_EX distributions? Do you make any special efforts to keep up with MiK_TE_X and T_EX Live? Do you have a lot of WinEdt users working with particular commercial distributions you have to keep up with?

AS: I always check new or upcoming versions of MiK_TE_X and make sure that WinEdt's default settings work with it. If there is any incompatibility I am usually alerted in advance by the keen users that are participating in beta testing. As far as WinEdt is concerned, there isn't much difference between MiK_TE_X and T_EX Live as long as the T_EX binary folder is included in the Windows PATH thus making launching executables easy regardless of where T_EX is installed. Relatively few WinEdt users work with other T_EX distributions. Y&Y T_EX comes to mind but since it is no longer being developed there is no need to maintain WinEdt's configuration for it; it can stay the same

DW: You have a significant user community (the <http://www.winedt.org> site mentioned earlier). You mentioned above that you monitor the WinEdt wish list. In what other ways do you coordinate with that community, reacting to user needs, deciding what you do and what community members do, etc.?

AS: In the late 1990s Adriana noticed that several users had set up web sites in which they offered useful advice and instructions on how to solve some language or task specific issue in WinEdt. Contributions were announced on the Mailing List but were hosted on web pages of the contributors. Many of these were students and their web pages disappeared after a while; also, some information becoming obsolete, we thought to set up a WinEdt.org site. This decision was really prompted by a nice collection of contributions by Robert Schlicht, who agreed to manage the domain; he is the author of many useful contributions and co-ordinates the activities there.

AM: Alex does not coordinate or decide what happens at WinEdt.org. However, he is a subscriber to the Mailing List and participates in discussions

DW: By the way, thank you, Alex, for showing me (in a set of messages parallel to this interview) how to set up some macros in WinEdt to allow me to copy text from the clipboard into different text buffers and then copy those text buffers back to the clipboard in a different order—I used this capability for alternately pasting AM and AS as I converted this interview into HTML. Is this the sort of thing you yourself might help with on the WinEdt discussion list if someone else doesn't answer first?

AS: Yes. If a WinEdt-related question on the Mailing List isn't answered in a timely fashion I usually post a reply. Sometimes it is just a pointer in the right direction and sometimes it contains more detailed instructions (especially if the documentation is not clear on the subject). Occasionally, the question exposes a bug or a lack of functionality in WinEdt and such problems are fixed, or, when feasible, the functionality is improved for the next version. The Mailing List gives me a chance to explain or justify certain behavior and it also provides valuable feedback on which many development-related decisions are based.

DW: I recently interviewed Christian Schenk, the creator of MiKTeX. Many users of WinEdt also appear to use the MiKTeX distribution. Was there any coordination between you and him that led to the joint popularity of your two systems?

AS: MiKTeX has been (and continues to be) a godsend to anyone wanting to TeX on their PC running Windows.

AM: Without any personal co-ordination, WinEdt and MiKTeX have been growing up together. As far as we know Christian does not use WinEdt and it has been many years since Alex has actually used TeX: these days it is only to ensure that WinEdt's default settings are properly configured to invoke MiKTeX and related TeX accessories.

AS: Although WinEdt is mostly used for TeXing it is designed as a reasonably powerful all-purpose ASCII editor.

AM: Yes: it was really cool using the HTML configuration in preparing the new HELP

DW: As an old computer programmer, I have sometimes thought that it might be nice to have a little piece of software that I could develop and support, be my own boss, and make enough money selling it to support me. Of course, I haven't actually done that because (a) I'm afraid I might have to spend more time dealing with operating system and compiler issues than dealing the actual application I am interested in, (b) I don't have a good idea for something a lot of people might like to buy, and (c) even if I had a good idea and started selling some copies, I fear I'd have no protective barrier from a large vendor subsuming my system's capability in some system the large vendor offers. You are apparently living this dream that I and probably others have had. How do you feel about the course your life has taken with WinEdt?

AS: I did not have much control over the sequence of events that led me into developing WinEdt and trying to make a living as a shareware author. It's been an interesting 10 years and I've learned a lot. I am almost ready to write a book on how to really write an editor :-). As for my living the dream, it is the occasional nightmare as well

AM: Our way of life demands (or at least we think so and give it) almost 24/7 attention, although we do take time off to sleep and eat. The effort has been rewarding: we now have a nice roof over our heads and Alex has a fine garden in which to replenish his soul. And he is well respected for his work.

AS: To treat each of the points you bring up:

(a) At first you can focus on features and ideas but after your application reaches a certain amount of users, operating system and even hardware specific problems take more and more of your time leaving you less to focus on new or missing features. If there is any chance of a conflict with another application or a process, it will eventually happen to someone. The idea is to correctly diagnose the problem (often with the help of the first victim who encountered it) and then find the way around. It is a non-rewarding and time-consuming job but essential for the application's survival

(b) Nor did I. Developing a tool that you (the author) would like to have for yourself is a good starting point. Thinking about marketability of the application comes later when the product is ready to meet the world. At that point you can put some kind of a reasonable price and conditions on the application's use, depending on how much effort and time you've spent developing it and how far you are willing to go in supporting and maintaining it. And don't expect any miracles: it takes time to build a reputation. And unless you came up with the idea for a "killer" application (the first word processor or Internet browser comes to mind) there are always alternatives; some of them likely well-established with a solid user-base — yet another reason to focus on quality and ease of use of your application.

(c) This may indeed be an issue with some "hot" applications. However, these days it is not very likely that a desktop application (like a \TeX -oriented editor) will get the attention of "the big guys". The more work and experience you put in your application the less likely it is that somebody will succeed in trying to get you out of business.

AM: I seem to recall that we'd dream of Bill Gates contacting us, offering 10 million dollars to take over WinEdt. Then we saw the Simpsons episode when Homer attracts BG's attention and it does not turn out at all well for him

DW: If you are willing to answer, based on your experience with WinEdt and its interactions with the world of \TeX , how do you see the prospects for \TeX ? Do you have a growing number of \TeX users, or do you find yourself having to push those parts of WinEdt that make it suitable for improving its utility in other domains?

AS: \TeX will not go away any time soon. The interfaces to it may evolve (perhaps into something more WYSIWYG) but \TeX 's ability to properly typeset mathematics equations will continue to be a challenge to alternative typesetting systems and word processors. I find that new users realize, after a while, that having to typeset their work with a markup language has its advantages even if it is not completely straightforward and it requires some learning. An editor can help by highlighting environments, matching delimiters, etc I always try to make such functionality in WinEdt customizable and thus suitable for most markup languages rather than hard-coding \TeX -specific rules. However, \TeX users remain the majority of WinEdt's clientele and I don't expect this to change just yet.

It is important that \TeX systems support conversion of currently popular document formats. Currently this is PDF, while PostScript and DVI are no longer the preferred

final format for compiled documents. DVI is still suitable for a working format especially because of source specials linking the source files with the compiled file in a DVI viewer (e.g., MiKTeX's YAP) that supports such functionality. I suspect that TeX would lose some popularity if it was not possible to compile it into PDF. But that's obviously not a problem as there are many ways to achieve the task with accessories that come with today's TeX systems.

DW: Have you learned about the business side of software development in the “school of hard knocks” or have you been able to find some sort of education or mentoring that helped you? Is there any sort of industry association for independent software developers such as yourselves that lets you share experiences and address common business problems?

AS: It was all from school of hard knocks. Lots of mistakes, thanks to my ignorance and lack of experience, were made in the early years. I had to learn my lessons fast and when Adriana took over the business side of the project I was relieved to be able once again to devote my time and energy to programming.

The last 10 years have been an interesting time. A lot has changed when it comes to the culture of downloading and installing software — gone from Kermitting files and ftp to instant broadband access and speedy installation. It's been interesting to have been here all along and live the changes as they have been occurring.

AM: There is a Shareware Software Association, but we've done things alone and learned by trial and error.

DW: Is there some obvious question you anticipated I would ask but haven't? If so, please give me the question and answer.

AM: I was wowed that you wanted to include us in this corner of the TeX site. I guess I live in fear that the fact that we want money in exchange for WinEdt will in the end leave us with no new registered users. We occasionally get the equivalent of hate mail for not being freeware.

DW: Thank you for taking the time to participate in this interview. I've enjoyed talking to you, and it's great to have a little more insight about the couple who provide the editor that I use for many hours every day.

AM: It's been fun. Maybe this will be the spur for me to bring our story up to date on winedt.com. We have enjoyed remembering this road less travelled, and have been reminded to be grateful for our talents . . .