Klaus Höppner

Klaus Höppner is the president of DANTE (`http://www.dante.de/`), the German TEX user group and a member of the TUG board (`tug.org/board.html`).

[Interview completed 20 February 2005.]

Dave Walden, interviewer: Please tell me a little bit about yourself personally.

Klaus Höppner, interviewee: I was born in 1966 in the Ruhr area, famous for its coal mines and steel industry in former times, but heavily affected by the decline of these industries in the last decades. I studied physics at the University of Dortmund, getting my PhD in 1997. After that I had postdoctoral fellowships in Hamburg and Berlin, before I found my permanent work in Darmstadt in 2002.

Currently I live in Darmstadt, between Frankfurt (the financial center) and Heidelberg (the city all Americans know), working in the Control Systems Group of a national accelerator center.

DW: When and how did you first get involved with TEX and friends?

KH: It was in 1991, when I was in a summer student program at DESY, an accelerator center in Hamburg. I was involved in writing software for data analysis for crystallography. When I had to document the routines, I got a one hour crash course in using TEX on their VAX machines, got the German version of lshort, and had to learn it by doing. I didn't have my own PC at that time (just a typewriter), so I didn't know there were other word processors. Some time later, I tried to use WordPerfect (it was more popular than MS Word at that time), but I was disappointed by the result and writing mathematical text with it was painful. Anyway, it took me about two years to realize that I wasn't using just TEX but the macro package LATEX and other TEX formats existed; this "small" point was missing in my crash course. When I bought my first PC, I found out that the computing center of my university distributed floppies with emTEX, so I continued to use TEX.

DW: You have become a significant contributor to the TEX community. Will you please tell me how this came about.

KH: I don't know whether I would regard myself as an important contributor to the community. I've done nothing special that couldn't be done by anyone else. My contributions started about 10 years ago when I discovered Usenet and started to write in

TEX newsgroups (mainly a German one). Lots of my writing at that time was during boring night shifts doing measurements for my diploma and PhD thesis. It was also at that time that I became a DANTE member and started to go to the meetings and to meet many important contributors face to face. In time, I was asked to prepare on CD-ROM the CTAN snapshot that was distributed by DANTE in cooperation with many other user groups. I did this until 2002 when it became too time consuming — CTAN became bigger every year and it was real work to select what to include (the main reason why it's a DVD now). But I still design the covers and I don't get complaints, so they seem to be not too bad.

At the end of the 1990s, the old DANTE board resigned, so I applied for one of the open positions. I became a board member in 2000, and since 2002 I have been vice president. Most of the work is administration: talking about money, monitoring office activities, or preparing for conferences. These are all things that someone has to care about and that I like while most people regard them as boring. Unfortunately, there is no time remaining for my original TEX activity of participating in the on-line discussion groups, and not only because of board activities — life at work is much different from life as a student. The new news is that I am becoming a fresh member of the TUG board as I thought I could be helpful. The future will show whether I'm right with this opinion.

DW: What motivated you to become involved in DANTE and then to expand your involvement in the TEX world? What benefit or gratification do you get?

KH: It was a stepwise development. Sometimes I was asked whether I wanted to do something (e.g. the CTAN CD snapshot), and I didn't see a reason to say no. Finally, I ended up as a candidate for the board. Most members of the old board resigned after some disputes within DANTE. I just thought it was the right time for persons to show their willingness to take over responsibilities. I'm not sure whether I had the right expectations. It is always required that board should do "visionary work"; but, as mentioned above, my time is mainly used for administration.

I'm just happy when someone says thank you for my work, and even happier when new volunteers show up to help keep things running. I think finding them is becoming more difficult, so it's a good feeling to see the positive exceptions. An example may be Manfred Lotz who immediately volunteered after a general meeting where I said that I wanted to stop working on the CTAN snapshot. One other benefit is that I'm reimbursed for going to conferences. I was at EuroTEX in Netherlands and France, TUG 2004 in Greece, and this year I will go to PracTEX in the USA.

DW: I am sure many TUG members are like I am and don't know anything about DANTE. Can you say just a few words about the scope of its activities, how its activities are different than TUG's, and how it relates to TUG.

KH: DANTE was founded 16 years ago in Germany and currently has about 2000 members. Originally, it was a forum for German-speaking TEX users (so we feel responsible for Austria and a part of Switzerland, too). TEX was focused on American typesetting at that time (remember that it was developed by Knuth for his own needs), so some efforts had been made to meet German needs. In the first years, DANTE distributed software on floppies and sold American TEX books (when German books were rare and it was really expensive to order American books via bookstores). Also, there is the German CTAN backbone that is financed by DANTE. For activities, I would like to mention the development of NTS, an object-oriented TEX-compatible typesetter in Java, the funding for creating the Latin Modern fonts, Type 1 fonts which extend Computer Modern to all the accented characters needed in Europe, and a TEX development fund that was installed

by DANTE in 2001.

I don't think DANTE's activities are too different from TUG's activities, just that DANTE is more focused on German language and Europe. The relationship to TUG is good — which doesn't mean we always share opinions. In general the cooperation of all TEX groups has improved a lot, so a lot of projects are international projects, often with shared funding.

DW: Do you have an image of how TEX and the TEX world will or should evolve going forward?

KH: There was a time years ago when I discussed with friends impressions of a recent conference and the consensus was "Nice as always, but also the same stuff as always". I don't feel the same today. Support for PDF (with pdfTEX and hyperref) has been an important step forward and, for example, ConTEXt shows the power of TEX.

What we need for the future is making TEX more user friendly. For instance, if you want to install a Perl package, you just open a shell on a CPAN mirror and type `install package-name`. We are evolving into this direction with TEX (TPM files were introduced with TEX Live, and Jim Hefferon is doing especially good work on restructuring CTAN) but there is still a lot of work remaining. Another point is the need for better documentation. So, there is still plenty of need for volunteers, even for John Average TEX user.

And finally we have to convince people that TEX is not as complicated as it looks like on first sight, especially to those without technical backgrounds.

DW: I see technological progress as being driven by people who have lives outside of technology. Will you say a few more words about your personal life?

KH: I'm a TV junkie, but no talk shows and rarely game shows. My current favorite is Monk.

DW: Thank you for your time in doing this interview. I have learned much that I did not know before.