Yuri Robbers

Yuri Robbers is a TEX user and is a production editor for *The PracTEX Journal* as well as maintaining the journal's web site.

[Interview completed 24 August 2008.]

Dave Walden, interviewer: Please tell me a bit about your personal history independent of TEX.

Yuri Robbers, interviewee: Some people compare me to a cat, but one living all nine lives at the same time. I also have the proverbial curiosity of a cat. This already started when I was very young. I couldn't get enough of having stories read to me, and as soon as I could read I became a voracious reader, and an equally voracious experimenter. I always wanted to find out more about my surroundings. Whether it was reading about space travel — I've wanted to be an astronaut since I knew they existed — or blowing up all the fuses in the house, I was eager to find out more.

My love for books didn't stop at reading them. I also wrote from an early age, and have been cutting and folding little booklets, and as soon as I had a computer capable of running primitive DTP software (a Commodore 64) I experimented with DTP, font design, etcetera. The fact that my father worked as a professional typographer (then at Brill Academic Publishers), at first still setting lead type in hundreds of languages, may have had something to do with my love for letters and the printed word.

Growing up, I devoured everything that would sit still long enough to read. Literature, the sciences, mythology and ancient religions, art, computers, history, etc. I've always aimed at being an *uomo universale*, an ideal that I'm sure one can't really accomplish any more in this day and age, but that has never stopped me from trying.

It was difficult for me to decide what to read in university. Eventually I chose biology, and I have never regretted it. Although, admittedly, I have always taken extra courses in subjects ranging from mathematics to celtic languages. My research has taken me to three continents, the first time out of Europe being my fieldwork in Indonesia, studying orang-utan social behaviour in the wild.

After living in quite a few countries spread over three continents, I am now back in Leiderdorp, the little village in the Netherlands where I was born back in 1973. During this period I have gotten myself a masters degree in ethology, the study of animal

behaviour, and I have been working on a discontinued PhD project in mathematical biology. I now work as a teacher of various subjects in a secondary school (the grammar school I graduated from), while still doing research at Leiden University, this time pursuing a PhD in behavioural ecology. In addition I still read and write loads, enjoy walking, especially in forests, study subjects ranging from folklore and mythology to typesetting, science and literature, meet with friends, play games and visit museums and concerts. I also keep my cats happy, and I maintain an international relationship — my girlfriend lives in Scotland.

My first published book dates from 2005, and is a scientific work on vertebrate social behaviour, titled *Agonic and Hedonic Styles of Social Behaviour* and co-authored with my friend Koen Kortmulder, who was one of my teachers in University. We are now working on another book.

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

YR: I've been working with DTP programs and word processors since I found out they existed, which was in the early eighties, near the end of primary school. I've never been quite happy with them though. I did what I could to make documents I created on the computer look as nice as I possibly could.

In 1992 I went to university, and in the first two years dabbled with *roff, and later Basser Lout. The assignments I had to hand in were, however, group assignments, so I did those in WordPerfect in order to remain compatible with my fellow students. After my fieldwork in Indonesia in 1995, a fellow student introduced me to Linux and with our Linux distribution came a TEX distribution. I was hooked. Both to Linux and TEX. I started working in LATEX. Everything I had to write by myself, I typeset in LATEX. Some of my fellow students were impressed and started using it too. Ever since 1995 I have used, installed and maintained TEX systems on many types of computer, including Linux, VMS, IRIX, Commodore Amiga, Windows, Mac OS 8, 9 and X, etc.

DW: In some of our exchanges of email about my typesetting, you have also given me advice on using TEX systems beyond LATEX.

YR: I've used LATEX, plain TEX and ConTEXt for work as well as for pleasure. Just hacking around in *TEX for its own sake was — and is — pure pleasure. I would not claim to be an expert, but I have a fairly extended experience. I've written all sorts of macros and fixed all sorts of problems for myself as well as for friends and colleagues. I even — my five seconds of fame — solved a minor bug in AMS-LATEX at one point. I've played with the base systems as well as with many add-on packages and experimented with fonts, with styles, and with graphics.

In 1997 I co-authored a rather large introductory mathematics reader for the university. Unfortunately I was required to do this in MS Word for the Mac. I was not very happy: I was too used to the ease and beauty of TEX and LATEX. A similar step "back" in my experience was the publication of that first book of mine on vertebrate social behaviour. It was typeset by a third party using InDesign, and I was not too impressed with it. Especially not with the fact that we had to generate the index by hand, and had to regenerate it by hand when the publisher made some changes to the layout that changed the majority of our page breaks in unpredictable ways. Also the few polytonic greek words required in the book had to be typeset in LATEX by me, and submitted as graphics files. Neither was I too impressed with the format the publisher imposed on us: 1 1/2 linespacing, for example, may be fine for manuscripts, but in an actual published book it is a bit too much for my tastes.

I wouldn't dare to claim that *TEX is ideal for everyone, but it is definitely the system

I prefer using. It offers me ease of use and beauty, and I have gotten so used to it — and its little idiosyncrasies — that I do not often run into problems anymore.

DW: You and I first met (on-line) in regard to publication of *The PracTEX Journal.*

YR: I've always intended to contribute to TEX. As I've said above, that started out by helping friends and colleagues. I've also answered the occasional question on TEX mailing lists, and filed that one bug fix I've mentioned. In 2006 I decided to offer helping out with TPJ. My offer was accepted, and ever since I have worked as a production editor. I deal with authors, edit papers, and run the scripts that keep the web site going. I've also written some papers, acted as Nelly)the typographical agony aunt) regularly, and managed to contribute one tiny script to the web site, one that eases generation of the whole issue PDF.

Since I've joined the TPJ production team, I've also been invited to join the *TUGboat* production team, although I must admit I've not had the time to contribute much to *TUGboat* yet. I still owe them at least two papers as well. Through TPJ and *TUGboat* I've had the opportunity to work with some wonderful people, most of whom are far more knowledgeable when it comes to *TEX than myself.

DW: You co-wrote an article for TPJ on creating book covers using PSTricks (`http://tug.org/pracjourn/2007-1/robbers/`). Have you been involved in the actual publication of books to a significant extent?

YR: I have done some typesetting (a few novels, a book of collected stories and a bunch of small booklets with short stories) for an independent publisher (Saga Whyte Press).

I used LATEX and Peter Wilson's Memoir for these projects, and I've used the Minion Pro fonts — which I bought for this purpose — along with Achim Blumensath's Minion Pro support for TEX. For these books and short stories I've also created the covers. I have not done the actual artwork, but I did implement everything in LATEX and PSTricks, and provided feedback to the artist, Annemarie Skjold, my co-author for the paper you have mentioned.

At university I was one of the editors, and for several years the editor-in-chief of a magazine for biologists. When I became an editor, this magazine was typeset in WordPerfect, and nowadays it is typeset in MS Word, but in between it has been typeset (mostly by me) in LATEX and a class file that I wrote, using `report.cls` as a basis, for this purpose.

After graduating, I was the Secretary of the Dutch Society for Theoretical Biology for five years. All correspondence and booklets, conference programs etc., issued by this society were made in LATEX. My predecessor had left me a huge collection of macros and programs, including a complete mail merge system he and other people wrote. During my five years I have adapted and expanded these macros, and created quite a few new ones. During this time I have also created a BIBTEX style file for the new bibliographical format of the *Journal for Theoretical Biology* called `jtbnew.bst` (it supersedes `jtb.bst`), which matches the old bibliographical format. I've used Patrick Daly's magnificent `makebst` script to create the basis, and then tweaked the result by hand. This project did, therefore, not require a great amount of programming skill — mostly a good eye for detail, a willingness to spend a lot of time on niggly-naggly conventions and problems, and a basic understanding of the `.bst` format.

I am currently working on a two-volume book on the behaviour of Asiatic Barbs, again co-authored with Koen Kortmulder and on a PhD thesis. For the PhD thesis I am using LATEX and Memoir. Regarding the book, it depends on the publisher: if our publisher will do the typesetting in-house, the decision will of course not be mine, but if they leave the typesetting to the authors, I will do it myself using some form of *TEX — most likely LATEX

or AMS-LATEX with Memoir again.

DW: Was your interest in typesetting only spurred by your father's work, or did you also learn some craft from him?

YR: He taught me a lot of the visual aspects of typesetting and of fonts. He showed me many examples of good and bad typesetting, and explained about the errors made in many pieces of typeset material. I also have him comment on the things I make, and use his criticism to improve my own work.

After I graduated from secondary school my father arranged a summer job for me in the printer's company where he worked at that time. I got to do four weeks of full-time work as his apprentice in the macro-typography department. We would get the typeset pages from micro-typography (where I also got to learn a thing or two), and we would lay out the originals for the printing presses, usually 16 pages per sheet of paper. We would also place any additional material such as illustrations, photographic material, backgrounds, etc. We would then photographically transfer everything to large sheets of film. These would be checked for errors, both typographic and photographic, and if everything looked fine transfer the image from film onto large metal sheets which would go onto the press.

DW: Tell me about your interactive fiction activities.

YR: When I was still a child, my uncle introduced me to Interactive Fiction, or as it was called back then, text adventures: computer games where one reads a bit of a story, types commands to be executed by the main character, and then receives the feedback, etc., until the story ends. One plays, as it were, the main character in a novel, solving puzzles and trying to bring the story to a happy end. At first these games were rather primitive, with simple verb-noun commands all that one could type. Nevertheless: I was hooked. Later I discovered games with far better parsers (the parser being the bit of the program that translates whatever the player types into something the program can work with) such as those by Magnetic Scrolls, Level 9 and especially Infocom.

I not only played these games, but I created a few simple ones as well. At first I used BASIC, but later I've used other computer languages as well. At some point I discovered Graham Nelson's language Inform, which is an Object Oriented programming language for Interactive Fiction. He also provided a parser which mimics the Infocom parser. Actually the last (or as I hope latest) game from the Infocom people was written in Inform.

I started exploring Inform and created a Dutch version of Graham's parser for it. The quintessential test of such translations is a translation of the original Adventure by Will Crowther, which I've also provided.

I wrote some small games of my own, and also used the parser to create educational software which is used in the school where I work. Also I have helped some students create such software using my Dutch parser and some additional modules I wrote for these educational programs.

DW: Some of your specific connections to Interactive Fiction are particularly fun for me to hear about. I knew a couple of the key Infocom guys when Infocom was an independent company (back in the decade starting in about 1977), and Will Crowther was my programming mentor.

Thank you, Yuri, for taking the time to participate in this interview. I've greatly enjoyed learning more about your background and activities beyond what we have talked about in our interactions over TPJ.