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Origins of Reading

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LyX: Challenging the Word Processor as Typesetter

Sitting down to Microsoft Word is like sitting down at a massively powerful typewriter, a typesetting machine with a fantastic graphical interface, or an amazing virtual letterpress shop; while it offers huge advantages over its real-world antecedents, it replicates and improves on these methods while failing to take advantage of computers' real power—data processing. Microsoft Word proudly describes itself as a WYSIWYG (What You See Is What You Get) word processor. A project named LyX proclaims itself as the "first WYSIWYM [What You See Is What You **Mean**] document processor," and is attempting to take advantage of one of computers' most intriguing literary possibilities by interacting with literature as data as opposed to be text.

First-time LyX users often have difficulty transitioning to a word processor where absolute control over the text is withheld. In LyX, hitting enter twice *does not* create two blank lines and hitting the bar more than once *does not* increase the number of spaces. As an author, LyX only asks you to classify the data you are entering and provide instructions on how to render this *data* onto a printed page—it does not force you to (or even let you) skip to the last step and control the details of appearance as you are entering your text. Writing this paper in LyX, I'd classify the first four lines as a *Left Header*, the next line as a *Title*, and the remaining paragraphs as *Body Paragraphs*. I configure the document rendering to conform to MLA standards (12pt. font, double spaced throughout, etc). If I were to use a block quote, I would not bother indenting

(LyX would not let me) but I'd simply classify my copied text as a quote and let LyX make the formatting decisions for me.

LyX's documentation describes the manner in which the software changes the way that authors write saying that "unlike standard word processors, LyX encourages an approach to writing based on the structure of your documents, not their appearance. LyX lets you concentrate on writing, leaving details of visual layout to the software." Since LyX interacts with text as data, superficial (but still extremely important) changes like switching from MLA style to APA style are done by simply replacing the filter and configuration information used for rendering.

While LyX is hardly the only way for computers to look at literature as data, it is one of the only almost-WYSIWYG interfaces based on this paradigm and this tends to generate confusion. When writing SGML and XML, it is clear to authors that they are writing document source data and encouraged to ignore the details of how things will look because the text remains unformatted in their editor. LyX is powerful because it displays a good approximation of the final printed document as users are writing but it can be confusing in that it is difficult for authors to control minute details (at least compared to software like Word). While LyX developers and fans consider this a strength, many users who are accustomed to being able to hit enter several times and create white space become frustrated when they *can't* make these changes in this way or at least not in this way.

While LyX is immensely powerful, it seems possible that LyX has taken steps to provide a paradigm shift in word processing with out a corresponding paradigm shift in the vast majority of its potential users who are comfortable using their word processor as a glorified type writer.

Works Cited

Lyx Press Release: Public release of LyX version 1.0.0. 4 April 2002. Available:

<http://www.lyx.org/about/LyX_1.0_PR.html>.

What is LyX?. 27 June 2001. 4 April 2002. Available: <<http://www.lyx.org/about/intro.php3>>.

Figures

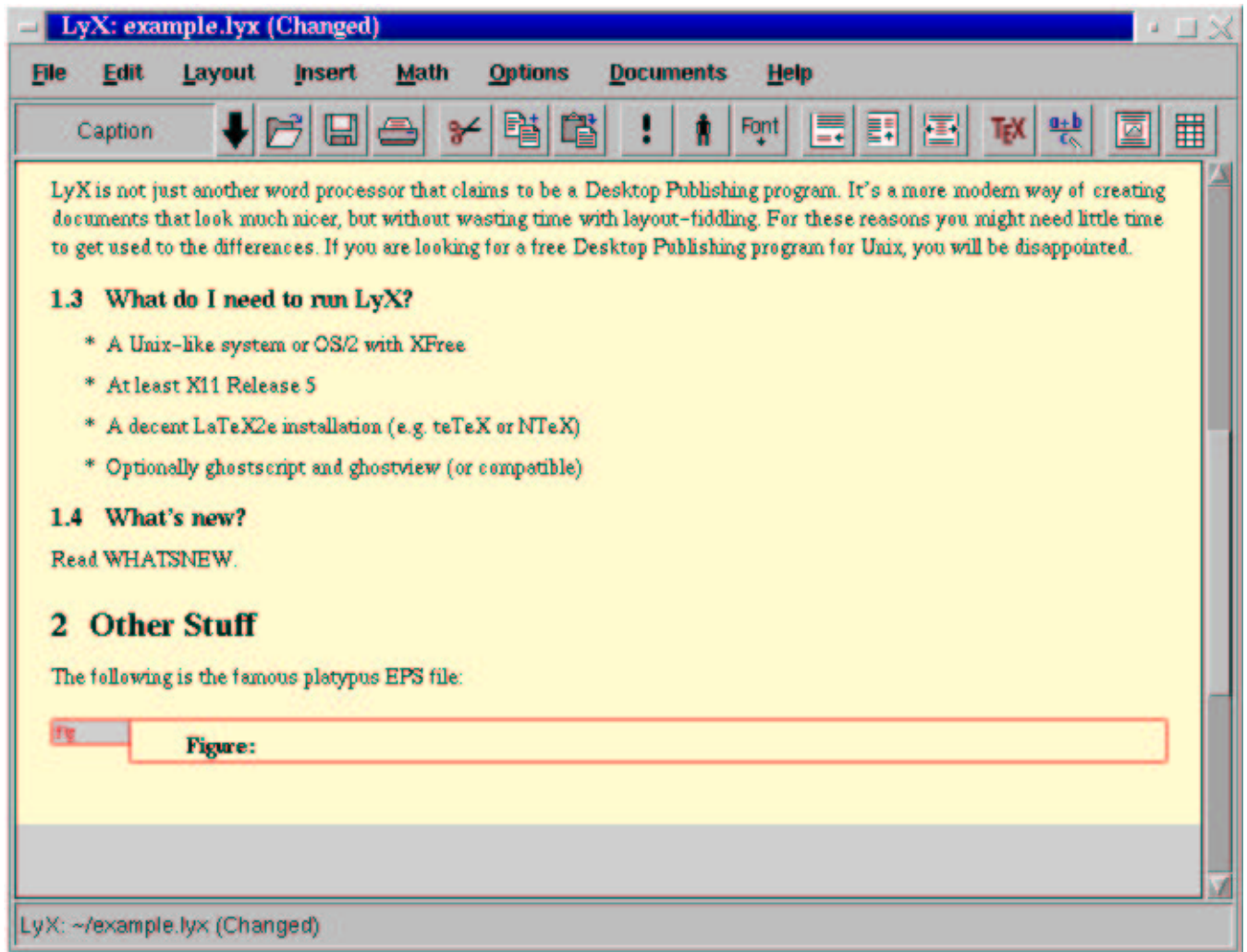


Figure 1 – Screenshot of LyX creating an example file (taken from the LyX graphical tour).

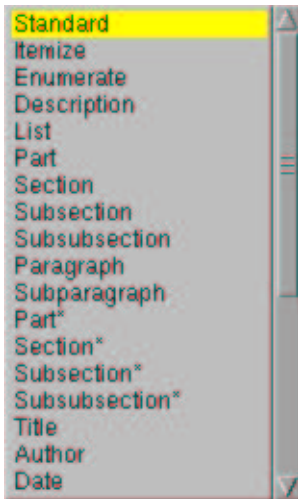


Figure 2 – An example of some of the different ways that LyX allows its users to classify data.