

Creative prose writing with Celtx

WRITERS UNBLOCKED



Sandor Jackel, Fotolia

Whether you plan to publish a comic or a manuscript, you need to manage a volume of material. Enter Celtx, which combines a database and text editor into a comprehensive tool. **BY ANDREAS KNEIB**

When you are ready to sit down and write that book you always think about, you will probably want some help getting organized. In this article, I will examine Celtx [1], a tool that helps you compose comics, radio dramas, movie scripts, novels, or plays.

Installation

Installing Celtx is easy, and it works right out of the box. In the download section of the Celtx project page [4], you will find program packages for Windows, Mac, the Eee PC, and Linux.

After downloading Celtx, you can unpack the tarball in the shell by typing `tar xvzf Celtx.tar.gz`, then type `cd celtx` to change to the newly create directory. When you get there, type `./celtx` to launch the writing tool.

Getting Started

On launch, Celtx comes up with a clear-cut splash screen (Figure 2) that gives you a couple of options. On the left side of the window, Celtx offers a selection of project templates that cover topics such

as text, movie, theater, comic, and radio play. The right side of the splash screen offers a selection of classical works prepared as examples – such as the H. G. Wells' radio play *War of the Worlds* or Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* – that will give you an excellent overview of what Celtx offers.

After selecting Wilde's play, you will see a number of tabs in the left-hand sidebar. The tabs give you a clear overview of the wide range of fields involved in producing a play. For example, the *Stageplay* tab contains the literary work with acts, setting descriptions, and dialogs in a text editor.

The editor might seem spartan, but it works in an intelligent way with the use of conventions and indenting that distinguish a play or other literary scripts in printed format. This feature distinguishes Celtx from Emacs or other word processing software. For example, the software attempts to identify the format of any text you type as a *Dialog*, *Heading*, or *Figure*. If the editor fails to identify the format, you can choose the correct format from a pull-down menu on the left-hand side. Also, the editor has a function for converting the complete script, including the cover, to PDF format (see Figure 3).

Alternatives to Celtx

Besides Celtx, a number of other programs take a similar approach to facilitating the writer's daily grind. If you prefer a more Spartan approach, StorYBook [2] – a Java program – is a good choice, providing a good database that offers views and options to suit your individual requirements.

Amateur writers with serious ambitions might want to check out Writer's Café [3]. Installation is simple, and the software integrates seamlessly with the Gnome desktop. Writer's Café works with OpenOffice, is just as feature rich as Celtx, and offers many helpers and rules for users who are interested in learning the writer's trade from scratch. In contrast to its competitor, only the demo version is free; the full version of Writer's Café will set you back about US\$ 65 (EUR 41, £ 33).

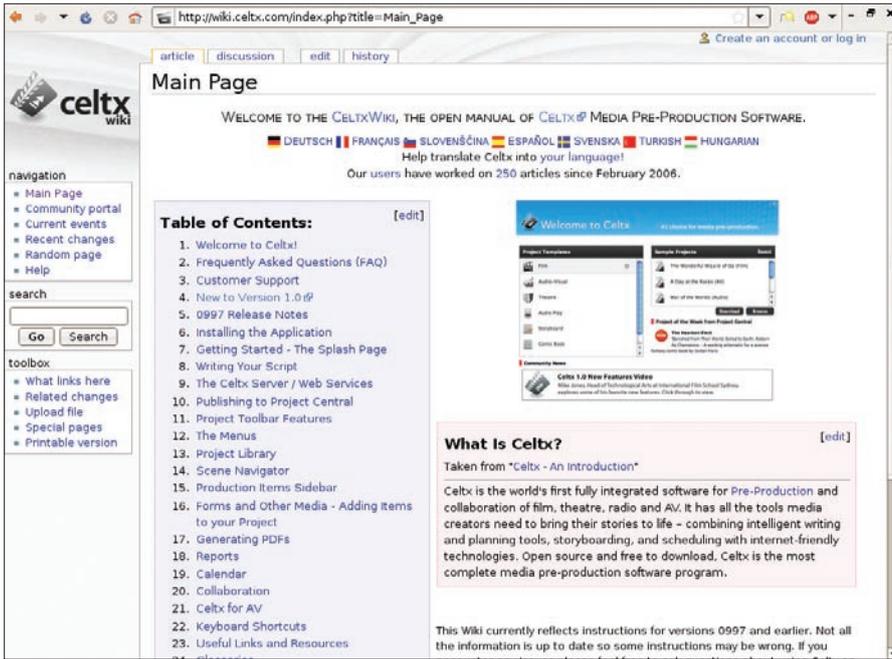


Figure 1: If you need help, check out the wiki on the Celtx website.

At first, the *Tea Images* tab, with its pictures of teacups and sandwiches, might seem slightly strange. In fact, this is a suggestion for the set in scene 1 (Figure 4). With this option, you can add sketches or photos to a project, scene by scene, and access this data whenever needed. The *Production Schedule* tab takes you to a calendar that lets you plan the production down to the minute. Finally, the *Master Catalog* gives you a database with resources such as photos and addresses of actors involved, locations, and set designs – all of which are organized in a clear-cut way, scene by scene. The next section tells you how to work with these resources.

The sidebar on the left of the window offers a further option for breaking down your material. In the case of Wilde's



Figure 2: Celtx displays a splash screen that offers a selection of project templates and examples.

play, you will see the *Project Library* in the top half. This contains a filesystem tree with the root of the project named *Importance of Being Earnest* containing various entries. The entries include tabs such as *Master Catalog*, *Stageplay*, *Character Catalog*, *Synopsis and Summary*, and *Oscar Bio*, a short biography of Oscar Wilde (Figure 5).

The second part of the sidebar changes its appearance or is hidden – depending on the context of the project element you are accessing. For example,

if you click the production equipment in *Tea Images*, you will see the play's *Sequences* in the lower half of the sidebar. The *Stageplay* view breaks the play down into acts and scenes. The lower part of the sidebar helps you navigate quickly through the acts and scenes via the view shown in the right pane.

Of course, you do not need to keep the tab names and descriptions – you can name the project library, the files, and the tabs to suit your own needs.

Authoring Time

Not every piece of work will be as large as this sample. Although Celtx is used mainly for drafting theater plays; scripts for radio, movies, and TV; and comics, the program can also help you to structure a longer piece of prose, such as a novella or novel. As a simple example, imagine you are planning a novel titled "The Magic Mountain" [5]. First you would choose the *Text* template on the Celtx welcome window. Celtx would then come up with the *Text* and *Main catalog* tabs, which you would see in the sidebar below *Project Library*.

The next step would be to assign a name to your project. To do so, just right-click the root directory of the project tree in the side bar, which is originally titled *Unnamed*. In the context menu, select *Rename* and enter "The Magic Mountain" in the dialog that then appears.

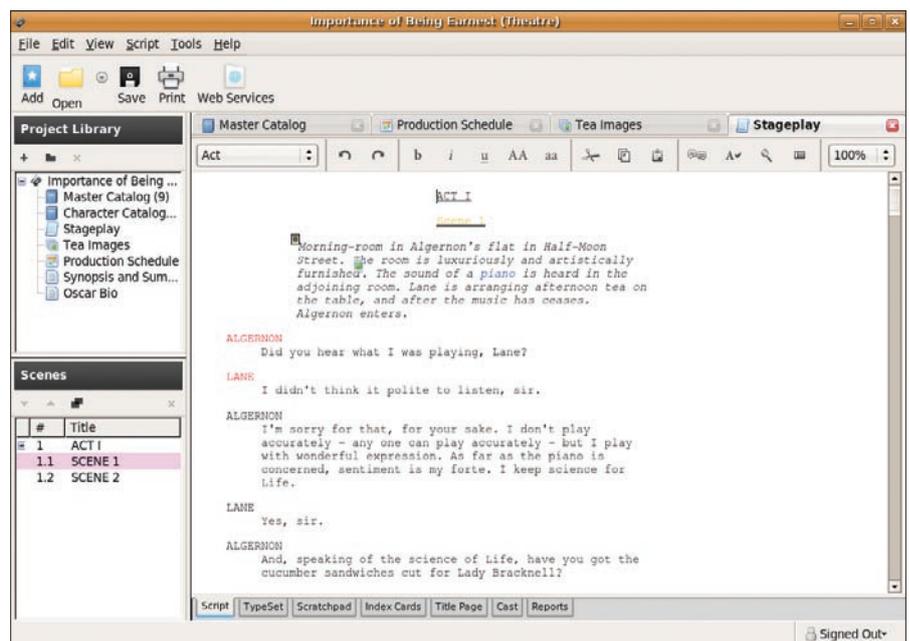


Figure 3: The program's text editor offers a number of extras, such as automatic format identification and a PDF converter.

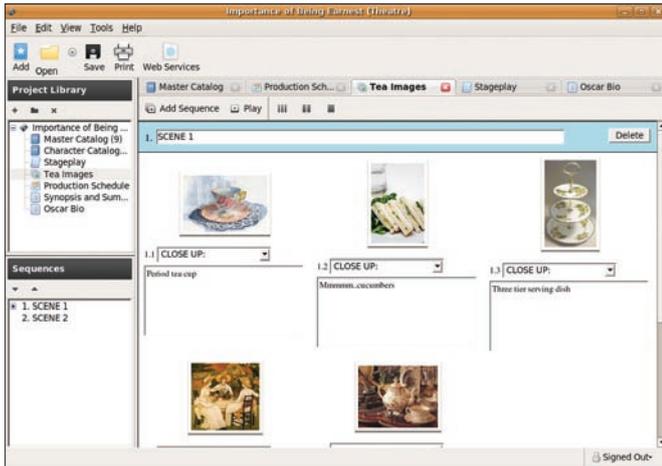


Figure 4: If you are planning a play, you can collect the set design elements in the Tea Images folder.

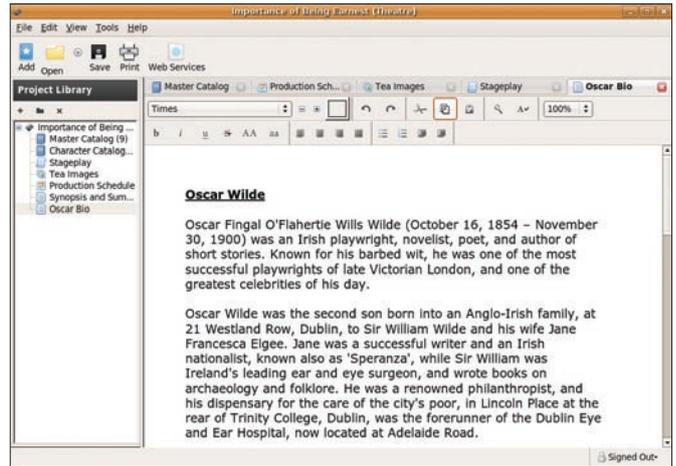


Figure 5: The sample Oscar Wilde play in Celtx includes a biography of the Irish author.

Clicking the *Main Catalog* tab opens a list with the headings *Name*, *Category*, *Description*, *Tags*, and *Media*. The + *Add* button lets you add elements to the empty list, such as *Characters*, *Scene Details*, or *Location*. The element list contains all kinds of entries, but you might be able to do without fields like *Costumes* or *Stunts* for a novel.

Because a good story depends greatly on powerful characters, you will want to select *Characters* and think of a name, which you then type into the text box in the element window – say *Hans Castorp*. The right window now tiles horizontally with the tab *Character: Hans Castorp*. In the fields, you can enter this character’s characteristics.

The field labels are self-explanatory. Here you can add an image to the *Media* field – a portrait of the character perhaps. The *Detailed description of body*, *Motivation*, and *Background to character* fields round off the image of your novel character.

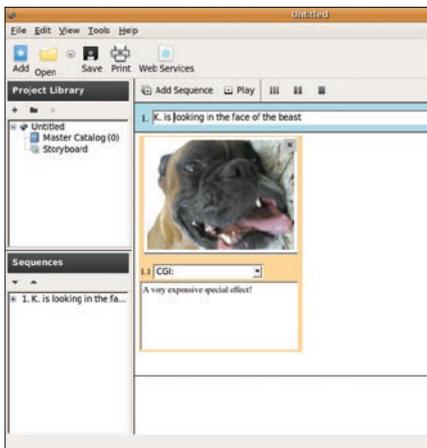


Figure 6: Compiling the story scene by scene.

To complete the *Characteristics*, you also need to consider the character’s main role in your story: this could be the *Protagonist*, *Antagonist*, *Best Friend*, or something completely different.

At this point, you can add one character after another to your narrative, as well as multiple *Locations*; however, if you click *Map of scene* in the *Address* section, the program will launch your web browser and take you to Google Maps.

Adding a *Scene details* element lets you define precisely what happens in which scene, who the protagonists and antagonists are, what their motivations are, and whether they reach these objectives in the scene. This element is important to a story, in that good material always has scope for conflict.

To create a storyboard, including a short description of all its sequences, click the plus sign (+) in the sidebar or click the *Add* button in the menu. Again, you can choose from a list of elements – in this case, you need the *Storyboard* – which you might recognize from your first steps with the Oscar Wilde example. Press the *Sequence* button to add one sequence after another (Figure 6). For example, 1. *Hans Castorp takes the train from Hamburg to Davos*, 2. *Hans Castorp arrives in the sanatorium in Davos*, and so on, until your story unfolds in front of your eyes – all you need to do now is write it.

But That’s Not All, Folks ...

If you need to take a break from your work, select *Save Project* in the *File* menu at the top of the Celtx window.

If you are collaborating on the project with various artists or authors, you can upload your co-production to a Celtx server. The program offers a wizard to guide you through the formalities of logging on. To reach the service, click the *Web Services* button in the tool’s taskbar. On top of this, Celtx offers a wiki, a forum, and a video tutorial. To access these resources, launch the matching options with your web browser in the *Help* menu.

Conclusions

Celtx is a feature-rich program, but despite this, the learning curve is not too steep: Computer newcomers should have no trouble navigating around the program, thanks to the intuitive interface. Of course, Celtx can’t take one responsibility off your shoulders – that of being creative and brave enough to put your own ideas down on paper. ■

INFO

- [1] Celtx project homepage: <http://celtx.com/>
- [2] Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Love of the Last Tycoon*. 1941. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Love_of_the_Last_Tycoon
- [3] StorYBook website: <http://storybook.intertec.ch/>
- [4] Writer’s Café: <http://www.writerscafe.co.uk/>
- [5] Celtx download page: <http://celtx.com/download.html>
- [6] Mann, Thomas. *The Magic Mountain*. 1929. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Magic_Mountain