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The monthly GNU Column

BRAVE GNU WORLD

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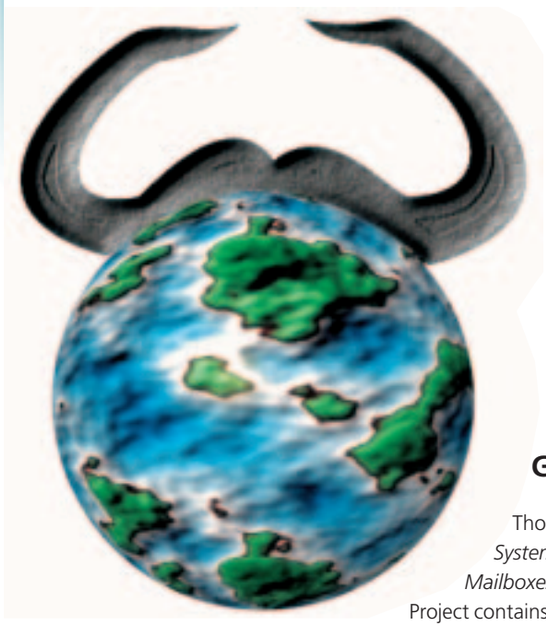

Welcome to another issue of Georg's Brave GNU World, where we reveal news about several projects which you may not have heard of yet.

GNU Pipo BBS

Those who believe *Bulletin Board Systems* (BBS), also often referred to as *Mailboxes,* are dead, are mistaken. The GNU Project contains the GNU Pipo BBS, a BBS under the GNU General Public License.

The ancestry-line of the GNU Pipo BBS reaches over YAWK (Yet Another Wersion of Citadel) back to Citadel, although it is completely independent code-wise. In fact it was a disagreement with Kenneth Haglund, author of YAWK, because of copyright-problems that triggered the development of the GNU Pipo BBS.

The original development-team were Gregory Vandenbrouck and Sebastien Aperghis-Tramoni who worked on the GNU Pipo BBS with help from volunteers like Sebastien Bonnefoy. After Gregory resigned, Sebastien Aperghis-Tramoni became the official maintainer of the project.

The GNU Pipo BBS contains support for forums, direct messaging, mail, chat, Web access and bots. For the amusement of the users, the bots come in different personalities like a parrot, a dog or a pseudo-user.

It's interesting to note that these juiced-up BBS-systems might offer users a viable alternative to Web portals as a *homebase* on the Net.

The GNU Pipo BBS is ready for production use and is being used by the Atlantis BBS in Marseilles, France. But since Pipo contains a significant amount of old code, Sebastien plans a code freeze in order to revise the code. The use of libraries especially is to be increased, since in some places the wheel has been reinvented - which is not good for the maintainability of the code.

The only really weak point is the documentation. The system does have system messages in different languages, but the code still requires better comments. Also the homepage and the manual require authors and translators.

Larswm

larswm is a window manager by Lars Bernhardsson that is interesting for several reasons:

First of all, purists should expect to fall in love with it, because it is very simple and minimalistic in the way it looks and uses resources. It is solely based on ANSI C

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with standard Xlib-functions and completely avoids using widget libraries like GTK+ or Qt.

But more importantly, it offers an alternative to the known, windows-like desktops. Even though these are widely spread, the user interface is definitely something where innovative concepts are refreshing.

The Free alternatives like KDE or GNOME essentially limit themselves to imitating the Windows desktop, although KDE is much closer to the original than GNOME. This is not an argument against KDE or GNOME, because they make the shift to GNU/Linux much easier and open avenues that were previously closed.

But GNU/Linux especially, is a platform that is well suited to innovative user interfaces and larswm gives new impetus, following its motto: "Because managing windows is the window manager's job!"

The desktop is split into two parts. The left part is bigger and normally contains a single window possessing the focus, which means that key presses and other input are directed into this window. The right side contains the rest of the windows as equally sized tiles, which is the reason larswm is called a 'tiled window manager'.

The keyboard support is also very good - if only using key driven applications, the fingers never have to leave the keyboard.

larswm definitely takes time to get used to, but it does have a well-deserved group of fans and everyone interested in alternative concepts should definitely give it a try.

There is one problem about larswm, however. Since it is derived from the 9wm, it was forced to use its rather ugly licence. This licence does speak of Free Software, but there are clauses that most likely make it incompatible with the (L)GPL. Also it is legally weaker, as the right to modification is only granted implicitly - just as the protection of freedom.

The project was officially finished in January 2001 by the author. larswm has been an experiment to try a new user interface concept. In the long run, he hopes to be able to replace all 9wm code with his own so that larswm will become a truly independent window manager. This could also help in solving the license problem. Additionally, Lars hopes to inspire other authors of window managers and to motivate them to implement similar concepts in their programs.

Some of the We Run GNU logos available.

GNUstep

GNUstep is an object-oriented framework and toolkit for program development, that is already successfully being used on many platforms. The function of a toolkit is to supply prefactored components for the graphical user interface so programs can be written faster and more effectively; also programs based on a certain toolkit have a similar look and feel. Two classic examples of toolkits are GTK+ and Qt.

GNUstep is based on the original OpenStep-specification by NeXT, Inc. (now Apple), so it profits from years of professional experience especially by NeXT Computer Inc. and Sun Microsystems Inc.; the API is very high-level and well-defined. By now there are several success stories where developers were able to write complex applications with GNUstep in minimal time.

It is also very helpful that GNUstep provides high level APIs around some of the best Free Software packages like gmp, OpenSSH and tiff. Additionally, it gives the term WYSIWYG new meaning, as GNUstep uses a common imaging model called Display PostScript, which is related to the Postscript printer language, for all graphical output.

Although the GUI is still in the beta stage, it is ready for production use and people successfully do so. Developers not afraid of something that is a little different from the rest should feel encouraged to give GNUstep a try.

Currently, development is mostly undertaken by three to four people with a group of 30 to 40 developers committing bugfixes, patches and comments. The libraries are published under the GNU Lesser General Public Licence – tools and isolated programs use the GPL.

At the moment, development is focused on completion of the GUI and a port to MS Windows. Since GNUstep is API-compatible with MacOS X (Cocao), it is already possible to develop programs for Unix and MacOS X parallel. With a port to Windows, programs could be developed for all three platforms simultaneously.

Also interesting is the GNUstep Web part, which uses a system similar to the Apple WebObjects and makes it easy to create dynamic Web pages with connections to databases. Even though this part is still rather new, it is already almost completely usable.

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W3Make

The XML Web publishing system, W3Make, by Stefan Kamphausen, is one of those small but rather useful projects. In this case it should prove useful for users of small to middle-sized Web pages.

Many XML-based approaches like, for instance saxon, allow only a single input file, so automatic linking is lost. Thanks to W3Make several XML source files can be piped through an XSL stylesheet with the help of saxon and written into several HTML output files.

The central core is a GPL-licensed Perl script that parses W3Makefiles. As the name already suggests, these are rather similar to the standard Makefile syntax, which allows you to use the Makefile mode of your favorite editor to edit them.

The author himself is using it successfully for his employer's websites and his personal homepage. It is definitely ready for production use. What he would like to include in future releases is a link checker that will canonically detect relative, absolute and local links and transcribe one into the other. Also he plans to start using the Perl XML::* modules instead of the saxon XSL parser. While making that shift, he is considering creating a plugin interface so it becomes possible to use DSSL instead of XSLT.

OpenWebSchool

Wilfried Romer and Hans-Peter Prenzel started the OpenWebSchool project in Berlin, Germany. The goal is to establish cooperation between elementary and high schools and make school resources available online.

Based on the principle of Free Software using the GNU General Public License and the GNU Free Documentation License, students of the higher grades create learning units for students of the lower grades and elementary schools.

This allows the students of higher grades to gain experience in program development and Web programming. Thinking about pedagogical aspects when creating the units also helps students to reflect on their own way of learning. Additionally, the project introduces students to computers and the Internet via topics that normally have no direct connection with these areas.

Students of the lower grades and elementary schools gain an interesting addition to the normal classes that also helps in familiarising them with the medium.

The website, central point of the OpenWebSchool, already contains some lessons in different topics, but due to the nature of the project and its youth, it is of course not complete. There is a need for more developers and the usability could also be improved.

The OpenWebSchool is definitely a very promising project that will most probably see re-implementation in other countries. An international cooperation, where students of one country create units for their native language to be used by students of other countries, seems to be the next logical step.

Free Software Foundation Europe update

As covered in issue five, a group of progagonists of Free Software is currently creating the European sister organization of the FSF.

By now the original team consisting of Peter Gerwinski, Bernhard Reiter, Werner Koch and myself has been joined by Frederic Couchet, Alessandro Rubini, Jonas Oberg and Loic Dachary; the next step to enlarge the team is already planned.

The central point of our work in the past weeks has been finding the right organisational structure and realising it with the constitution. Since we consider transparency to be very important, we'd like to introduce some results at this point.

In the middle of the FSF Europe is a central organization, the so-called *Hub*, which provides the European coordination, the office and all tasks that can be centralised. Connected to the Hub are national organisations that work on the local tasks and provide local points of contact for politics and press.

In order to be independent of popularism, the membership policy of the FSF Europe follows that of the FSF. New members are only being appointed by a majority of the current members.

To allow working together with volunteers better and more closely than the model, the local organisations, the so-called *Chapters*, are in close contact with societies which are open to everyone in general.

Those organisations, called *FSFE Associate Organisations*, do a lot of the basic work and are in very close contact with the Free Software Foundation Europe. As it is possible to have Associate Organisations with different orientations, there can be several in one country.

Very often, these Associate Organisations are also tied to the FSF Europe Chapters personally. A good example for this is France, where Fredeic Couchet as the President of APRIL is also FSFE-Chancellor, which is the highest representative of the FSFE in France. APRIL itself has been established in France for several years now and has been doing valuable work there. It has now joined the network as an Associate Organisation of the FSF Europe.

In this way existent local structures are being protected and networked with each other through the FSF Europe. Additionally this allows everyone to work closely with the FSF Europe.

The personal structure is designed in such a way that all members of the FSF Europe are members of the Hub and meet once a year. At these meeting the

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guidlines binding all parts of the FSFE are discussed and decided. Every second year the Europe-wide positions of president and vice-president and the 'head of office', who is responsible for all office-related matters, are elected.

The election of the local representatives, the chancellor and vice-chancellor, is done by the local chapters at their yearly meetings.

The responsibilities of the president and his deputy, the vice-president, are the political and public work on the European scale, the coordination of the Europe-wide cooperation and on demand the support of the chancellors in their tasks.

This structure has been written down into a constitution with the help of a lawyer and, at the time of writing, it is at the tax authorities in Hamburg, Germany to be checked for the granting of charitable status.

After the last necessary steps have been performed to complete the legal founding, the main target will be the creation of the local organisations. The Germany, France, Italy and Sweden Chapters are already being prepared, Austria and the U.K. should probably not take too long as well.

Parallel to this, it will also be my task to introduce the Free Software Foundation Europe into discussions and speeches and to establish contact with local organisations and politics. If you would like to meet with me at one of these occasions, you can inform yourself about my planned and fixed dates at my homepage.

Enough for this month

That's it for this month, as usual I'm asking for plenty of mail to the well-known address below and hope to receive interesting suggestions, ideas or project descriptions. ■

Info

Send ideas, comments and questions to Brave GNU World column@brave-gnu-world.org
Homepage of the GNU Project http://www.gnu.org/
Homepage of Georg's Brave GNU World http://brave-gnu-world.org
"We run GNU" initiative http://www.gnu.org/brave-gnu-world/rungnu/rungnu.en.html
GNU Pipo BBS homepage http://www.gnu.org/software/pipo/Pipo-BBS.html
Larswm homepage http://www.fnurt.net/larswm/
GNUstep homepage http://www.gnustep.org/
W3Make homepage http://www.skamphausen.de/software/w3make/
OpenWebSchool homepage (in German) http://www.openwebschool.de/
Free Software Foundation Europe homepage http://fsfeurope.org/
Conference Page - Georg C. F. Greve http://www.gnu.org/people/greve/conferences.html

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