World News

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■ Opposition against EU software patents

If the directive "com 2002-092" of the European Commission becomes European law, patents on software will be fully legalised in the member-states of the European Union as is already the case in the US.

As many members of the European Parliament feel uneasy about this, on 8th May the Greens/European Free Alliance group in the European Parliament organised a half-day's hearing titled "Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and software patenting" in the European Parliament in Brussels and a street festival "Free ideas for a free world" in front of the parliament building thereafter.

Speakers at the EU Parliament hearing included Richard Stallman for the keynote-speach, and scientists and CEOs/CTOs of six small and middle-sized IT companies. They informed the parlamentarians briefly about their positioning towards software patents.

Amongst the CEOs/CTOs were Opera's Håkon Wium Lie and David Axmark of MySQL AB. Today, dealing with US software patents results in an enormous waste of resources for SMEs, as Opera's CTO stressed. His company has been the target of "a constant stream of patent infringement letters", usually claiming the violation of US patents and asking to negotiate licensing fees. Evaluating these patents not only eats up a lot of resources. Usually, the effort proves to be a useless waste of time and money: "Either the patent is outside our field of work, or it is too broadly defined to be taken seriously." Only in very rare cases, licensing a patent actually becomes necessary.

In the aftermath, humor was used as a weapon against software patents: A funeral procession carried grave stones symbolising free software projects which died on patent violation, and a pantomime street theater expressed how software patents would allow programmers to be put on a leash by corporates, with the help of the law.

Furthermore, the winner of the "2nd Patent Violating Programming Contest" could take home a trophy, a "golden" loo. His 26 lines of code (whitespace and comments excluded) violate 62 of patent number EP1283486's 67 claims. The patent's subject: editing tables by column. Amongst the other submissions to the contest was some code violating a European patent granted in January 2003. It covers the *if-then-else* programming construction.

The hearing and the street fest were accompanied by two symposiums titled "From Legal Wordplay to Granted Software Patents" (7th May) and "Economic Impact of Software Patents" (8th May, after the street party) organised by the "Foundation for a Free Information Infrastructure" (FFII). ■

*http://swpat.ffii.org/events/2003/
europarl/05/index.en.html*
*http://wiki.ael.be/index.php/
ManifAgainstSoftwarePatents*
*http://www.elug.de/projekte/
patent-party/contest.html*

■ Free electronic voting system

When the Spanish Linux Users Group Hispalinux and the Universidad de León in February 2003 held the first "Votobit" congress on electronic voting, it was a pioneer experience in Europe. In the course of the conference Hispalinux presented a new and powerful client-server tool to use in modern electronic voting systems, *JFreeVote*.
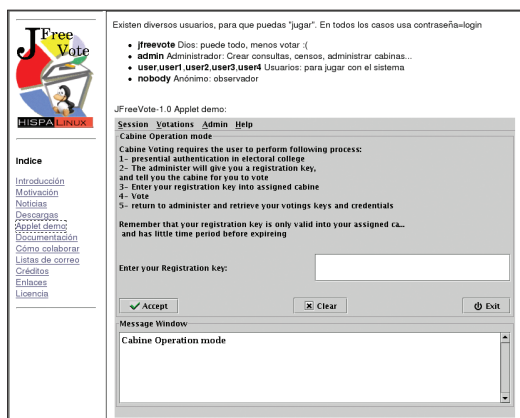
The failure tolerant software, written in Java, allows for secret ballots from home or from a polling booth. It implements voters' authentication (e.g. via PGP) as well as vote counting and ensures transaction atomicity.

The system comes with complete record logging and online-help (currently only in Spanish). Due to its modularity, new features can simply be added as modules.

On the client side, a Java enhanced web-browser does the job – as an alternative, the developers provide a lightweight X11 program. Hence, a simple Linux PC can be used as a balloting machine.

JFreeVote is distributed under the GPL which solves the important issue that in a democratic voting process, every step must be transparent. After the Government of Spain approved a new law about electronic signature in May, the chances are good to actually introduce the system as a new standard for democratic processes. ■

http://votobit.unileon.es/
*http://www.eurielec.etsit.upm.es/
~ jamc/work/jfreevote-1.0*

India gets Linux Supercomputer

Bangalore, the South-Indian city that many like to refer to as this country's "Silicon Valley", has commissioned what media reports have termed "arguably the most powerful single-platform Linux computing facility in the country".

The Altix 3000 system from "Silicon Graphics Systems India" (SGI) has been set up at the "Supercomputing Education and Research Centre" (SERC) of the "Indian Institute of Science" (IISc). Powered by 32 Intel Itanium-2 processors for high-end 64-bit computing, it is one of the first high performance computing platforms from a major global manufacturer to embrace free software. Some called it "penguin on steroids" when first launched in the US weeks ago. "The acquisition of this machine by the nation's premier educational institution for supercomputing research is also reflective of the increasing inroads that Linux is making into challenging computing applications via the campus computing community route," commented mainstream newspaper "The Hindu".

The system can also be expanded in the form of super clusters with up to 64 processors per node – which, it is suggested, may come in handy to address computation intensive tasks like gene mapping and bioinformatics which are part of SERC's agenda for the future. ■

Pakistan turning to Linux and Open Source

The Government of Pakistan is looking at Linux and "Free/Libre and Open Source Software" (FLOSS) in an attempt to reduce piracy and protect intellectual property rights (IPR). According to Pakistan's Business Recorder (*http://www.brecorder.com/*) a "Linux Task Force" is being formed under the auspices of the Ministry of Information Technology's "Technology Resource Mobilisation Unit" (TReMU), as a project sponsored by the Ministry and executed by "Comsats Institute of Information Technology" (CIIT).

Early in April, TReMU organized a seminar in Karachi to raise awareness about Linux and Open Source. The event was sponsored by IBM Pakistan, which is celebrating 50 years of service in the country. IBM Pakistan also used the occasion to distribute prizes to the winners of the Global IBM Linux Challenge that the company launched in 2002.

The Linux initiative comes in the wake of several discussions in official Pakistani circles on the issue of IPR and the need to adopt FLOSS as a national strategy. At the seminar, speakers stressed how FLOSS frees economically deprived entities from the burden of resorting to software piracy for their genuine software needs. TReMU hopes to provide an enabling environment to create a pool of Pakistani Linux expertise, which can then address issues like embedded software on this OS. ■

Brazilian free software co-operative

When thinking "co-op" one usually thinks of food and handicraft. But the principles of co-operatives – to treat people fairly, to encourage them to solve existing problems, and to provide products and services to meet customers' and producers' needs instead of focussing on making money – overlap to a huge extend with the principles of free software.

With the lately formed Brazilian "free solution co-operative" SOLIS ("Cooperativa de Soluções Livres") the first free software co-op came into being. SOLIS is an offspring of UNIVATES, a University center in Lajeado, a city in the South-Brazilian state of Rio Grande do Sul, which is known for a policy in favor of FLOSS, and consequently, all software produced by the almost 30 men and women forming the co-operative will be released under the GPL. Half of the "cooperados" work on free software projects inherited from UNIVATES, among them SAGU, software for academic administration, and GNUTECA, a library automation and catalog collaboration system. The other half provides local companies and institutions with training, deployment and customisation services for FLOSS. ■

http://www.solis.coop.br/
http://www.univates.br/freesoftware/

Conference rally

The middle of the year seems to be a very fruitful time for conferences and gatherings on FLOSS. 17th/18th May Ukrainian Open Source developers and users met in Kyev to discuss localisation problems and to present projects.

From 5th to 7th June, the "IV Forum International Software Livre" at the "Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio Grande do Sul" in Porto Alegre/Brasil invites an international audience to listen to multi-lingual talks by e.g. Miguel de Icaza, David Axmark or Slackware's Patrick Volkerding. Europeans need to travel even less to listen to Miguel who will also attend this year's "GNOME User and Developer European Conference" (GUADEC) at Trinity College Dublin/Ireland, on 16th–18th June.

Despite SARS, Asian Open Source activists are busily organising conferences. To "provide a window for world-wide researchers and developers to understand the Open Source activities in Taiwan" is the aim of the "3rd International Conference on Open Source" (ICOS) in Taipeh 25th to 27th July, 2003. The "Asian Enterprise Open Source Conference 2003" in Singapore might already be luckier in terms of attracting international speakers with their call for paper ending 1st August: The annual conference and expo which started out as the "Singapore Linux Conference" in 1999 will be held 29th to 31st October, 2003.

Open Source developers from Scandinavia who wonder how to spend the summer hacking, might register for SHE, the "Swedish hacking event" in Ljusdal 21st to 24th August. Neighboring country Norway hosts three interesting gatherings in a row, in difference to the Swedes, provide their information in English. For the first time, COSINO, the "Conference On free Software In Norway" will be held in Oslo, followed by a Debian hacking session called "Debcamp" from 12th to 17th July, and the "Debconf 3" from 18th to 20th July. ■

http://osdn.org.ua/conference/2003/0517/
http://www.softwarelivre.org/forum2003/
http://www.guadec.org/
http://twopensource.org/icos03/en/
http://www.asiaosc.org/article_43.html
http://she.cx/
http://www.nuug.no/cofsino/