5th International Open Source Forum in Porto Alegre/Brazil
It's Brazil's Time

The world is changing – and Brazil is proud to be a driving force in this process. The lesson to be learned from a huge Open Source conference in Porto Alegre is all about optimism. **BY HELIO CHISSINI DE CASTRO**

Strange times, we are living in: while the Northern hemisphere engages in huge battles on the frontier of software patents, while it is worried about its future in technology, the other hemisphere decides that the rules are changing, and no one can stop the move of its people. A noise that sounds like the self-proclaimed third world is making a dream coming true that many in the first world are dreaming.

The echoes of this move are exactly what we saw at the 5th International Open Source Forum FISL (Fórum Internacional de Software Livre) in Porto Alegre, Brazil (*http://www.softwarelivre. org/forum2004*). Some of the visitors from Europe and North America shook their heads in disbelief when confronted with the statistics: More than 4500 registered participants from 35 countries attended more than 100 panels and tutorials held during the four event days June 2 through 5, 2004. Of these, the first day overlapped with the last day of the 4th International Debian Conference DebConf (*http://www.debconf.org/debconf4/*) in the same city, making the event even more visible and interesting. According to Martin Konold of the KDE project, FISL was larger than Linux-Kongress in Germany, Europe's biggest Open Source show. And yes, we had many of the Open Source stars there, among them John Maddog Hall (more and more becoming a Brazilian kind of guy), Lawrence Lessig and Jim Gettys.

After the Brazilian government's large-scale Open Source software training for as many employees as possible a couple of weeks before (see Issue 44, p13), there was some apprehension in the Open Source community that this could become yet another vaporware program. But no, things are really changing, as the FISL showed: Virtually everyone was there, sharing one community, sharing one goal. Given the fact that this year sees local elections in several major Brazilian cities, no one was surprised that political aspects were a major topic in talks and conversations. Consequentially, one of the surprises the event was to produce was about politics.

What's your name, Linux?

This surprise became manifest in form of a panel chaired by Porto Alegre local Leonardo Vaz, a result of a growing movement started by him. It aims to stop the fighting within the Open Source and free software community in order to avoid a political takeover, and to unite all "tribes". You know them all, the advocacy groups formed by users sharing an often fanatic belief in their favorite distro like Debian, Slackware, Conectiva. Probably you also know local developer groups like Python-br, KDE, Gnome, linked together in stupid rivalry.

This panel brought together representatives from all these Brazilian groups on the same level, in the best hacker spirit, and urged the large crowd (many even sitting on the floor) to stop their animosities. A feeling that this would unite the Brazilian Open Source software movement was in the air.

Let's take the endless GNU/Linux story, which too often takes on religious forms. The panel surprisingly enough, left participants with a sense of why GNU/Linux isn't the appropriate brand for the operating system, and not even for distributions built around this OS. Why? Because branding something with its licences (or the major contributors), would mean to name Linux something like GNUApacheBSDXFreeMIT…/Linux. Not just GNU. Fair is fair.

Another issue discussed at this panel was the question of how to protect the Open Source community from the influence of political interest groups and takeovers. Let aside the necessity to interact with government officials, the Brazil Open Source community could end up in a position where many people talk about OSS, but don't act.

Finally, even the rivalry between several development groups was addressed, and, for the first time Brazilian Open Source tech writers and community representatives were talking together, with one tongue. Their message: don't militate against your rival, help him and create an atmosphere of good competition (and go out and have a beer together).

There's no place like $HOME

And it worked: At the User Group place, a mingling floor for distro, user group and development projects, we saw KDE proponents being approached by visitors and asked to line up for a picture in front of the Gnome banner. Guess what: they agreed without a single sign of embarrassment.

We watched everybody freely transiting from booth to booth, no matter what kind of booth it

Figure 1: Stylish Apple laptops are LinuxChix' favorite.

was. It was hard to spot a booth occupied by only its own staff, there was always some "alien" around. Even government officials mixed with anybody on a level of equality. Geek met politician, met nerd, met hacker. And chimarrão, a traditional preparation of herbal (mate) tea was there for everyone.

We saw the KDE booth becoming a German embassy, when besides the two German KDE guys on booth duty, a lot of Brazilians arrived, speaking fluent German, among them even guys from the cities of Rio Grande do Sul. A couple of Debian folks from Germany added to the picture.

And finally we observed a Linux user group from Argentina partying with Brazilian LUGs on the day of a Brazil vs. Argentina soccer match (which is kind of a religious thing there).

It is worth mentioning that the booths were organized the Brazilian way, meaning without requirements on the level of perfection. Helpers pointed out: "This is your place!", and people arranged everything in their own fashion.

Interviews, interviews, ...

Unnecessary to say that a huge and colorful event like this would come to the attention of the media. But this time it wasn't the regular computer press only, but a renowned and hip program from Brazilian culture television called "Vitrine". They recorded interviews over interviews in a fresh and funny style, and things grew beyond expectations when geeks started to show up. It was easy to tell that the TV folks had a good time, too.

Figure. 2: Television was everywhere.

Photos: Flávio Moreira, http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/

Figure 3: Brazilian Open Source events can easily compete with those in Europe and North America.

And they weren't the only camera team at a time when documentary fever has taken over Brazil. About 10 or more were going to feature FISL, and even two foreign teams were there. In addition, the event saw the official launch of two Open Source and Linux oriented print magazines, and it got a lot of non-tech media coverage. For the latter it was especially interesting to see how the Open Source movement was affecting culture, economy and politics, which leads to the major presentation of the conference.

Read, hear, use, copy, sample!

It was, of course, about "Creative Commons". In a major move by the Brazilian Ministry of Culture, Brazil, together with Finland and Japan were the first countries to fully adapt the Creative Commons licenses to their legal systems (Germany followed at the "Wizards of OS" conference, *http://www.wizards-of-os.org/index.php?L = 3*, in Berlin, a couple of days after FISL). At FISL, Brazil went further on this path and launched a new license called Recombo, a DJ dream. A license that allows you to sample and to legally reuse any part of music.

Its legal definitions are the work of the Fundação Getulio Vargas Law School in Rio de Janeiro, and project leader Ronaldo Lemos da Silva Júnior himself approached Brazilian's Minister of Culture, the famous musician Gilberto Gil, making him buy the idea. It was Lawrence Lessig's turn to hold the laudation, poking fun at the self proclaimed free nations who are still afraid to use the power of freedom. After further talks from Brazilian representatives and John Maddog Hall (who received a 3 minute standing ovation from the crowd), the long awaited Minister of Culture arrived. It's impossible to describe how proud everyone was about this being the first time, a minister had attended an Open Source event with innovations of his own, and not only with a boring speech. Due to a tight schedule, he wasn't available for interviews or pictures afterwards, leaving not only Linux Magazine frustrated.

Another important speech came from Luís Nassif, one of the most respected economists from Brazil and a columnist for one of the major national newspapers. He, a former critic of the Open Source economy model (and still not fully convinced), has been looking at it from a slightly different angle after he learned from Sérgio Amadeu, the head of the governmental Brazilian Institute of Technology, how well structured Open Source software is. Did you ever think a government official would convince an economist about Open Source?

But the world is changing, and Marcelo Taz, a well-known Brazilian TV entertainer, put it in words when addressing an audience of almost 2000 people at the Creative Commons panel: "Look, everybody, I am here, in 2004, at a computer event, sitting with economists, musicians, lawyers in front of a huge crowd that looks like a rock'n'roll crowd, speaking about freeing copyrights, and our Minister of Culture is Gilberto Gil!!!" ■