The Monthly GNU Column

BRAVE GNU WORLD

This column looks into projects and current affairs in the world of free software from the perspective of the GNU Project and the FSF. In this issue, we focus on mind maps and the demand for free software at the European Commission's 6th Framework Program.

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Mind mapping involves studying relationships among various terms and thoughts, and visualizing those relationships to provide a better overview. Thus, a mind map reflects a very personal and specific view of the person who created it.

KDissert

If you are interested in learning more about the underlying techniques and concepts of mind mapping, the Wikipedia entry at [1] is certainly a big help. Kdissert creator Thomas Nagy takes mind mapping a step farther with his contribution: in contrast to classical

mind mapping applications, such as View Your Mind (vym) or Freemind [3], KDissert uses mind maps to generate documents.

These documents are built from the individual elements on a card. Although the complete framework gives users a visible overview, the tool gradually builds up a natural internal structure, which grows as if it has a life of its own. Thanks to its extremely intuitive GUI, KDissert is easy to learn. In fact, half an hour should be quite sufficient to master the basic operations.

Mind maps are always composed of graphically linked nodes, and KDissert is no exception (Figure 1). Each node in KDissert represents a structural level within a document; this level can be a chapter, a section, a subsection, an image, and so on. Within the mind map, the font type, font size and color, images, and bullets help to identify nodes. More font types and bullets are available for text within individual nodes, including comments and links to external documents or Internet pages (Figure 2.)

But how does a mind map become a book? Enter the document generator, which manages the mind map sections and composes a document from them. Of course, this means enumerating the individual components, which is not typical of a mind map. For this reason, documents can always be viewed as tree diagrams that link the individual components.

There are nine very different output formats. Documents can be output as websites, Java applets, Latex books or articles, presentations in Prosper and Beamer format, as Impress or Writer documents for Open Office, or as text files. This helps users quickly find the right format for their work.

Thomas Nagy sees education as one of the major fields of application for KDissert, and he specifically refers to students. But he also views teachers, scientists, engineers, and business people as potential users. The fields of application range from traditional student work through to project management.

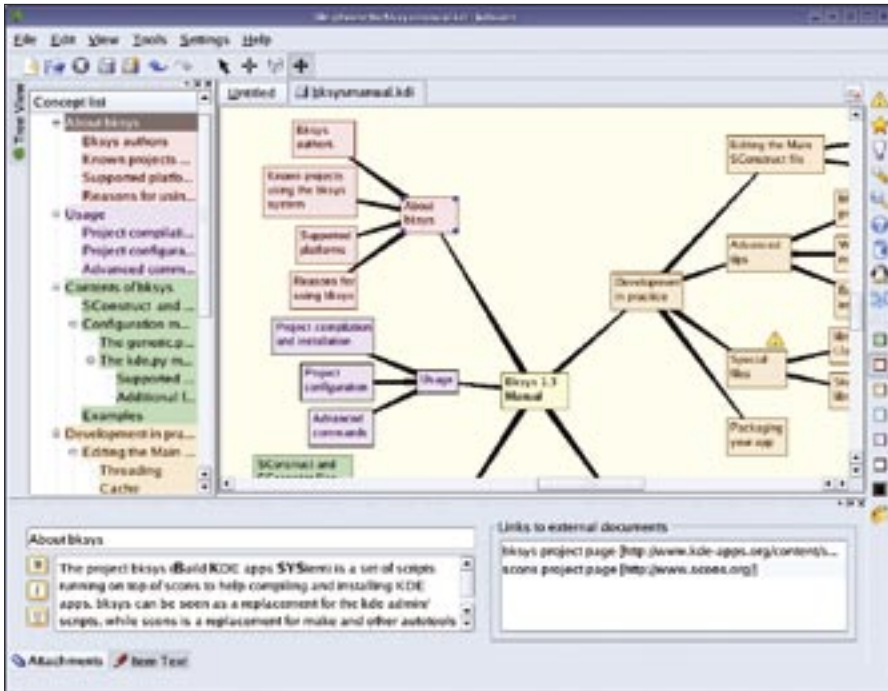As is so often the case, the development work was driven by Thomas' own

Figure 1: The KDissert mind mapping tool helps users organize complex topics and addition-ally allows users to generate documents from their maps.

personal requirements. Thomas' work involved mind maps, but he couldn't find a tool to convert mind maps to documents. This prompted him to start work on programming KDissert back in 2003. While working on the project, Thomas decided to integrate the tool with the KDE desktop, which made C++ the obvious choice of programming language. Thomas opted for Bksys [4] as the build system; this was a good choice for Thomas, as it implements Scons [5] for KDE. Scons replaces traditional makefiles with a Python-based build system. In contrast to traditional approaches, this simplifies the extremely complex requirements for building a KDE application placed on developers.

Of course, as a KDE application, KDissert gives users all the freedom of the General Public License (GPL). Although the KDissert source code is relatively young, according to the author, it is very mature and stable. Lots of useful extensions for the tool come to mind, but, as Thomas does not have time to author them himself, a bit of proactive involvement would not be amiss, if you have the time and skills.

Framework Program

Talking of being proactive: the European Commission is actively promoting European science and business within the scope of its framework program. Some 3.625 billion Euros will be devoted to Information Society Technologies (IST) throughout the duration of the sixth framework program [6]. Thanks to an initiative launched by the Free Software Foundation Europe (FSFE) in March 2002 [7], these funds will mainly be available for free software. If two comparable projects are competing for support, the free software project will be given priority.

As a result, the number of registered free projects has grown dramatically. As regards sustainable investments, this is a very good thing, however, many of the projects suffer from typical side effects of European business: inefficiency, incompetence, and egocentricity. Despite the free software label, not all projects actually produce free software, and often projects are founded simply to milk the cash cow. Even though a project might fail, those responsible for it will still proclaim their success, thus bluffing their way into the next round of subsidies.

The disillusioning business model that some institutes and enterprises follow has been a part of scientific and technological promotion for many years now. Unfortunately, the European Commission's move to subsidize free software is no exception; many developers who applied for grants on the basis of realistic and well-founded projects, and were turned down, are justifiably annoyed. But how can we put and end to the mudbath?

Building Consortiums

The first sign of a solution to the problem was to restrict grant applications to groups. Individual entities are not entitled to apply for grants from the program. The funds are aimed at European
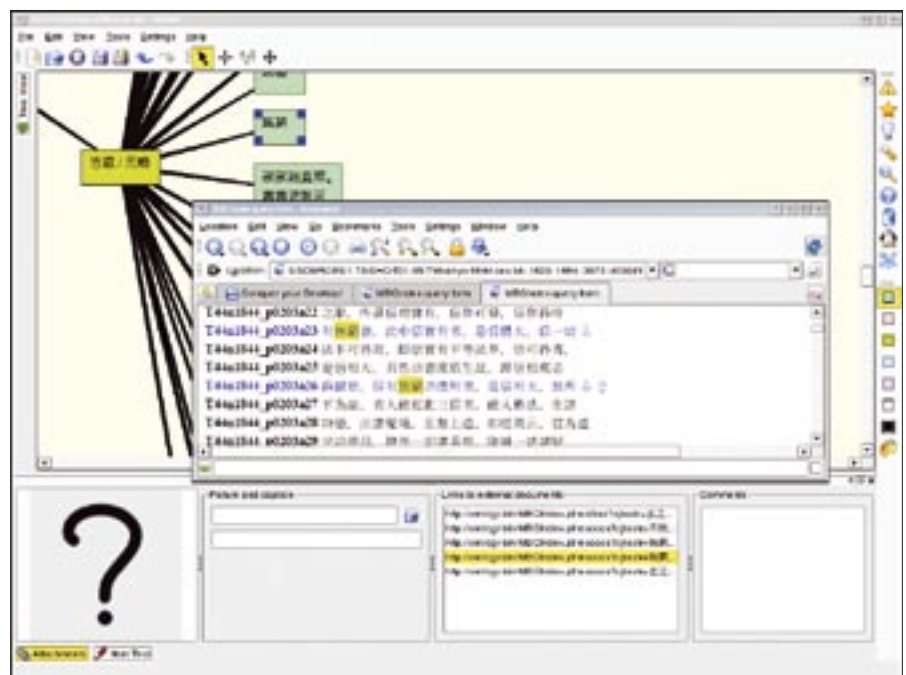

Figure 2: The KDissert mind mapping tool provides a variety of styles that use colors or bullets to distinguish between text sections and nodes.

Figure 3: While José Manuel Barroso, the President of the European Commission, is fighting for a common constitution for all EU member states, the members of the community devoted their time to promoting software projects in executive committees.

integration, and this means that so-called consortiums of at least five independent partners from at least three countries are required to apply.

There are three things that partners within a consortium can't afford to ignore: first, a project can take several years. Second, if a major partner quits, this can mean the end of the consortium, and third, the consortium is given the funds as a group, and it is left up to the group members to allocate funds as they deem appropriate.

After signing a contract with the European Commission, partners are closely tethered for quite a while. People involved in free software projects really need to ignore the enticement of purportedly easy money and take a good look at the other partners within the consortium. Are they really interested in free software, or did they suddenly discover their passion for free software after reading about the grants? Another less obvious question is, does the consortium have at least one partner capable of giv-

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ing the project direction?

The FSFE can help in this case: projects can seek partners via the mailing list at [8] and talk directly to provide orientation. If the project is a well-founded effort, the FSFE might even get involved as a partner. More than one consortium has incorrectly stated that the FSFE was involved, so you might like to verify statements like this by talking to the FSFE.

Evaluation

The second step towards funding is evaluation. Randomly selected experts review the entries and evaluate them on the basis of pre-defined schematics. But what is an expert? Basically, this can be anybody who applies online at [9] and has the necessary skills. Although the notes that accompany the application form state that special skills in the applicable fields are the major requirement for a successful application, my experience with Brussels-style Eurocracy leads me to expect that an academic title might be a big help towards getting on to one of the boards.

The evaluation process decides which projects will be receiving funds. It decides whether money will be put to good use or wasted. The more members of the free software community that register as experts, the better the chances are for good projects to meet with competent evaluators.

The European Commission coordinates the whole framework program at a political level. This includes decisions on strategic targets, or so-called calls, that is, precisely coordinated requests for projects concerned with specific topics. An appropriate call is another prerequisite for applying for funding.

Additionally, much of the Commission's political activity takes place within the IST division of the framework program, mainly in the form of work-

shops in Brussels, some of which are open, and others by invitation only. The participants are expected to bear the costs themselves, and there is no compensation for time lost. That's a pity, because who has the time and money to visit all these events in Brussels?

The level of competence of some contributions to these workshops is worrying. People refer to Linux 8.0 and to the fact that Linux is available under the GNU License or from Red Hat. People think that the GNU GPL is only valid within the USA and Germany, and there are justifiable calls for a competence center that people could call for more details. At least we can help out there: the Free Software Foundation Europe's phone number is +49 700 FSFEUROPE.

Being Proactive

We need more good software projects, more evaluators with knowledge of free software, and more people willing to get involved at the Commission level. All of these possibilities are open to anyone. You do not need to belong to an organization to be an evaluator. If you are interested in working as an evaluator and are not actively involved in a project, maybe you can do something on the political scene. Our initiative decides what kind of Europe we will live in. ∎

INFO
[1] Wikipedia entry on mind maps: *http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mindmap*
[2] Kdissert: *http://freehackers.org/ ~tnagy/kdissert/*
[3] Freemind: *http://freemind.sourceforge.net/wiki/ index.php/Main_Page*
[4] Bksys: *http://www.kde-apps.org/ content/show.php?content=19243*
[5] Scons: *http://www.scons.org*
[6] 6th EU Framework Program: *http://fp6.cordis.lu/fp6*
[7] FSFE activities on the Framework Program: *http://fsfeurope.org/ projects/fp6/fp6.en.html*
[8] FSFE mailing list for the 6th EU Framework Program: *http://mail. fsfeurope.org/mailman/listinfo/fp6*
[9] Definition of requirements for candidature as an expert on a Framework Program evaluation committee: *http://www.cordis.lu/experts/fp6_can-didature.htm*