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November proved to be an interesting month in the Linux and Free Software communities.

Things started out pretty normally, with another successful Ubuntu release and the accompanying "Ubuntu Below Zero" hacker gathering in Montreal. We also saw a new distribution from RedHat (their Enterprise Directory distribution) and some turbulent times for a couple of other vendors.

By the middle of the month, Microsoft was hinting that it might finally standardize the Microsoft Office file formats under an international body, leading some to wonder if they were trying to turn over a new leaf. But alas, it didn't last. As the month came to an end, Microsoft drew fire from the Free Software Foundation Europe (FSFE) in a scandal that many Free Software enthusiasts feel

Community Notes

SCHEMAS AND TIN FOIL

has tainted the UN World Summit on Information Society.

Open Microsoft Office?

Microsoft has hinted that it might release its proprietary document formats to an international standards body such as the ECMA International (the European association for standardizing information and communications systems) or even push for full ISO certification for their Office product's XML Schemas. Such a move has potential to be positive for Free Software if the Office formats are to truly be made open. In such cases, it would no longer be necessary to actively dissuade people from using Microsoft format attachments, for example, which could make it easier for Free Software applications to interoperate with Microsoft's office products.

However, the timing of this move follows the decision by the US State of Massachusetts to mandate the use of the OpenDocument format in government and is likely to be related – Microsoft doubtless doesn't want to lose out at the hands of Open Office when it comes to lucrative government contracts.

The community will take some convincing if it is to believe that Microsoft is truly seeking to release open standards to make the world a better place for interoperability. Only this past month, we've witnessed several conversation threads concerning kernel hackers who are seeking alternative ways to get at in-

formation that Microsoft has published under unacceptably restrictive licenses. It may surprise some readers to learn that Microsoft is a leading publisher of certain important technical documentation produced by various committees. They publish several important pieces of information concerning the ACPI standard, which has in the past led to the removal of some patches during kernel development, lest the information upon which they were based taint the kernel.

Just this past week, several developers argued over the right to use some Microsoft documentation to enhance support for the latest PC systems based around modern BIOS implementations. They'll take a little more convincing now that Microsoft is genuinely seeking to mend its ways.

Richard Stallman's Tin Foil Hat

The second phase of the UN World Summit on Information Society (WSIS) took place in Tunis from November 16-18, 2005. At the conference, representatives from 175 countries debated many of the



Figure 1: I met Richard Stallman for tea the last time he was in London. We chatted about hardware patents and digital security.

issues that affect the modern information age.

Among those present at the conference were Bruce Perens, Richard Stallman, and Mark Shuttleworth. Bruce documented much of the event in his blog (perens.sourcelabs.com), which includes one rather amusing incident involving tin-foil hats. It turns out that the security arrangements for the preceding “phase one” of the summit in 2003 had included the issuance of RFID cards to all those in attendance. Richard Stallman (RMS) was among those who had objected to this, which led to an agreement not to use RFID technology at the phase two meeting. Unfortunately, this promise was not kept, and it became obvious to RMS that his card had the user tracking technology implanted during its production.

Ever the melodramatic type, Richard decided to make a point out of this use of what he deems intrusive and dangerous technology by procuring an entire roll of aluminum foil and producing a shield to wear around his pass. He would remove it to pass through the scanners placed around the building, but was unwilling to accept the potential that people might be reading the RFID without his knowledge and tracking him around the grounds.

During his keynote speech, he even gave a talk about the RFID issue and passed the tin foil around for others to construct their very own pass protectors. Incidentally, RFID shields are likely to become more commonplace over time as more and more governments and organizations begin to use the technology. Future US passports will apparently be issued with RFID embedded information, but will likely have a layer of foil added within the outer binding covers to prevent them from being surreptitiously read without the owner’s knowledge.

Unfortunately for Stallman, UN security officials apparently weren’t so interested in the wider privacy debate surrounding RFID, or in issuing protectors, and they were somewhat unimpressed by Stallman’s peaceful protest in Tunis. They decided not to allow him to leave the room where he had been speaking, and then they wouldn’t allow him to enter into the next room, where he was due to speak, until the whole thing was cleared up with some high enough ranking official behind the scenes.

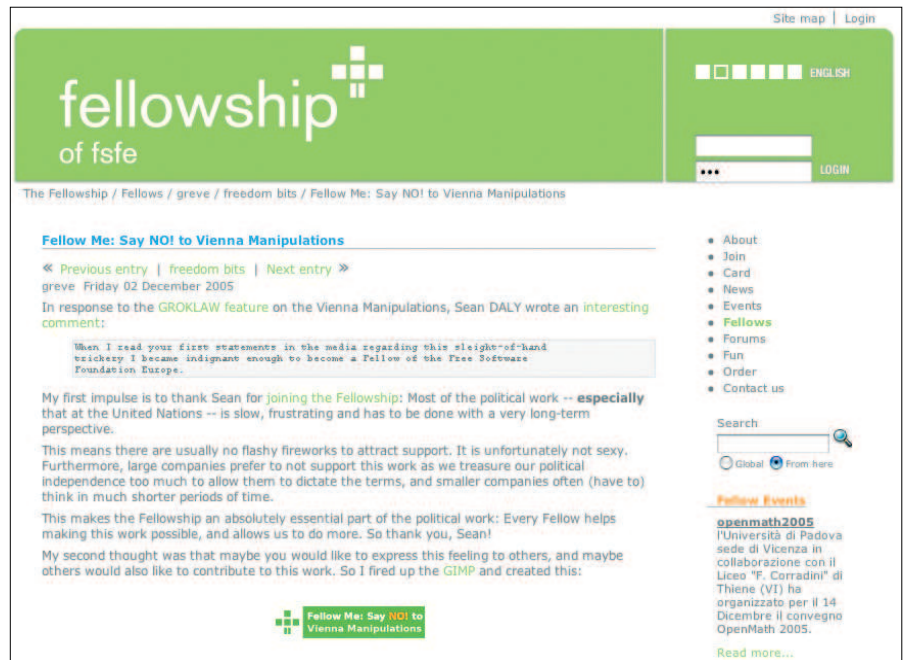


Figure 2: FSFE hopes the outrage over Microsoft’s apparent clout with the UN will help rally support for the FSFE fellowship program.

Perens notes in his blog that they had some limited diplomatic protection as UN delegates, which would have led to amusing headlines had Richard actually been detained for any period of time. Bruce reminded Richard that he had limited immunity while at the conference. To this, Richard wittily remarked that he should have used the opportunity to shoot one of the paid lobbyists against Free Software who had been bugging him again. Perens doubted that the immunity was that extensive, but there’s now little doubt UN security will be watching RMS even more closely from now on.

Vienna Manipulations

The president of the Free Software Foundation Europe (FSFE), Georg Greve recently drew attention to a document presented at the UN World Summit on Information Society (WSIS). The document, known as the Vienna Conclusions, made reference to Free Software as part of a wider analysis of issues affecting IT and creativity.

An original draft version of the document discussed how the Free Software model is changing the way people do business. According to the FSFE, the document originally had included the wording “Increasingly, revenue is generated not by selling content and digital works, as they can be freely distributed

at almost no cost, but by offering services on top of them. The success of the free software model is one example.” Microsoft was unhappy at the references to Free Software and has since admitted that it had references to Free Software removed from the final version of the document.

Such ability for Microsoft to demand semantic changes to UN documents has raised more than a few eyebrows. The FSFE is now attempting to draw attention to this practice and to encourage those in positions of authority to prevent it from happening in future. To this end, the FSFE has provided a website www.fsfe.org/fellows/greve/freedom_bits/fellow_me_say_no_to_vienna_manipulations, in which you can let everyone know what you think about Microsoft’s actions by pressing a button that says “Fellow Me: No more Vienna Manipulations.” (The “Fellow Me” is a reference to the FSFE’s fellowship program.)

For its part, Microsoft claims that it asked for the section to be deleted from the Vienna Conclusions because “it contains only a one-sided perspective of the ICT industry.” They continue, “The rationale for this is that the aim of free software is not to enable a healthy business on software but rather to make it even impossible to make any income on software as a commercial product.” More than a few groups successfully



Figure 3: Users tune in to Breezy at Ubuntu Below Zero.

making money out of Free Software were rightfully shocked by that last statement.

On the wire

Following the release of Breezy Badger, the Ubuntu folks have continued their campaign for world domination. Firstly with yet another successful conference – Ubuntu Below Zero, Montreal – and secondly, with a series of talks around the Northern Hemisphere by Jeff Waugh, Ubuntu hacker extraordinaire and one of the leaders of the Gnome Desktop project.

Jeff has been travelling for the last month or so, visiting various Linux User Groups and other communities on his travels as part of the Badger Badger tour promoting Breezy in all its easy-to-use Debianesque glory. He wound up in Portland (Oregon) for the final “The Last Badger” leg of the whirlwind tour, just in time for the Open Source Development Lab (OSDL) invite-only Desktop Architect’s gathering (perhaps a secret travel motivation, Jeff?). Oregon has become quite the Open Source hub over the last few years. Not only is the OSDL based there, but also the OSL (Open Source Lab), and several other key Open Source and Free Software groups, not to mention a rapidly expanding developer community.

At the Desktop Architect gathering in Portland, several of the core Linux desktop people engaged in a multi-vendor,

multi-desktop discussion on what the current state of play is and where things should be headed. Novell used the opportunity to remind those present that they’re sponsoring some pretty interesting usability research that aims to understand how people adjust to Linux for the first time. The results from that survey are available at the website <http://www.betterdesktop.org>.

Novell itself made headlines with the announcement that it would lay off hundreds of workers and switch the default Novell Linux Desktop to Gnome (from KDE). They later backpeddled a little by

stating that they will continue to support KDE for the time being. If Novell does truly switch to Gnome, that will leave few major Linux desktop contenders based on KDE, which is all the more reason for the recent growth in Kubuntu as a first-class alternative to the regular Ubuntu for those seeking a distribution based on KDE.

I branched out over the last month by hanging out with some of the Linux geeks at the London PHP hackers meeting. Although I’m no stranger to an occasional “perlmongers” (PM) event, I admit to being genuinely surprised to meet such an extremely knowledgeable bunch of skilled Open Source developers and enthusiasts. PHP is often viewed as a suped-up scripting language, but the reality remains that it is extremely easy to learn and to use. When I switched my blog software from one PHP content management system to another, the entire process took a couple of hours with a bit of scripting magic – and that included relearning PHP from scratch. The latest 5.x releases have overhauled the PHP language, which now allows for many more high-level language constructs.

The PHP hackers – like their Perl counterparts – hold regular monthly meetups with speakers on a variety of topics. This month’s speaker runs a popular music website called magnatune.com. He discussed the need for intelligent caching solutions when running large websites on PHP. ■



Figure 4: A crowded conference room in Montreal awaits the next speaker.