FOSDEM 2005 in Brussels, Belgium

DEVELOPER MEET

The annual winter meeting of Europe's open source developers took place February 25-27 in Brussels, Belgium. Again the event was a mustn't miss for thousands of contributors to free projects and a welcome opportunity for developers to exchange ideas outside the borders of their own communities. **BY ULRICH WOLF**

From left: Alan Cox answering questions about Kernel bug fixing; Theo de Raadt says Thank you for the FSF Award; Richard Stallman in talk with Jimbo Wales from Wikipedia; packed auditorium at Jimbo Wales' Wikipedia presentation.

In the fifth year since its inception, the FOSDEM (Free and Open Source European Meeting) developer conference remains true to its principles: free, as technical as possible, and only as commercial as needs be. This concept continues to draw increasing numbers of developers from all over Europe and the US. The big guns were all there; for example, Alan Cox, who has returned to kernel development after a break, Wikipedia founder Jimbo Wales, Richard Stallman, Theo de Raadt from Open BSD, KDE founder Matthias Ettrich.

The organizers talked of 3,500 attendees, but arrived at this figure by adding the attendees from both days. Realistically, the figure is somewhere between 2,000 and 2,500 participants, as the majority attended both days.

Alan Cox's keynote demonstrated that the kernel is still a big crowd puller. An audience of 700 were highly amused at his ribald description of release policy and kernel trouble-shooting issues ("Linus is an excellent developer, Linus is a crap engineer"). He called for more formality to the patch process.

Wikipedia: Free Knowledge and Free Software

The spacious auditorium was also fully packed for Jimmy "Jimbo" Wales' talk.

The Wikipedia founder pointed out that, like in most projects, a small group of those involved with Wikipedia actually did most of the work. About 80 percent of all entries are by ten percent of the registered users, and according to Jimmy, the core team at Wikipedia accounts for no more than 2.5 percent of those users. He called for engineers to help with Wikipedia and Mediawiki software development.

Spring with Sarge?

The best thing about the conference is not its major keynotes, but the structured discussions and talks in smaller groups. You might describe FOSDEM as a collection of birds of a feather sessions. Although there were a few well-attended keynotes, more interesting things were going on in the seminar rooms and smaller lecture theaters of the Free University of Brussels.

This was where to encounter Debian developers talking about the future release schedule and the chances of releasing Sarge in the near future. Reading between the lines, the end of April seems a likely release date. This said, there are still hundreds of critical bugs to repair and a lot of work to do on the Installer. The Mozilla sessions staked their claim somewhere between technology and community organization. The Calibre project made its first showing at a developer conference; Calibre investigates organizational forms within free software development [2]. The project is sponsored by the European Commission.

FSF Prize for Theo de Raadt

This year's Free Software Award went to OpenBSD developer Theo de Raadt. Theo was given the award for his efforts in promoting free firmware. In his laudation, Richard Stallman emphasized that it is becoming increasingly important to have free BIOSs and firmware in computers. And Theo de Raadt had made an important contribution towards this goal with the tenacity he demonstrated in exchanges with many hardware manufacturers. ■

INFO

[1] FOSDEM website:
http://www.fosdem.org

[2] Calibre at FOSDEM:
http://www.fosdem.org/2005/index/dev_room_calibre

[3] Summary of Scott Wheeler's talk:
http://www.kde.me.uk/index.php?page=fosdem-2005-search-talk

[4] FSF Award:
http://www.gnu.org/award/