Free Software in South America

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Content: Free Software in South America
How an emerging industry chose to not follow the proprietary prophets
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1 Information Technology in South America

Despite carrying attributes like "3rd world countries", "developing countries" and the like, IT development runs at full speed in most countries in South America. Not much is known about this situation though. Free Software is a not a recent phenomenon, so how does this fit together?

1.1 History

Like in those countries considered the 1st world, Microsoft has and still does dominate the software deployments at least at the client side.

Software was not available in localized versions for a long time. Many applications were just translated to European Spanish and Portuguese, for example. Language minority groups such as people speaking Tupi-Guarani still cannot rely on proprietary software producers and expect localized versions. On the other hand, a lot of Free Software localization projects have been founded, especially for desktop software.

Recent statistics revealed that internet usage in South America is surprisingly high when compared to other regions.

In several countries, programs for social and digital inclusion have been started.

Strategic relationships among those countries are common, and guarantee a higher independence of conventional software makers.

On the software patent issue, a clear concensus has been reached that the introduction of said patents would harm the economy more than it would help it.

2   Universities

There are a lot of projects going on; the following list is only a small window into the activities. Universities such as the UFRJ, USP, UnB and those outside of Brazil all have some relevance in these topics.

2.1   UFPR

The Federal University of Paraná (UFPR) operates a technology center (C3SL) that has been using Free Software since 1992. The computer pools all run GNU/Linux systems, the last Windows installation was abolished about five years ago. Not only in usage, but also in development Free Software plays a major role. Ever since the invention of the Multi-head setup (using four monitors at one PC), the projects have become widely known. Currently, C3SL develops and operates software for CEX, a successful chess portal, based on the old chessd project code.

2.2   UNICAMP

For more than 7 years, the university which is located in Campinas/SP operates Dicas-L, a Linux community, including Rau-Tu (online help system) and courses for beginners. Also, an OpenOffice.org portal page was opened recently. UNICAMP is also a sponsor of CódigoLivre.

2.3   FAPESP

The Brazilian Research Funding Organization in SP operates Incubadora, a GForge-based project development site.

3 The Governments

Most of the South American governments have some kind of migration plans or even larger visions on their agendas. In particular, there has been a move by the Argentinian and Brazilian governments to restrict the WIPO madness. But also the fights between Microsoft and government officials like a congressman from Peru got a lot of press coverage.

3.1 Brazilian Federal Government

Free Software was one of the major points on the list when the current president Lula was elected. The Software Livre portal site contains two section, a GForge-based development center and a wiki-based collaboration pages collection. It is operated under the banner of the National Presidency. At CONISLI in São Paulo in 2004, the government presented their migration guide, intended to be used by institutions throughout the state and national levels. ITI, which is the IT and certification authority in the country, and its president Sérgio Amadeu even faced court action from Microsoft, when turning towards favouring Free Software. The company backed off - and the national financing institute Caixa Federal started distributing about 60,000 copies of their Kurumin variant.

3.2 Government of Venezuela

The National Assembly of Venezuela decided to exclusively use Free Software as the base for their local, regional and national installations, in November 2004. The precursors were however already suggesting this move previously. In the general public, many percieved this as yet another burdening tie to established industry nations which was cut. More than 80 infocentros already run on Free Software previously.

3.3 Usage in Ministries

The Ministry of Health is running a website to promote and inform about its Free Software-based solutions. The Ministry of Defense recently handed out new contract requirements, stating among others that LPI certificates would be necessary for IT services. The Ministry of Cities recently hired Debian and GNOME developer Gustavo Noronha de Silva to guide its IT staff. The Ministry of Culture, headed by the (former and still performing) artist Gilberto Gil, is currently organizing a game development competition, with focus on the openness of the resulting games, of which a couple will get support for commercial-scale production and deployment on the web or for cell phones.

3.4 City Administration of São Paulo

The entire city portal appears different from others already on the first look. It's got a penguin in one corner, and a "copyleft" statement below all the content. The pages are

hosted on a Zope platform. This is the outcome of introducing the digital goverment (e-government) in the city.

3.5 Telecentros

Using low-cost, or even used, computers to facilitate internet access and technology education for people on low income is a concept known to many countries. The sucess story of the Telecentros as used in Brazil, Argentina, Peru and other countries however has even led the most advanced countries behind in terms of public access to such resources, under the guidance of trained people. In São Paulo alone, the milestone of half a million people was reached in late 2004 - just a few weeks later, the mark of 550,000 was surpassed, all using the specialized GNU/Linux distribution Sacix. A group named Metareciclagem furthermore creates social projects to use computers for artwork and the like.

4 Companies

Companies usually do not care about the ideals behind Free Software - for them, software is a tool which should just work, without any costs attached. Thus it doesn't yield any surprise to see that most success stories are actually just Linux migrations done in cooperation with consulting companies, who will claim all the net win for themselves instead of distributing fair shares to the respective projects used to make said migrations a success in the first place. But it's not always just like this.

4.1 Varig

South America's largest airplane companies uses Linux on their servers. Varig, while consolidating their server infrastructure in 2001, switched to Linux to cut down costs. Security infrastructure was hardened by Conectiva contractors.

4.2 Metrô in São Paulo

One of the world's youngest, and thus most modern, metropolitan systems is installed in the city of São Paulo. Linux and OpenOffice.org are used throughout the company. Contributions back to the community were done by maintaining the translation of OpenOffice.org manuals, even before the source to StarOffice was set free.

4.3 Itaipu

The world's largest hydro-power plant is installed at the border between Brazil and Paraguay, and operated jointly by a company owned by both countries, named Itaipu Binacional. The technical migration from special hardware components to digital control and measurement facilities goes hand in hand with replacing custom software, often without sourcecode, by standard Free Software components. The IT support branch, PTI (Technology Park of Itaipu), even developed a GNU/Linux distribution for internal use, and regularly organizes an installfest in the city. The Latinoware conference drew hundreds of people, including many South American government officials, to Itaipu in November 2004.

5 Organizations

To spread the words, lots of grassroots organizations have been founded.

5.1 PSL Brazil and state organizations

PSL is the organizer of the annual International Free Software Forum, which is attended by thousands of visitors.

Dedicated sub-projects like PSL Women exist to gather interest groups and focus their work on advancing the acceptance of Free Software and other values. Beside, both the KDE Women and Debian Women projects were founded at or around FISL in Porto Alegre.

5.2 MinasLivre

In Minas Gerais, beside the PSL-MG group and lot of active students at universities like the UFMG, including the first translation of Mozilla to Brazilian Portuguese, and the people who organize the EMSL and FestSol, MinasLivre is an organization consisting of many groups to promote the usage of Free Software in Minas Gerais, a state of Brazil. The organization of a national convent is planned, too.

In the capital of Minas, Belo Horizonte, even a lot of desktops have already been migrated to a home-brewn distribution dubbed Libertas Desktop, following a tradition of using Linux since 1995 on the servers.

5.3 Abrasol

The Brazilian Free Software Association invented a logo which can be used to identify projects or products entirely based on Free Sofware - not just referring to the source code, but also manuals, contents and so on.

5.4 Projects

KDE, GNOME, Debian and other projects have a lot of active members in South American countries.

More projects are being hosted at CódigoLivre or similar project centers.

Media-wise, after the Linux Magazine issued by Conectiva went out of the kiosks, the Linux Magazine Brazil was founded as a version of the international Linux Magazine.

6 Resources

6.1 General Information

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http://www.solar.org.ar/
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Free Software Association (Argentina)
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http://www.softwarelivre.org/
```
Free Software News (Brazil)
```
http://www.apesol.org/
```
Free Software News (Peru)
```
http://www.softwarelibre.cl/
```
Linux and Free Software News (Chile)
```
http://www.linux.org.uy/
```
GNU/Linux site (Uruguay)
```
http://bachue.com/colibri/
```
Free Software Community (Colombia)

6.2 Government portals

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http://www.softwarelibre.gov.ar/
```
National Free Software Projects (Argentina)
```
http://www.softwarelivre.gov.br/
```
Presidential Portal (Brazil)
```
http://www.softwarelivreparana.org.br/
```
State Portal (Paraná, Brazil)

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