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OpenPuppets

When cute design meets free software

Bernardo González Reinfeld

In summer 2004, OrganicaDTM's design team discussed a project in a typical production meeting when suddenly a new idea arose. Somebody said that as we used free software daily in our business, we should be involved in a deeper way with free software community and should find a way thank their members for their efforts. We all looked at each other, knowing that that person was right. But how? We had helped in some free software projects in the past with translations and programming of add-ons (Postnuke, Xaraya, Gnome, etc.), but we were designers and we wanted to help with something related to our field.

A few weeks later, our creative team had an idea: we could create a new virtual world, where the mascots of the Free Software/Open Source projects were the main characters. We worked on the personalization of a central group of mascots - Tux for Linux, Gnu for GNU, Wilber for Gimp, etc. - giving them a new appearance. Little by little, new characters were created and several products were designed; we had wallpapers, posters, t-shirts, mugs, plush toys and other things. By the end of February 2005, the first version of this world was published on the internet: OpenPuppets was born.

Cute characters change the world

New users have accustomed themselves to closed systems. Few of them know (and want to know) about command lines, file systems, browsers, kernels or programming lan-

guages. The first time they start using GNU/Linux and free software in general, they might not feel "at home".

How is it possible to make this transition easier for them?

Our answer is with the aid of games and fun, using the pets of the different projects and becoming the spectators of a fantastic world: OpenPuppets.

OpenPuppets is art, design, and education. In order, to change the world, one must do it smiling

A child can learn about stars with kstar (<http://edu.kde.org/kstars>) or a teenager can use Impress (<http://www.openoffice.org>) for his or her homework; however, in order to learn how to use these programs, young people need simple and fun-to-read handbooks, rather than official documentation. For example, Otto (OpenOffice's pet) could appear like a "tour guide" in the handbook and explain the main ideas behind Impress.

OpenPuppets is a project where children, young people and adults are able to laugh while they learn how to use free and open source software. OpenPuppets is not just about writing accessible documentation. The project will include comic stories, where characters have their own personality and adventures - and while you enjoy the stories, you will learn about technologies.

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Art and toys

Little by little, we add new characters to the OpenPuppets world. Each design is created by our team. Our artists know what free and open source software is, because they work with it and they share experiences with the free software communities.

OpenPuppets offers wallpapers, icons, online games, clothes. Organica's team is designing fun merchandise, which helps in promoting OpenPuppets and reaching the general public.

Organica's team is creating plush and wood toys, limited editions, enumerated and handmade

This has been done before. However, Organica's team is going beyond that: it's creating plush and wood toys, limited editions, enumerated and handmade.

We don't think there is a better way to introduce our toys to the community. Many people love vinyl, wood and plush toys; they collect and share them, it's a very strong community. We use their language (toys) to introduce free and open source software to them.

Little by little, we offer more and more toys made of vinyl, wood, metal, and plush. This is a more artistic area, where

Core OrganicaDTM Team. Top: Bernardo Gonzalez Reinfeld (left) and Ricardo Barrios Díaz (right); Bottom: Carolina Gonzalo (left) and David Gonzalez Reinfeld (right). On the table, some plush and clay models



we are freer to develop our work.

The balance between education and art gives consistency to the project, and allows our creative team to continue developing new ideas. At the moment we are designing vinyl toys and working on 3D prototypes, which we will offer to the toy industry.

Thanks to OpenPuppets, in a not very distant future, mice and ducks might be replaced in children stores by penguins and seagulls.

Promoting free software/open source in education

Taking advantage of the force of the designs to create educational material is an important step in the development of the project. The pets of the different projects become teachers, making learning more entertaining. We expect the first digital publications of this type by summer of 2005 (northern hemisphere).

OrganicaDTM Design Studio works beside a team of teachers and educators to prepare an educational project where the OpenPuppets characters are the key. In this way, technology is used as a tool for learning.

For a child learning is something natural. If the learning process is motivated with play and funny characters, the

results will be improved. Learning to use a word processor with ants (Abiword) and seagulls (OpenOffice) is more amusing than doing it by simply copying text. They will learn that there is more to a program than just writing letters.

Conclusion

The free software/open source world is in a very interesting time. Many enterprises, large and small, are paying attention to it as a real alternative. Many domestic users utilise it daily. Mass media are covering it. But we don't think this is sufficient: there is still a lot of ignorance of free software and its importance.

OpenPuppets seeks to present the free software/open source world to the "common" people, in a fun and simple way, explaining to them that alternatives do exist, that a computer is a simple and useful tool. We are trying to do this by promoting art and technology.

We will see the real success of the project in long term; right now, it is exciting to see as it evolves.

Bibliography

OpenPuppets in English (<http://www.openpuppets.com>) and in Spanish (<http://www.openpuppets.com>)

OrganicaDTM Design Studio (<http://www.organicadtm.com>)

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About the author

Bernardo is the director of OrganicaDTM Design Studio