Interview with Bernhard Reiter at aKademy

What we can do to promote the future of free software

Tom Chance

In his speech (`http://conference2004.kde.org/cfp-userconf/bernhard.reiter-social.political.aspects.free.software.php`) at aKademy (`http://conference2004.kde.org/`), Bernhard Reiter of the Free Software Foundation Europe (`http://www.fsfe.org/`) (FSFE) both celebrated Software Freedom Day and reminded the KDE community of what freedom in software means. The FSFE was founded in 2001 to promote and defend free software, and to coordinate national free software organizations, throughout Europe.

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Bernhard is the Chancellor of the German Chapter of FSFE and has been involved since its inception. Interested in what he had to say to the KDE community, I caught up with him after his talk to ask him a few questions.

You mentioned in your presentation the threats of software patents and DRM (Damn Restriction Management, as you described it). What other areas do you think the free software movement will need to address in the next few years?

Well to begin with, the issues of software patents and DRM will be huge and so will be keeping us all busy for many years yet. Other issues do exist but they are generally ongoing as opposed to short-term projects. We expect that there will be more legislative and political attacks on free software, but we cannot predict what they will be.

The most important point I want to emphasize is that we must continue to educate people, and especially politicians, about free software We must convey what it means to the whole world, in terms of who controls technology and how it affects our lives. If we can do that, we won't have to spend so much time defending against attacks because more people will help us.

In Europe in particular, Governments are now driving a lot of the free software adoption. What part can projects like KDE and organizations like the FSFE play in this process?

Not everybody takes a huge interest in politics and I believe that it is normal that some people stay out of the technical side of things and just develop software. On the other hand we need more people to engage themselves politically for free software. Others should at least be responsible and keep their eyes open for events and developments where they can do their share. So they should, for example, be aware of demonstrations and lobbying efforts on issues like software patents.

In terms of development, members of the free software community should also bear in mind that code can shape laws.

Fig. 1: Bernhard Reiter

If the code doesn't allow a person to perform a particular action, then the code is controlling that person. In projects like KDE, which are reaching a fairly mature stage, developers should be focussing on the users and trying to make free software more usable for them. Even development can be political issue.

An important aspect of freedom in software is the ability to use it. But while KDE is currently translated into over 80 languages, there are hundreds more that are commonly used and that aren't yet covered. How can a community of volunteers, both in KDE and the FSFE, help this?
KDE developers already do help, in that they are part of a process of gradual improvements in internationalization and localization. In terms of free software organizations, apart from the FSFE in Europe and the FSF in North America there aren't any well established organizations.

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We're hoping to change that, but we don't want to take

money and help from governments and companies, even if it would help with internationalization, if it were to harm our independence and our ability to promote free software. We need to be careful about where we use our money, and what the specific focus of our investments are.

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But don't you think that there is a role for government in areas where the market cannot yet supply full internationalization, especially where a large proportion of the population cannot speak English?
Well yes, of course government should be interested in preserving the cultural and linguistic heritage of their country. Where the market cannot provide, it is their duty to do so.

Moving back to software, are there any areas in particular on the free software desktop that you think developers need to address most urgently?

Fig. 2: KDE World Summit's logo

It is hard to say what is missing before we try deploying our software in the target markets, and so we will know a lot more when GNU/Linux is deployed in more corporations. I

am worried that many desktops are adding proprietary software to their systems where free software isn't yet available or good enough, usually because it is more convenient. Proprietary PDF readers and the MP3 format are an example where free alternatives exist (KGhostView and Ogg Vorbis, for example). Many proprietary tools are being used to develop free desktops; proprietary vector editing applications, for example, are used by many of the icon artists. We ought to be working to stop this being necessary or even desirable. Personally I would like to see more attention to business, with a good business model for private desktop users.

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The FSFE has an initiative called the GNU Business Network (`http://www.fsfeurope.org/projects/gbn/`) which could help in this area if we received more funding. Society needs business, but business interests shouldn't drive it. Rather, society should be laying down the ethics by which business operates. Free software desktops can be part of the development of such an ethical business model for free software.

Should projects like KDE be more proactive in promoting free software then, including more protective licenses like the GNU GPL?
It's a matter of strategy. Yes, the KDE Project should promote freedom both by choosing free licenses (e.g. the GNU GPL) and by talking to partners and the public about it, but there are also times when it is more strategic to use a license with less protection (using the GNU LGPL, for example, to spread adoption).

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Qt on Windows remains a problem for us, since it is not available under a free license. KDE goes to some lengths to allow proprietary KDE software to be developed by re-

leasing its libraries under the LGPL. This may be a good strategy - I don't want to condemn it in general - but it poses practical problems for KDE development, as they cannot accept GNU GPL code for the core libraries and the modules that require a Qt licensing exception when using GNU GPL. What code goes into which module within KDE is governed by this requirement that only benefits proprietary KDE applications.

The KDE Project ought to recognize how much it has given Trolltech, whose success is based to a large extent on the success of KDE. Maybe the KDE Project could encourage Trolltech to GPL the Windows version of its toolkit? The current arrangement is not unreasonable, but the KDE Project should be aware that it could talk to Trolltech on an equal level.

Bernhard, thank you for this conversation.
It's no problem; it is always good to educate more users about freedom. I would like to note that it is a good sign that the FSFE were invited to aKademy, and that the KDE Project and the FSFE have a good relationship. We welcome all future cooperation.

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About the author

Tom Chance is a philosophy student, free software advocate and writer. He has worked in various guises with the KDE Project, the Association for Free Software, the Foundation for a Free Information Infrastructure and Creative Commons. You can contact him via his web site, http://www.tomchance.org.uk (`http://www.tomchance.org.uk`)