

dictators who claim to be benevolent. There are examples for successful and unsuccessful communities on both ends of this continuum.

Before we look in detail at two concrete examples of how the technical, social, and structural issues were approached and dealt with by groups within KDE, it seems useful to provide some background on the history of the KDE project in these three areas. The following section will thus describe what KDE is today and how the community arrived at that point.

## History and Structure of the KDE Project

KDE, or the K Desktop Environment, was originally conceived out of despair. At a time when FVWM was considered a desktop, Xeyes was a stock inventory item on the screen, and Motif was the toolkit competing with XForms for the higher body count of developer's brain cells and for lack of sexiness, KDE was founded to achieve a revolutionary goal: to marry the raw power of Unix with a slick, eye-candied user experience. This goal was now considered achievable because the Norwegian startup Trolltech was about to release the first version of its groundbreaking object-oriented GUI toolkit for C++, Qt. Qt set out to allow GUI programming the way it was meant to be: systematic, object-oriented, elegant, easy to learn, well-documented, and efficient. In 1996 Matthias Ettrich, at the time a student at Tuebingen University, first emphasized the potential offered by using Qt to develop a complete desktop environment. The idea quickly attracted a team of about 30 developers, and that group has been growing steadily ever since.

Version 1.0 of KDE was released in 1998. Although nimble in its functionality from today's point of view, it needs to be measured in relation to the competition: Windows 3.1 did not have memory protection at the time, Apple was struggling to find a new kernel, and Sun swept the sorry remnants of CDE into the gutter. Also, this was before the first Linux hype, and the momentum of Free Software was not yet understood by all in the software industry.

Even in the process of finishing KDE 1, the developers had already redesigned it for 2.0. Some major elements were missing: the component model, the network abstraction layer, the desktop communication protocol, the UI style API, and more. KDE 2 was the first release that was architected, designed, and implemented in a reasonably rational process. Corba was considered for the component model and rejected. This was also the first time the contributor group fluctuated. Interestingly, although some early core developers left, the size of the active KDE development team slowly but steadily grew. KDE e.V., the organization of the KDE contributors, was founded in 1996 and grew to represent the vast majority of the KDE committers by 1998. From the beginning, the organization was meant to support the contributors, but not to influence the technical direction of KDE. The course of development is supposed to be the result of the work of the active developers, not a management team. This idea proved to be one of the most important factors, if not the most important, toward making KDE one of the very few major Free Software projects that are not massively influenced by funding corporate bodies. External funding is not regarded as problematic in KDE, but many