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# Freestyle - FLOSS In Design

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Elpueblodechina reports on the Freestyle seminar on Free, Libre and Open Source Software at V2 in Rotterdam

[IMAGE]

> Images created using Graham Harwood's GIMP plugin

If Free Software has become a key force in developing the internet, shaping the roles of system administrators and developers, what does it mean for media practices working with such software or with the internet? What, for instance does free software mean to people who shape the look of the net, its workings, but not so much its guts? Freestyle, a seminar at V2\_Organisation in Rotterdam on 19 May tried to come up with some answers. The seminar, organised by the Piet Zwart Institute and the Hogeschool van Amsterdam together with its hosts, V2, brought together artists, designers and programmers to talk about computers and design practice. The presentations reflected on networks and standalone applications, proprietary software and FLOSS tools.

Callum Selkirk is the system administrator at the Piet Zwart Institute in Rotterdam and a software developer involved in projects at the Ascii Cafe in Amsterdam. His is a 100 percent command line philosophy. He introduced the seminar with a curious observation about the surveillance systems used during the demonstrations against the WTO in Seattle, Genoa and Evian: they were all put together using free software platforms. Governments and free software are a good match, considering the tight budgets faced by state administrations. Given that, what does freedom or even 'creativity' mean when FLOSS meets design?

The first speaker was Rishab Aiyer Ghosh, a researcher from New Delhi, immersed in large-scale studies of the demographics of free software developers, the economics of collaborative production, the generation of value and above all, the motivations behind an activity apparently not primarily or solely carried out for financial reasons.

Ghosh started by defining the meaning of 'FLOSS', or Free/Libre and Open Source software, a term widely used in Latin America, Asia and Southern Europe. He found it necessary to make a distinction between free of use and free of cost, in order to be consistent with the history of the term, which was always more related to liberty than to a missing price tag.

His studies of free software communities analyse in depth what the benefits of creating free software are, the human motivations over and above the added economic value. Reasons range from learning new skills, earning a community's respect and 'producing aesthetically beautiful pieces of code' – all of which illustrates the growth of a culture of free software.

But he also made clear that FLOSS does not necessarily arise from kindness or altruism. It would probably be more accurate to say that FLOSS is developed out of a social process involving fun, pride and community spirit. 'But so is investment banking!' Ghosh points out with a laugh. He stressed the fact that FLOSS has to be regarded as an economic system of production. It deals specifically with the economics of collaboration, trying to attain sustainability on the basis of a practice of small contributions supported by the networked environment of the internet.

The seminar tried to bring together both sides of the FLOSS phenomenon, the developer's and the user's. Yet the real divide between these two groups of actors was extremely clear.

A graphic designer, Roger Teeuwen from Rotterdam, who was commissioned to make the flyer for the event using FLOSS tools, gave a report of his first experience with free software and a great description of the FAQ for design applications such as the Gimp, Sodi Podi and Scribus. It was a clear demonstration of the first approach that proprietary software users tend to have toward the use of free software. An 'I-can't-find-my-buttons' sort of approach, bringing up the discussion about what really should be expected from free software and how to bring users and developers together in a collaboration on software design.

From the audience, Lawrence Liang, a lawyer from India and research fellow at PZI, stressed the problem of inter-operability, and how we tend to underestimate the amount of time that we spend learning to use any operating system, especially considering the familiarity of such a system as Windows that has the tendency to lock us in as eternal users.

On the designer's side, the problem of time (and deadlines) is a big issue when anybody thinks about acquiring new software skills. To which you can add the fact that design education is mainly carried out using proprietary software. Maybe what we can do as users is to provide feedback to developers, but it was very clear that there's a considerable distance to bridge between these two realms. For instance, an aesthetic difference: while designers work under a paradigm of perfection, developers tend to find errors attractive.

This led on to a presentation by Graham Harwood, social software developer and perl programmer, who talked about the networked possibilities of the Gimp. He opened up the presentation by explaining the history of the tool, mentioning for instance the fact that this software was developed without any colour theory behind it. While the Gimp can be used like Photoshop, it springs from the network culture of developers, and for that reason it has an amazing capacity for manufacturing a relation to images, or to what he called the 'networked image'.

His presentation focused particularly on the chance to perceive images in a way you may have never done before - images that search for their own context. Active images? In any case, images coupled with active programming, networked images, related to all sorts of situations, people, places and questions.

He took the opposite direction from closed, proprietary systems, describing how such software doesn't encourage users to think of themselves as working together; and at the same time, he emphasised the importance of understanding the culture emerging from networked visual environments. The piped and nodal environments of Unix provide new dimensions for visual work. The info-aesthetics of FLOSS would mean dealing with the command line, and working on a networked paradigm would mean extending the tool toward infinite and unexpected possibilities.

Harwood's was a highly politicised presentation, which also showed characteristics of the culture that seems to be growing around software and digital production. Just as Rishab had stressed, the use of FLOSS is a process which makes one more aware of the context of programming as a social relation – even if the user initially comes from a totally different angle.

This sheds light on ways that software might unknowingly influence designers and design. There is a recurrently stated view, for instance, that the kind of images that Photoshop produces – a clean aesthetics based on perfection and anti-aging – are something to be challenged. What would Free Libre Open Software have to say about an alternative aesthetics, and even more, an alternative way of living?

Erik Dooper from Open Source Software Lab, Amsterdam, contributed a practical side to the seminar as he made demonstrations of 3 FLOSS vector graphic applications: Scribus, SodiPodi and Inkscape.

Kit Blake, a Rotterdam-based programmer, presented Silva, a content management system developed with Python. He showed the commercial possibilities of open software. A key part of his presentation was how their work became possible as a result of the style of the software itself, but how that also set up new problems in design and development. He mentioned how difficult is to make clients understand the value of a customised structure when there is no visual or graphic change. They only work on the back end, but that is very strong, as it shows how well-adapted a networked system can be to an organisational structure. He also described the importance of the community around free software, naming it as one parameter of success for this or that technology.

Jaromil, an Italian GNU/Linux developer presented dyne:bolic, a full Linux distribution software for liberation. He spoke about the potential of open software for streaming, using trashed computers to broadcast radio, as has been done in Palestine. He described a paradigmatic change or a drift in 'world's communication topology': how the possibility to broadcast for free might involve taking a position before the media to face up to monopolies of information. He related streaming to political action, developing a networked practice that could someday become much stronger. At the same time, he said, the importance of a poetic and free sensibility in software is something that both designers and programmers can invent together.

V2 showed two projects currently under development: Playlist, a software for online collaborative video, and V2\_jam.

The first, presented by Willi LeMaitre, is a research made by artists about new situations for collaboration. LeMaitre introduced himself as a video artist and addressed an issue already raised above, that is how to develop software from a user's point of view, in this case the viewpoint of the artist? On the one hand the artistic approach must find ways to sort out the hegemony of the moving image, exploring non-linear and recursive narratives: a system for collaboration based on a conversational approach, more than just adding up isolated contributions to a collective venture. What they have chosen is a multi-threaded dynamic 3D representation of a growing structure.

While recognising that the possibility of stepping outside of the norms of software is something only made possible with FLOSS, he was sincere in recognising that one of the first aims of the project, to develop this platform using FLOSS, didn't succeed to its fullest extent because they had to be able to integrate proprietary formats such as Real and Quicktime. He stressed that open software was an aspect of the project, but not an overriding concern. Perhaps this also illustrates the degree of compromise that non-developers address while using open software, and the pressure, both financial and administrative, that artists work under while doing research.

The second project, V2\_Jam, presented by Anne Nigten & Artem Baguinski, is an ongoing research project into combining and integrating different open source media software. Interesting in terms of inter-operability and integration of media forms, and also because it comes out of interdisciplinary work, one of the hybrid forms that the seminar managed to show.

FLOSS is a small world, and the debate around proprietary software vs. FLOSS is a small one if stacked up against other world problems. Yet, at the same time, it's a miniature model of a global revolution. In this world the FLOSS movement is truly a growing autonomous system with political lines of flight.

**Related links:**

Piet Zwart Institute, Master in Media Design, Rotterdam  
<https://pzwart.wdka.hro.nl/mdr/Seminars2/floss/>

Silva, content management system, Rotterdam  
<http://www.infrae.com/>

Erik Dooper - Open Source Software Lab, Amsterdam.  
<http://www.ossl.org/>

Rishab Aiyer Ghosh  
<http://orbiten.org/rishab.html>

Graham Harwood  
<http://www.scotoma.org/>

Jaromil  
<http://rastasoft.org/>

Dyne:bolic  
<http://www.dyne.org/>

V2\_lab  
<http://lab.v2.nl/>

Playlist  
<http://www.w----e.net/>

GNU Linux  
<http://www.gnu.org/>  
<http://www.gnu.org/copyleft/gpl.html>