

Daniel James reports on the FAVE free software multimedia conference

FAVE raves



A new event focused on the creative use of free software was recently launched in the city of Bristol, in the south-west of the UK. Known as FAVE, which might have stood for Free Software Audio Visual Event, the day attracted around eighty participants who were able to share knowledge on a diverse range of subjects, from audio programming to open source film making. It was rounded off with a series of performances from artists using free software. FAVE 2005 was held at the Trinity Centre, a large former church in the centre of the city. More recently used as a music venue, playing host to the likes of Public Enemy, the building is now a community arts centre catering for a vibrant local cultural scene. The 18kW PA system, more usually pounding with drum'n bass, instead amplified the output from laptops running Csound, Rosegarden, SuperCollider, a variety of other self-made software, and even a bit of punk rock guitar.

First on the stage was Chris O'Shea, introducing the Sonicforms interfaces project. O'Shea is a digital artist whose work deals with physical interaction and exploring audiovisual synaesthesia. His Sonicforms project is a research platform for developing tangible interfaces in audio visual computing environments - interfaces that users can literally get to grips with. The hardware typically takes the form of solid objects on a sensor table which can be lifted, moved and replaced, providing a radical alternative to the familiar keyboard and mouse. The Sonicforms project aims to create a community knowledge base around tangible interfaces, as well as open source tools for production. O'Shea hopes that by providing an

easier entry point to the emerging field of tangible interfaces, artists and musicians interested in this area will be able to spend more time on their work, rather than having to build all of their tools from scratch.

Next came Tom Chance, speaking on behalf of the Remix Reading project; Reading being the town of that name in England, rather than the kind of reading associated with a magazine or book. The aim of this localised Creative Commons project is to get artists working with music, video, images and text to come together and share their work, creating collaborative 'remixes'. This is meant to include the people based in the Reading area who are not necessarily technically literate, or previously

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aware of copyright licensing matters. To this end the Remix Reading collaborative web site has been designed to be as easy to use and understand as possible. All material uploaded to the site is released under a Creative Commons license, customised copyright licences which allow others to use, copy, and share the material legally. This has the potential to move back barriers to creativity which have emerged as

copyright laws become ever more restrictive in the face of technological development.

While the Creative Commons initiative has met with broad approval from the free software community and some parts of the art world, Chance talked about the practical problems that have arisen during the first year of Remix Reading's existence. A major problem is the poor awareness of copyright law among the general population, while the legalistic nature of the full Creative Commons licences create additional difficulties for those prospective users who are not actually lawyers. Nevertheless, Chance believes that the Reading project has been worthwhile, particularly since it has created opportunities for direct contact between local participants. Over 600 creative works have now been uploaded to the Remix Reading site, and the project's founders are now expanding into other towns in the UK. The web-based model has been designed for straightforward duplication, with derived projects now beginning to be established in Brighton, Deptford and Bristol itself.

John Ffitch gave a talk on the Csound language, designed for sound rendering and signal processing. It's one of the veterans of software-based synthesis, having been written in 1985, but with

origins in the Music V family of languages created by Max Mathews at Bell Labs in the 1960's. (The version of A Bicycle Built for Two sung by HAL in the Stanley Kubrick film 2001 is one of Mathew's best-known pieces.) Rather than a user-friendly GUI application, Csound is actually two programming languages. The simpler of the two is the score language, which represents a series of note events. The other

part, the orchestra language, describes how to create sounds - with inscrutability comparable to assembler language and therefore a seriously steep learning curve. It's used for research into synthesis as well as by electro-acoustic composers for performances. Ffitch is a mathematician and astronomer based at the University of Bath who ported Csound to the PC back in 1990. He is now taking part in a complete re-write of the code which will have improved MIDI functionality, and will support the Open Sound Control protocol. Other developers are working on sequencer interfaces to Csound which are designed to bring it out of the realm of the programmer and make it more accessible to electronic musicians.

Senior BBC R&D engineer Michael Sparks gave a presentation on scaling the Corporation's media streaming infrastructure. This effort includes the development of the free software Kamaelia platform, described in this column in LinuxUser & Developer issue 54. His talk also

communication channel, Rawlings argued, the democratisation of cinema has arrived. The workshop introduced the concept of web films, a genre created by downloadable movie shorts such as the 1997 Star Wars spin-off 'Troops'. He went on to describe the free software tools available to film makers, including Cinelerra. The session also covered the distribution methods available to would-be web film creators.

A final software demonstration came from RachelAPP, a London-based musician originally from France. She demonstrated how to record and mix music using Ardour and JACK, how to program drums with Hydrogen, and how to master the result for distribution using JAMin. This was not merely a theoretical exercise, since she has already recorded and released a number of post-punk EPs on her own record label using the set-up, and has recently released her debut album. Many of RachelAPP's songs are made available on her website as free MP3s, under the

electric guitar. Stutters is also a London-based musician, and describes his work as quiet and thoughtful, creating landscapes of bits and junk. The day was closed by Dave Griffiths, who uses live coding and genetic algorithms to produce music which is outputted immediately. The audible result ranges from abstract noise to complex rhythms, but with an underpinning in acid house and techno which prevents the music from becoming lost in avant-garde territory. If the music being produced by artists using free software has anything in common, it's that it displays a refreshing lack of cliché.

The next FAVE event is currently being planned for 2006. Suggestions for the line-up of next year's event and potential contributions towards it should be directed to the FAVE mailing list, details of which are on the web site at <www.fave.org.uk>



Live coded techno from Dave Griffiths on the stage at FAVE



covered why the BBC uses open source software, why the BBC releases source code for some of the software it develops in-house, and why it doesn't on other occasions. Sparks was followed by Richard Bown, who gave a practical demonstration of the Rosegarden-4 audio/MIDI sequencer and score editor. Bown has been working on Rosegarden since 1995, and is responsible for almost all the MIDI, audio, sequencing and recording code in recent releases. He also demonstrated Studio... to go! - the music production environment produced by Fervent Software, which is based around a live Linux distribution (see the Audio Libre column in issue 44.) A second major release of Studio... to go!, version 1.50, was recently announced.

A talk from James Wallbank of Access Space was possibly the most enthusiastically received of the day. Access Space is a walk-in media lab in Sheffield, which is one of the UK's few organisations dedicated to promoting the creative use of zero-cost computing - it was profiled in LinuxUser & Developer issue 50. Wallbank described how Access Space has promoted creativity using free software for over five years, through artist residencies, workshops, events and exhibitions. The organisation has now grown into a charity which offers access to technology to anyone, for free. The recent 'LOSS' CD project co-ordinated by Access Space featured music made by artists using free software, and was released under a Creative Commons 'Sampling Plus' licence.

The next presentation came from Tomas Rawlings of PluginCinema.com, an independent website devoted to the creation, production and distribution of 'films' online. With computers and DV cameras as the production tools and the Internet as the distribution and

Creative Commons 'Share Alike No Commercial Use' licence.

Music began with Andy Preston of Edge Effect playing some of his recordings, which he describes as belonging to the 'Ambient-Goth' genre. These pieces were made using free software applications including SpiralSynthModular, SoundTracker and Audacity. Preston has been experimenting with electronic, industrial and ambient music since 1987. He uses both computers and hardware synthesisers in his work, and is a long-term contributor to the SpiralSynthModular project. He was followed by RachelAPP, who returned to the stage with her electric guitar and drum machine for a live set. Her music reveals the influence of both the Pixies and PJ Harvey, but despite a resemblance in her sound, she claims never to have heard Huggy Bear back in the early 90's.

Three laptop-wielding musicians followed. Matt Gray performed a live-coded set using SuperCollider Server for OS X, which has also been ported to Linux. SuperCollider is an environment and programming language for real-time audio synthesis. It can be controlled by MIDI, a mouse or graphics tablet, and over a network using Open Sound Control. As is the norm for live coded music, the output of the laptop's display was projected on stage so the audience could attempt to follow what was happening in software.

Next on stage was Jonny Stutters of the Jeremah project, who augmented his ambient electronica with the processed output of an

Keylinks

- Sonicforms
<www.sonicforms.org>
- Remix Reading
<www.remixreading.org>
- Csound
<www.csounds.com>
- BBC Research & Development
<www.bbc.co.uk/rd/>
- Fervent Software
<www.ferventsoftware.com>
- Access Space
<www.access-space.org>
- PluginCinema
<www.pluginCinema.com>
- RachelAPP
<www.rachelapp.co.uk>
- Andy Preston
<www.edge-effect.co.uk>
- Matt Gray
<www.destrukta.net>
- Jonny Stutters
<www.jeremah.co.uk>
- Dave Griffiths
<www.pawfal.org/patterncascade/>

