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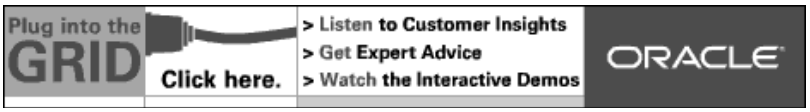

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Thursday, 6 May, 2004

Tux goes to Egypt

by Maddy Reddy

ACN Arabian Computer News

Earlier this week, the Egyptian LUG (Linux user group) had the first ever Linux Installfest in downtown Cairo. With some 1000 odd Linux enthusiasts, turning up for the event, Linux seems to have finally arrived in the land of the Pharaohs.

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The event, which took place at the Sawy Cultural Centre, was initially geared up around 150 attendees, but the organisers say the hall was 'maxed' out with much a larger turnout crediting their guerrilla marketing campaign, which was largely through word of mouth and mailing lists.

"The atmosphere was just unbelievable; people who had had linux installed realised the LUGgers were overwhelmed and stayed on helping other people with installs, we couldn't burn CDs fast enough, several thousand educational pamphlets were not enough by a wide margin. We were expecting maybe 150 or 200 people throughout the day," said a spokesperson for Installfest.

After the success of the first event, the organisers said they are now looking at the possibility of another Installfest during this summer at the Bibliotecha in Alexandria.

Linux is fast gaining momentum in the region. IBM for instance, has established a large Cairo-based development team to work on Arabic support for Linux, but the numbers are yet to reach critical mass.

Linux-Egypt.org, the official Linux user group for the country, which recently distributed more than 70,000 free copies of Linux with Online Magazine, estimates that even if 10% use it, then the installed base of Linux is more than 7,000 users. Even Egypt's official LUG site, which reports more than 220,000 users have used the site since its launch in August 2001, is suggestive of the interest in Linux.

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The past year, with support from major IT vendors such as IBM, Novell, Oracle, Red Hat, BEA, Sun Microsystems, People Soft and SAP all porting their applications to Linux with Arabic API initiatives. On the internet, Arabeyes.Org, a meta project that is aimed at fully supporting the Arabic language in the Unix/Linux environment and several governments reviewing Linux, the 13-year open source operating system is now moving up the value chain, after Egypt's Telecom ministry endorsed the Arabisation process of Linux in Egypt.

Egypt with a population of more than 70 million people has an active Linux registered user base of around 300 people according to estimates. In other words, the Linux density is little over 2.30 users/million and currently number 145 amongst Linux using countries, according to Linux.org. This number is extremely low, as the report estimates that Egypt needs four more users in Linux density to pass Nepal to rank in at number 144, while Azerbaijan needs two more users to pass Egypt to touch 145.

Compared to paying Windows users, where Microsoft tracks licenses and revenues globally, it has been harder to track Linux usage. The software is distributed free, with minimal licensing issues; downloadable from more than 50 distribution vendor sites such as Mandrake, RedHat, Suse, Debian and others, besides bundled with hundreds of computer magazines.

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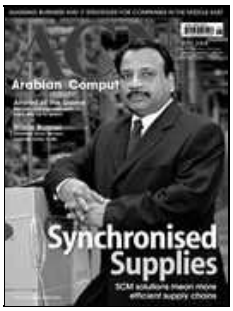

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