

The Open Pitt

What's cooking in Linux and Open Source in Western Pennsylvania



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From the Editors: Can Linux be Too Easy?

From the very beginning, the concept of Linux distributions was to make it easier to install and manage a Linux system. Recently Linspire, creator of a commercial distribution with the goal of extreme ease-of-use has released Freespire, a zero-cost version. It has also made its basic "click and run" software download service free.

One corresponding community effort to streamline and simplify Linux on the desktop is Ubuntu. Using the tag line "Linux for Human Beings," it seeks to produce a distribution which doesn't present the user with too much complexity. The GNOME desktop environment is also increasingly pursuing this goal.

Nobody (well, almost) wants to do more work than necessary, so this would seem to be only good. But are there any downsides to making Linux easier?

It is clear that there are those with an elitist attitude who worry that giving inexperienced users an easy path into Linux will ruin their private playground. But there are more legitimate reasons to look before you leap into making or supporting certain changes to Linux-based operating systems.

Freedom or Compromise?

As we briefly touched on in these pages last month, Eric Raymond re-

cently called for Linux distributions to provide support for more hardware devices and file formats. One quickly runs into issues of proprietary drivers and legally-encumbered media formats such as MP3 files and DVDs. Raymond advocates the pragmatic approach of obtaining licenses for these and therefore adding new capabilities that users want to Linux.

Fans of Richard Stallman will counter with the argument that the legal restrictions in this software limit the user's freedom. By giving in and accepting these proprietary formats and devices, they say, manufacturers and content creators will never be pressured into moving toward open formats and specifications.

Authors of Free and Open Source software have a history of creating alternatives to proprietary formats; when Unisys asserted that GIF files were covered by one of its patents, the PNG format was created in response. A more recent example is the Ogg Vorbis audio format created to counter the patent-encumbered MP3. And programmers try their best to write Open Source device drivers for network adapters, cameras, scanners, and printers for which manufacturers refuse to provide specifications.

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WPLUG Annual Meeting

WPLUG's annual meeting will take place on October 21 at the Squirrel Hill branch of the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh. There will be a series of five- to ten-minute lightning talks on various topics.

Votes will also be counted at this meeting for the Board of Directors election and two amendments to the bylaws. For more details on the candidates and the voting process, see <<http://www.wplug.org/vote/>>. The following members were nominated for the Board at the last meeting:

- Beth Lynn Eicher
- Judi Galardi
- Michael Hansell
- Vance Kochenderfer
- Bill Moran
- David Ostroske
- Ted Rodgers
- Brian Seklecki
- Greg Simkins
- Chris Teodorski
- Patrick Wagstrom

Once again, it is critical to have enough members attend this meeting to have a quorum, so plan to be there. We'll have a potluck lunch and some cool swag to give away, so be sure to come out and join in the fun!

August Roundup

Aug. 5 General User Meeting: Brian Seklecki and Ted Rodgers spoke about their efforts to produce a Linux distribution tailored specifically for local college students. Their intent is to make a live CD and an installable operating system that includes the features and applications desired by students and that will also connect easily to the University of Pittsburgh and

Carnegie Mellon University networks. The goal of the project is to introduce students to Linux in a way that is easy to use and addresses their needs. The CDs are to be distributed on move-in day, and web space is being sought to provide a downloadable version as well. It will include customized artwork and handy local reference information.

Coming Events

Sep. 30: Ohio LinuxFest. Greater Columbus Convention Center (*pre-registration required at <<http://www.ohiolinux.org/>>*)

Oct. 21: General User Meeting/Election Meeting. 12:30PM to 4:30PM, Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh—Squirrel Hill

The public is welcome at all events

Links of the Month by Michael P. O'Connor

Sorry about the lack of the links for the newsletter in recent months, but I have been busy with many other projects. One of these is that I am learning a musical instrument and that, my dear reader, is the inspiration for this month's set of links.

First, I have found that I like to share my attempts at playing my tin whistle with family and friends. This could not be done without a good sound recording program, and for my needs I have found Audacity <http://audacity.sourceforge.net/> more than fits the bill here. It will record sound and let me do some minor edits such as taking the sound of my aquarium out of the background with its noise removal function. Then it will encode the music into MP3 or OGG format so I can send it off to my friends and family.

No set of audio links would be complete without some way to play

your music. For MP3s and OGGS, XMMS <http://www.xmms.org/> does a very fine job. Small, light, and does not take up much screen space on the desktop. But let's admit it, we have all run across that one Internet radio station that just does not use these formats but instead uses the technology out of Redmond, and for these streams you can use MPlayer <http://www.mplayerhq.hu/> to listen in.

Finally with many stations, radio shows, and individuals producing a plethora of great podcasts, you might want a nice program to catch all these great shows. One popular choice, gPodder <http://perli.net/projekte/gpodder/> can do this for you.

As always, if you have any links to suggest, send them in to me at wplug@mikeoconnor.net.

Till next month, enjoy these links!

EASY, from p. 1

Some software authors have created a way to reach these proprietary formats and hardware devices without obtaining a license, but these programs (depending on the jurisdiction) often violate one or more laws and so are not a viable option for any distributor who wants to stay in business.

Creating Islands

As distributors modify and customize their offerings to make them easier to use, they run the risk of diverging from the appearance and behavior of other Linux distributions. On a purely technical level this can cause problems with compatibility, although this is minimized if the distribution still adheres to the Linux Standard Base.

A more subtle yet extremely important issue is that of support. A distributor who, in the name of ease-of-use, radically alters the appearance and behavior of applications and administrative tools creates an island inhabited only by the users of that distribution. This makes it difficult for them to talk to and obtain support from other Linux users, since their frame of reference is so different.

And if that distributor should cease producing the distribution, these users are effectively stranded unless somebody comes along to continue to maintain the distribution or migrate them to another.

Living on an island is also troublesome for the distributor. Unless changes are contributed back and merged into the upstream project, the effort required to maintain custom versions of the software increases dramatically.

Shooting Users in the Foot

It is also important to avoid negative side effects when aiming for ease-of-use. By default, the aforementioned Linspire logs in and runs the desktop environment as the root user, which has full administrative privileges over the system. This simplifies matters somewhat since the user can perform actions like installing hardware and changing system settings without entering another password. However, it opens a path for users to accidentally cause major damage to the system, or for malicious software attached to an e-mail message or web page to infect and take over the entire machine.

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What is Linux?
 Linux is a *kernel*, the core of a computer operating system, created by Linus Torvalds. It is typically packaged as a *distribution*, which includes the extra programs necessary to make a computer functional and useful. Since 1991, it has grown from a one-man project which ran on one computer to one with thousands of contributors running on everything from personal organizers to million-dollar supercomputers.

What are Open Source and Free Software?
 Open Source and Free Software provide you, the user, with the opportunity to see the source code of the programs you use. You are free to use it, share it with others, and even make changes to it if you wish. While the Free Software and Open Source communities differ in their philosophical approach, in practical terms they share nearly identical goals. Learn more at <http://www.opensource.org/> and <http://www.gnu.org/>.

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Most Linux distributions get this right by strongly encouraging or even requiring you to create a normal user account when installing and by warning against logging in as the root user except when necessary. It is important that issues like security are not thrown to the wind in the pursuit of simplicity.

How to Do It

Anyone looking to create a friendly new Linux distribution needs to prevent unintended consequences and avoid isolating themselves and their users from the rest of the community. Any choice to include proprietary software should be with the goal of moving users away from locked-in formats and hardware onto free alternatives. By taking the long view when deciding how to serve your customers' needs, you will benefit them, yourself, and Linux as a whole.