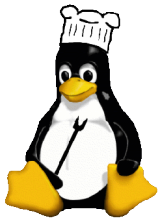
The Open Pitt

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



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Book Review: *Linux Desktop Garage* *by Bobbie Lynn Eicher*

Author: Susan Matteson
Publisher: Prentice Hall PTR
ISBN: 0131494198
$29.99, 384 pages, 2005

The goal of Prentice Hall's new Garage Series of books is to provide readers with a practical and entertaining guide to technical topics that are often intimidating to an ordinary reader. As one of the latest releases offered under this banner, the *Linux Desktop Garage* does this much well. It's not recommended, however, for users who are looking for a guide to more advanced topics and aren't content with just the basic user software available in the open source world.

This is a book that goes out of its way to be as friendly and inviting to its readers as possible. The first chapter is, appropriately enough, "What Are You Getting Into?" which is probably the question that many people who want to try out Linux are asking themselves. It then moves on to give a general explanation of what Linux is and how to go about installing it. A particular point where the author deserves praise is that she put the extra effort in to provide explanations that can be used by both Windows users and those who have experience with Macs.

Most valuable with this book is its structure. Once Linux has been introduced, each chapter that follows is devoted to a type of task that users might want such as word processing, messaging, and games. For someone who's already used to computers but doesn't know anything about Linux equivalents for their usual software, that makes *Linux Desktop Garage* an excellent tool to get straight to the information they need without getting bogged down in anything else. An especially helpful point is that the end of each chapter includes a table summarizing the software mentioned and gives it a quick review. Even more helpful for some will be the table at the end of the book listing common Windows programs and the suggested Linux equivalents.

If you want to go beyond the level of a quick reference to GUI software on Linux, however, this book becomes much less valuable. The author, Susan Matteson, may consider herself to be an avid Linux user, but professionally she's a web developer and writer and that bias shows in a way that many in the Linux community won't appreciate. Experienced users are likely to be startled, to say the least, by statements like the following from the preface: "There are command-line programs to do those things, but why be so limited?" The more zealous followers of Richard Stallman are likely to be irritated by her quick dismissal of the claim that the entire operating system shouldn't be called Linux, though perhaps they'll at least give her some credit for mentioning that it's really just the name of the kernel. So long as you're looking for practical help with GUI programs and not advice from someone who groks the larger open source community, you'll be fine.

See **GARAGE**, *p. 2*

April Roundup

Apr. 9 General User Meeting: **Warren Dukes** spoke about the challenges involved with managing a small open source project. Using his *Music Player Dæmon* project as an example, he covered all phases from inception through release and maintenance. Topics included choosing a license, managing the code repository, generating documentation, and publicizing the project. He also covered ways of fostering a community of users and developers. Warren's slides are available for download.

Apr. 30 Special Presentation: In conjunction with PghSAGE, WPLUG hosted a lively presentation by **Daniel V. Klein** titled "Flying Linux." Starting out with a discussion of digital fly-by-wire systems in aircraft, he went into other types of systems, both electronic and physical, and why they fail—either through accident or malicious intent. He continued by demonstrating the complexity of Linux and other modern operating systems and revealing many of the hidden assumptions we make about security.

Slides - <http://www.wplug.org/meetings/one-meeting?wp_meeting_id=3177>
Music Player Daemon - <http://www.musicpd.org/>
PghSAGE - <http://www.pghsage.org/>

Coming Events

May 21: Installfest. 10AM to 5PM, 1507 Newell-Simon Hall, CMU
May 28: General User Meeting, Topic: Version Control with Subversion. 10AM to 2PM, 1507 Newell-Simon Hall, CMU
Jun. 4: General User Meeting, Topic: MythTV. 10AM to 2PM, 1507 Newell-Simon Hall, CMU
Jun. 11: Tutorial, Topic: Regular Expressions. 10AM to 2PM, 1507 Newell-Simon Hall, CMU
Jul. 9: General User Meeting. 10AM to 2PM, 1507 Newell-Simon Hall, CMU
Jul. 16: Installfest. 10AM to 5PM, 1507 Newell-Simon Hall, CMU

The public is welcome at all events

GARAGE, *from p. 1*

The main drawback to *Linux Desktop Garage* is that it's only likely to stay useful for a year or two. The author unfortunately opted not to provide version numbers for most of the software she references, so as time goes on and features change, it'll be difficult for a new user to judge whether her reviews and advice are still valid for the versions of the software they'll actually encounter.

The included CD is also of little value. Though the book itself focuses primarily on the Fedora and Mandrake distributions, the CD contains a copy of the Gnoppix live CD distribution. While including a live CD isn't necessarily a bad idea, it's strange that they'd include one that's still in beta in a book that's meant for new users. The rest of the CD contents—a set of the links included in the book—might save a bit of typing but doesn't really do much to help.

Linux Desktop Garage will be a useful reference for its target audience, though as time passes users may have a hard time figuring out which parts they can still trust due to the lack of version numbers. For users who want something other than a quick reference to the software they can use on Linux in place of the Windows software they've used in the past, there are better resources available.

Bobbie Lynn Eicher is a student at the University of Pittsburgh.

Who is Linux's Spokesperson? *by Beth Lynn Eicher*

For better or worse, Americans associate a product's success with the popularity of a company's spokesperson. Billionaire Bill Gates is the public face of Microsoft. What would Apple be without the undeniable Steve Jobs?

The loss of a good spokesperson only goes to prove how valuable their influence was in the first place. For example, Dell was left scrambling when Steve, the "Dude, you're getting a Dell" Guy, was arrested. Even Wendy's Restaurants introduced an "unofficial" spokesperson to step in for the late Dave Thomas.

Since Linux is a worldwide movement and not a corporation, promoting it is not just a matter of throwing a few million dollars at the marketing department. Linux needs a spokesperson and thankfully we have many.

But if you had to select just one name to answer the question "who is the spokesperson for Linux?" who would be your choice? Let's take a look at this, shall we?

Of course it's Linus, right? Unfortunately his speaking engagements are very rare. From all accounts Linus Torvalds is a very private and reserved person.

What about Bruce Perens? He used to be very involved with Debian Linux, but these days seems to concentrate more on the broader issues surrounding Open Source.

So is it Eric Raymond? He doesn't focus on Linux, either. His Web page <http://www.catb.org/~esr/> contains opinions on programming, Open Source, privacy, and numerous other political ideas. Linux is mentioned very little.

OK, then is it Richard Stallman? Nope, his GNU project is still hard at work on The Hurd, intended to be an alternative to the Linux kernel.

What about Alan Cox? Unfortunately, he refuses to travel to the United States in protest of Dmitry Sklyarov's 2001 arrest under the Digital Millennium Copyright Act. The chances of breaking this boycott are slim, so we won't get to see Alan in person. Although he rarely grants interviews, he recently spoke to LugRadio <http://www.lugradio.org/episodes/24>.

Who is it, then? My nomination for the position is Jon "maddog" Hall, President of Linux International <http://marketing.li.org/>. He's out there promoting Linux worldwide without distribution loyalty. When he's on the road at various conferences he makes a point to be friendly to the local Linux User Group. When at home in New Hampshire, he's active in his local LUG. If that isn't enough, he's representing Linux in the computing community at large as a board member of USENIX.

Indeed, Linux needs many spokespersons in order for it to succeed. Anyone can do it and you can start small. Recommend Firefox to a coworker. Boot Knoppix on your brother's computer and show your niece how to play Frozen Bubble. Offer to help out at your local LUG. Sing the praises of running an operating system that is virtually free of spyware. Before you know it, you will be an advocate, too.

Beth Lynn Eicher is a Linux/Unix System Administrator for Carnegie Mellon University. She views her Open Source advocacy as a thanks to the community that has served her so well.

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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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