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## **Debian Etch vs. SuSE 10.1 Community**

I've been a Linux user for approximately 5 years. Before that, I dabbled with the OS, eventually learning what I needed to make the transition to a full-blown Linux user in 2001. My computer experience goes back to the mid-to-early 1970s... before the personal computer revolution. So, I have had a pretty good range of experience with computer operating systems.

Back in the 1970s, to 1980s,... computer operating systems were clunky, text command affairs. Those who were not schooled in the particular computer's command language, were basically S-O-L... Whether it was a Unix-based main-frame, a Timex-Sinclair 2KB computer, an Apple II, or a Commodore PET, Vic20, or C64, the user had to memorize a set of commands that made operating the machine fairly difficult. Through the early 1990s, this continued even on the IBM clones... Then that Redmond, WA company came out with it's Macintosh-like OS (if you can call it an OS)... and all that (slowly), began to change... PC OSES could be configured with more than just typing a few things on a keyboard. But beneath it all, the command lines were still there, able to do their job when the graphical user interface failed to provide the flexibility. Redmond's latest incarnations of their OS almost entirely do away with that flexibility. And then... they started telling people they wouldn't let them tinker with their machines any longer... That was the last straw, for me. I started using Linux exclusively on my personal systems at that point. That was around 2001. What does all this have to do with Debian Etch, or SuSE???,... you may ask. Simple. Modern Linux distributions come down to 2 factors when you are dealing with their capabilities. The first is Flexibility. The second is Ease of Set-Up. This is where each, Debian and SuSE differ. I first tried installing and configuring SuSE 10.1 Community on my Dell C640 laptop (strangely, coincidental that one of my first computers was a C64... ). What I found was a distribution that was relatively easy to install and set up. Then came configuration... YAST, the set up tool that SuSE uses, has recently (within the last 2 years) been open sourced. Still, instead of the tool becoming more configurable and flexible, it has become more rigid and demanding. If one makes changes in configuration files, SuSE's YAST has a tendency to change them back to what it likes... additionally, the developers have taken a play from that Redmond, WA company's playbook and taken away some of the options for configuration that you once had. No longer, for example, can you force SAX2 (the graphic card set up tool) to force 3D enabling on a given card or chipset, it's either provided or not. Also, wireless configuration is another sore spot. The various wireless tools cannot be easily installed or activated. Those who were SuSE 10 Professionals users before, will now find it difficult to configure their wireless card. YAST doesn't make this any easier. All of this takes away from what otherwise is a fabulous distribution. Debian Etch takes a different approach. Installation is tough. You need to know more about your hardware. Hardware is sometimes mis-identified. You need to be able to spot this. You also need to be able to know how to install various drivers for your components. That said, once this is done, Debian Etch delivers a first rate computing environment. Apt-get based tools make for easy upgrading and package delivery. The only difficulty is that the system is designed for the Linux user who knows their way around a command line. But once set, the system is generally rock-solid. The best part is that there is no installation tool that will force its will on your configuration. The downside is that sometimes there simply is no installation tool that will configure what you need. Then it's time to hit LinuxQuestions for your answers. The challenge is what makes Debian appeal to some. To others, it is a thorn in the distribution's side. Configuration, though is extremely flexible with Debian. Plus, you have to work very hard to break it. Both distros give access to a 2.6.16 kernel, and therefore allow you to experiment with Novell's new XGL capabilities. XGL allows the user to benefit now, with current hardware, from 3D accelerated desktop functionality. What has been promised as vapor-ware from Redmond, in the form of their new 3D-enhanced desktop, is here, now and working in Linux. XGL is, albeit, largely experimental, but for those brave souls that have chosen to install it, it provides eye candy which deflates the argument that good software can only come out of store-bought box. XGL can deliver solid 3D-enhanced performance on the desktop, true transparencies (which MAC OS X users have enjoyed for a long while), and reduced CPU load, all on yesterday's graphics hardware. Redmond is struggling to deliver this on tomorrow's hardware. Unfortunately, I haven't taken the leap of faith to install XGL and get it working on either distro. It is however, my next big project on my laptop. A note to those looking into XGL: This is not the same as SUN's Looking Glass project, which promises a real revolution in desktop performance and use, which includes the ability to rotate open applications, write on the back and side of those panes, and a whole host of other capabilities,... but it is a transitional step towards that kind of interface. It is also a big argument for those who want to show that Linux can not only do everything the proprietary PC OS can do,... but it can pull off things that that OS still cannot. Conclusion: In a word,... Choice. You have in Linux, the choice of whatever flavor you chose to use. You have the ease of the GUI to assist in set up, and the flexibility and control of the command line to allow ownership of your computing experience. For those wanting ease, SuSE 10.1 Community is a good choice. For those wanting the control that Linux can offer, Debian Etch is a solid recommendation. Currently, and for the foreseeable near future, I have chosen to be a SuSE user on my desktop (an older version which I MAY upgrade later), and a Debian Etch user on my laptop. Either way, I can't go wrong, and neither can you. Now,... if they could only finish porting Familiar and GPE to the Palm Lifestream...

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