

Monday, July 31, 2006

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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Posted by JaseP in Technology at 19:29

Monday, March 14, 2005

2005 the Year For Linux on the Desktop?

Is 2005 going to be the year for Linux on the desktop? Signs point to a continuation of the steady growth that the open source Linux operating system is experiencing.

For several years now, the Linux desktop has been developing toward a greater usability level and a greater presence on the desktops of average users. Signs are that this trend is going to continue to gain momentum in 2005. The major signs are greater adoption of open source programs as solutions for average users, and the increase in malware effecting the average user's ability to get simple computing done. If you couple that with the level of progress that the Linux distributions are making towards usability, then Linux user will continue to see greater momentum in 2005. Firefox, the open source web browser based on Mozilla, and the new Thunderbird (an open source e-mail client, part of the same project family) releases are seeing adoption by users all over the globe. Some statistics put Firefox web browser use at over 4%, a mere 5 months or so after it began to roll out. It seems that Microsoft is again putting attention on its Internet Explorer web browser as a result of the pressure that it is seeing from the Firefox project. Firefox has features that the average user wants. It is resistant to pop-up advertisements that populate the web. It is also resistant to installation of malware through the loading of those programs. Since it is not tightly integrated into the operating system, it does not serve as a conduit to infect the base operating system with malware. In all, it does everything the average user wants out of a browser, plus it is free. It is not just free as in cost, but it is free as in open, as in open source. Anyone who wants to inspect Firefox code, needs only to download it for themselves. They can then make changes or develop add-ons to their heart's content. Firefox looks to be poised to take the place of IE in the hearts of corporate IT executives who want to build custom interfaces to their intranets and extranets. Thunderbird seems positioned to do the same for e-mail clients what Firefox did for browsers. OpenOffice.org, the free office suite is another splendid example of this. OpenOffice does everything that Microsoft Office did a few years back with none of the added bloat that has come with newer versions. Its open source nature makes it an ideal candidate for integrating with third party applications for such things as document generation and publication. With its built in ability to export standard Adobe PDF files (standard open format version), it is a superb way for individuals to output documents that resist alteration by the reader. Microsoft executives must be in cold sweats. Their grip on the throats of the computing populace is slipping. Malware has taken an unprecedented hold on the computing populace's machines. One needs only talk to a few friends and co-workers to learn of infections by adware, spyware, viruses and trojan horses. Common knowledge tells us that an unprotected Microsoft Windows XP system on broadband internet will become infected within approximately four hours. Firewalls and virus scanners have done something to help prevent the spread, but these efforts are leading people to the inevitable conclusion; Microsoft security is severely lacking and is essentially locking the barn door after the horse has escaped. People are becoming increasingly frustrated and concerned. This concern stifles e-commerce and prevents the full use and enjoyment of the Internet. And,... what any salesman knows is that buying into a new solution is not a matter of weighing the facts. It is, however, all about how people feel about their situation. Microsoft itself, through its "too little, too late" approach to online security, and the poor design philosophy of their operating system and other products, has created the environment for change. People want to be safe, they want to enjoy their technology, and they want it to work like it is supposed to. Microsoft products fail here. Linux (as well as each of the other open source solutions) succeeds. Linux usability has increased in recent years. Install routines for the major distributions have become at least as easy, if not easier than Microsoft's. More and more machines are being sold with various Linux distributions already installed on them. While the average pre-installed Linux machine is not a speed demon of a machine, nor is the distribution of the manufacturer's choice usually a choice distribution, they are often better served by installing more complete distributions on them. Novell, with its recently acquired SuSE Linux, Mandrakesoft with its Mandrake Linux, and RedHat's Fedora Core spin-off project all have positioned themselves as outstanding commercial oriented distributions. Pure open source solutions such as Debian and Slackware are often popular choices. Users can get help for free on websites like LinuxQuestions.org. Most Linux users can operate a home Linux machine that can surf the web, serve as a home server (Internet firewall, file server, print server, etc.), and do all the simple things that they want (including play games, both native and under various emulation projects). Linux is being pushed in the embeded marketplace as well. Developers of computing appliances are apt to seek an open source solution because they can scale it to any architecture they want, rely on the efforts of the open source developer community to solve critical problems, and do it all without paying license fees to anyone. Linux looks here to stay. The Google search engine works on Linux servers. Linux is going to show up in the new version of the Palm operating system. If you believe you will not be using Linux in the new year, in at least some capacity,... well,... you might just be Bill Gates or Steve Ballmer.

Thursday, March 3, 2005

The future of the Palm

Is the Palm going to evolve into a new type of device, or is the technology going to continue to be what it is? What lies on the horizon for PDA devices in general and the Palm in particular?

Palm Source recently (within the last several months) announced that it has acquired China MobileSoft. While a corporate merger usually does not mean much in terms technology, this one will. China MobilSoft has a concentration in the development of embeded Linux. It seems that the next vesion of the Palm OS will be based upon a Linux kernel. This won't mean a lot to the end user, but it will mean a heck of a lot to Palm and other developers. The Linux kernel is on the verge of becoming what mobile telephone technology has become,... everywhere and hot. For a touch of what future Palm devices can become, one only has to look to the Sharp Zaurus. The Zaurus is the "it" PDA for the geek set. It is infinitely customizable. It can be everything from a smart terminal to a telephone, essentially it is a pocket dekstop computer. It is not surprising, considering that most PDAs have more processing power than desktop machines had a few generations ago. I currently use a Palm m130, an out-of-date PDA by any estimation. Yet the device is still very versatile. I can word process on it, do spreadsheets, play games, and,... oh, yes, check and update my schedule and monitor contacts. It is because of the ability to download programs that this is so. As memory gets bigger, and processors get more capable, the usefulness of the devices only get greater. There are those who have predicted that Palm-style PDA devices will get marginalized as technology improves. I see quite the opposite. In fact, the Palm Treo is just another example of how the integration of new technologies impoves the PDA devices. The Treo line is a full featured PDA line with cell phone technology built right in. While a little bulky for those who just want a cell phone, the Treos are perfect for those who carry around both a cell and a PDA. What is on the horizon? I predict simple voice recognition on future models as the power of the devices approaches the power of desktop machines (for those who scoff, remember that the Palm devices had the best, practical handwriting recognition system at their early stages, in their simple shorthand system). I predict broadband wireless internet access. And I predict that anything less than a Linux kernel will subject the machines to the kind of security nightmare that is MicroSoft Windows XP. I predict that laptop computers will be continue to be mobile desktop alternatives, but that true computing portability will be with the next generation or two of PDA devices.

Posted by JaseP in Technology at 15:38