An up-to-date look at free software and its makers

# PROJECTS ON THE MOVE

Free software covers such a diverse range of utilities, applications, and other assorted projects that it can be hard to find the perfect tool. We pick the best of the bunch. This month, we discuss Ubuntu, Debfoster, and Deborphan. **BY MARTIN LOSCHWITZ**

Don't expect the software patent directive to disappear from your screen just because the EU parliament rejected it; new initiatives have been announced by both friends and opponents of software patents.

## Ubuntu and Debian

Debian [1] is not considered a newbie-friendly distribution. The install is too complex, and despite attempts at automatic hardware detection, even something as simple as attaching a USB stick poses a seemingly impossible task for non-experts.

This is why even Debian developers have welcomed Ubuntu Linux [2] as an important step. The folks at Canonical have achieved what Debian has been attempting to do for ages: combined the benefits of Debian, especially with respect to package management, into a no-cost, user-friendly desktop distribution.

## Behind the Scenes

Ubuntu was founded by British Canonical. Its founder, Mark Shuttleworth, known as the "first African in space" [3], gave various Debian developers jobs at Canonical to allow them to work full-time on Ubuntu. These developers include some of the Debian project's major contributors, such as Debian Account Manager and FTP Master James Troup, along with Matt Zimmermann, a member of the security team.

One thing is for sure: Ubuntu has spread like wildfire without the initiator earning money with it. Ubuntu CDs are distributed liberally to Linux usergroups and at congresses or fairs. Anyone interested in doing so can visit the Ubuntu homepage and order CDs, which are posted to the applicant free of charge. However, the question is, why is Mark Shuttleworth spending so much money? Shuttleworth prefers not to say much about his motives saying that it is mainly for fun, and to establish an alternative to Microsoft. Canonical does earn revenue from Ubuntu through various technical support options.

## Criticism

Some Debian helpers have complained that some developers are neglecting their

**Figure 1: Competition between Debian and the Debian derivative Ubuntu continues to grow.**

work for the project and giving preference to the new distribution. The fact that some Debian developers are working for a project that is actually competing with Debian for users annoys others. However, most people agree that, from a technical point of view, Ubuntu is a step in the right direction. Of course, the Debian developers would have preferred Mark Shuttleworth to pay people for working on Debian rather than founding a project of his own.

It will be interesting to keep track of Debian's reactions to Ubuntu. The newly-founded Ubuntu Foundation [4] – to which Shuttleworth has donated generously – is intended to strengthen Ubuntu's community ties, but we may find that the Ubuntu Foundation actually widens the cleft between the Ubuntu and Debian distributions, although a further split is precisely what Debian wants to avoid.

Some developers warn that there may be no room for Debian in the future if Ubuntu decides to put out a server version. But the widespread conviction that Debian needs to provide more impetus itself, and risk changes in order to attract more interest from desktop users, cannot be denied. This said, the more active Debian developers that join Canonical and Ubuntu, the harder it will be for Debian to make that move.

## Legacies

If you manage a Debian system, you will be familiar with the issue: *apt-get* busily installs new packages whenever dependencies require it to do so. But the *apt-get* system does not take care of

removing obsolete packages from the system. In time, this can turn a Debian system into a software museum full of ancient packages.

The Aptitude or DSelect functions for removing defunct packages can only help you if you consistently use these management tools instead of *apt-get*. But manual package management with a typical collection of over 1000 installed packages is borderline insanity. This said, there is nothing to stop the system administrator from automating the task of checking for obsolete packages. Wessen Dankers wrote the Debfoster [5] program to automate the package checking process. If you launch the *debfoster* command with the *-s* option, it outputs a list of packages not required by any installed program.

## Conformity

Running Debfoster at regular intervals, especially after upgrades, will help you keep your package database free of obsolete packages. It makes a lot of sense to run a program like Debfoster after upgrading to a newer version of Debian, as running a Debian upgrade removes a large number of Debian packages from the distribution, but do not remove them from your hard disk. Just as an example, consider the old *gcc-2.95* packages, which Sarge replaces with *gcc-3.3* versions.

Some caution is advisable when using Debfoster. You can only be sure that you do not need seemingly orphaned packages if you install everything on your system via the package management system. Otherwise, you may find some programs that you build failing due to missing libraries.

## Deborphan as an Alternative

If you prefer an easier approach, you might appreciate Deborphan [6]. Deborphan is a small program, written by Debian developer Peter Palfrader, that

basically does the same job as Debfoster, but Deborphan also has the *orphaner*, a dialog-based text interface. Deborphan also searches for suspicious packages.

Deborphan has one more option that Debfoster cannot give you: the *-n* switch tells the program to recommend packages for removal, although other programs may reference them using a *Recommends* or *Suggests* entry.

## Sarge Release

Just a short while after the release of the latest Debian Sarge, major changes are again imminent at the Debian project. Debian developers stated that they would be introducing some fundamental changes to the Debian *unstable* branch.

For example, whereas Sarge still uses version 3.3 of the GNU Compiler Collection (GCC), the next Debian release will be moving to version 4. Since the new compilers introduce changes, the API programs compiled with GCC 3.3 would not necessarily work with libraries or programs compiled with GCC 4. This problem will mean Debian developers having to build more or less every single package from scratch. Work also appears to be continuing on the Debian Installer, which debuted with the Debian Sarge release.

To be able to finally release Sarge, the developers also postponed a number of changes, which have now blasted their way into *unstable*. Users are advised to avoid this branch of the distribution for the time being.

## That's All Folks

… for this month at least, but we do have one request: if you can recommend a program that you would like to see featured in *Projects on the Move*, why not mail me with your suggestion [7]? I look forward to your comments! ■

| **INFO** |
| --- |
| [1] Debian: *http://www.debian.org* |
| [2] Ubuntu: *http://www.ubuntulinux.org* |
| [3] Mark Shuttleworth: *http://www.firstafricaninspace.com/* |
| [4] Ubuntu Foundation: *http://www.ubuntulinux.org/Ubuntu/Foundation* |
| [5] Debfoster: *http://www.fruit.eu.org/debfoster/* |
| [6] Deborphan: *http://packages.debian.org/deborphan* |
| [7] Tips: *projects@linux-magazine.com* |