

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 assorted projects that it is sometimes difficult to find the perfect tool. We pick the best of the bunch. This month we cover blogging – the latest buzz, the latest on the DPL elections, and more trouble at Debian. **BY MARTIN LOSCHWITZ**

**T**he EU is entering the second round of the battle over software patents. While supporters have successfully had the directive passed by the EU Council of Ministers, opponents of patents are increasing the pressure prior to the second reading. The number of pages warning about the danger of software patents continues to grow. And it appears unlikely – although by no means impossible – that the European Parliament will pass the directive.

## Diaries All Round?

More and more, communicative people have adopted the idea of using a blog to let other users share their ideas, thoughts, and feelings. Blogs are typically edited in a browser. The blogging software on the server then creates a website to match the users' entries. Users who prefer to run their blogs on their own servers will need blogging software – luckily many free blogging applications are available.

## Flowery Creations

The authors of Blossom [1] claim that their blog management tool is easy to

use, install, and configure. For example, administrators do not need to create a database or waste time trying to set one up, as Blossom uses simple text files. Entries can be created in the web interface and uploaded via FTP or WebDAV. Plugins add all kinds of functionality to Blossom. The default package supports RSS feeding of blog entries, and themes give the Blossom blog a pleasing appearance.

## Comments Wanted

The B2 Evolution ([2] blogging application is an alternative. In contrast to Blossom, B2 Evolution can manage multiple user accounts and even groups if required. B2 Evolution has been translated to many languages and has a comment function that supports interactive communication. A blocker removes the spam put there by pesky robots.

B2 Evolution is the result of a complete overhaul of B2. The software is slightly more difficult to install than Blossom, as B2 Evolution needs a MySQL database. Just like Blossom, B2 Evolution can generate an RSS feed from the blog entry headlines, and it is plugin

extensible. B2 Evolution also has themes to allow users to design their own blogs.

Like the other solutions, Serendipity [3] aims for ease of use. Themes and skins allow users to modify the blog software's appearance. Version 0.8, which is still under development, even supports Smarty framework [4] templates.

Serendipity can also manage multiple user accounts. The comment function adds threading on top of B2 Evolution's offering, and this makes for less cluttered, longer discussions. Again, a spam filter removes the junk ads from the blog; and if that is not enough, bloggers can stipulate that they want to view comments first before manually manually approving the comments for publishing.

## Multi-Language Support

The web interface is available in English, Czech, Danish, French, German, or Spanish. Administrators have a choice of database back-ends, including MySQL, PostgreSQL and SQLite, which is quite simple to install. Serendipity also supports a wide selection of output formats. Rather than just reading blogs in your

browser, you can opt for an RSS feed, BB-Code [5] as used by PHP-BB, various wiki formats, or ASCII text in addition to the standard HTML.

If the word syndicate makes you think of the Mafia, think again. A syndicate can be, and frequently is, a neutral word meaning any kind of lobby group. In the context of blogs, syndication refers to the idea of collecting RSS feeds from blogs and displaying them on a common homepage.

## The Syndicate

The Planet Planet [6] project creates syndicates. It was originally designed to collate and display RSS feeds from blogs belonging to a few Debian and Gnome developers on the Planet Debian [7] (see Figure 1) and Planet Gnome [8] home pages.

Now the software is freely configurable and will collate arbitrary feeds. The RSS standard ensures that Planet Planet is capable of reading and seamlessly integrating feeds generated by blogs or other pages. Many projects use Planet pages for internal communications or for public relations work.

## New Debian Project Leader Elected

The perennial number two has finally made it: Branden Robinson (Figure 2) won this year's election to become the Debian Project Leader (DPL). With just a short lead over former Debian Release Manager Anthony Towns, Branden Robinson took the top notch, and nobody seemed more surprised about the result than Branden himself. In fact, he said it

took several hours for the good news to hit home.

The Debian developers have put their trust in Branden as one of six candidates who applied for the job of steering the Debian project. Last year there were only two genuine candidates. Some of this year's candidates election campaigns were fairly similar, although there were some diametrically opposed views in some cases. Jonathan Walther, who gained notoriety by propagating conspiracy theories, came last. Martin Michlmayr, the previous Debian Leader, did not run for re-election.

Branden Robinson sees the election result as support for his idea of putting the tasks assigned to the project leader into the hands of a team headed by the DPL [10]. This new idea for organizing the Debian management process will have ample time to prove its value before the next DPL elections take place in April 2006.

## Quicker Debian Releases?

Debian Sarge will be released, some time! Until that happens, the release managers have put the interim period to good use speculating on improvements at the fringe of a conference in Vancouver, Canada, which was initiated by a Norwegian Unix user group. This is where they drew up the so called Vancouver Document, which was then posted on the Debian developer mailing list for discussion [11]. Less important things have led to battles in the past, so it comes as no surprise that the posting gave rise to an intensive debate, including some fairly intense flaming.

The bone of contention was the idea of not offering Debian releases for all eleven of the currently supported architectures, but restricting the official release to four architectures in the current release cycle: the 386 family, the PowerPC, Intel's IA64, and the AMD 64. Although support for other processor types would not disappear completely, it would no longer be a mandatory part of the Debian stable release. Users



Figure 2: The DPL Branden Robinson beat Anthony Towns by a short lead.

wanting to run Debian on other architectures would thus be forced to move to the unstable tree. Many developers fear that these "second class architectures" could soon become neglected.

## To be continued...

Projects on the Move will be back – hopefully with even more sensational software from the FOSS scene, but we do have one request before we go: 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 [12]? I look forward to your comments! ■

## INFO

- [1] Blosxom: <http://www.blosxom.com>
- [2] B2 Evolution: <http://b2evolution.net>
- [3] Serendipity: <http://www.s9y.org>
- [4] Smarty: <http://smarty.php.net>
- [5] BB-Code: <http://www.phpbb.com/phpBB/faq.php?mode=bbcode>
- [6] Planet Planet: <http://planetplanet.org>
- [7] Planet Debian: <http://planet.debian.net>
- [8] Planet Gnome: <http://planet.gnome.org>
- [9] Thank you message from Branden Robinson: <http://lists.debian.org/debian-project/2005/04/msg00087.html>
- [10] Branden Robinson's campaign platform: <http://www.debian.org/vote/2005/platforms/branden>
- [11] Vancouver Document by Steve Langasek: <http://lists.debian.org/debian-develop-announce/2005/03/msg00012.html>
- [12] Tips and suggestions: [projects@linux-magazine.com](mailto:projects@linux-magazine.com)



Figure 1: Planet pages collect, collate and display RSS feeds.