Community Notes

THE YEAR WAS 2006

Jon Masters looks at a few of the defining moments of 2006 and rounds up the latest activities from the many different Linux User Groups around the world. **BY JON MASTERS**

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This past year will be noted as one in which even the most traditional software companies who didn't "get it" – such as Microsoft – sat up and finally tried to listen. It was also a year in which the dynamics of the Linux community changed. There was a shift away from the mainstream media and users caring solely about "Linux," to users becoming more interested in the fundamental concepts behind free and open source software. I know of many Windows users who discovered Firefox, Wikipedia, and Thunderbird in 2006, but who have no interest in making the switch away from their Mac OS X or Windows PC – yet they still do "get it," and are increasingly getting involved in areas in which the different project communities overlap. In fact, a recently published book, *Wikinomics*, aims to draw various conclusions from these trends

and is on its way toward being a best-selling examination of the power of communities like our own.

In 2006, we saw the first revisions of the new GPL version 3 license, which will, for the first time, introduce restrictions for distributors of GPL software who wish to assert their rights to certain patents and intellectual property. GPL version 3 goes way beyond just providing patent protection for GPL authors. It also tries to prevent "tivoization" of GPL-based projects through their use in devices featuring restrictive DRM and digital signing technologies designed to make it difficult (or "impossible") for the community to make modifications.

These may be laudable goals, but not everyone was happy to see this happen; we've seen a lot of community fragmentation and positioning over the endeavor. Some projects directly affected by GPL version 3 (like the BusyBox project) almost imploded over the issue. We're likely to see more serious discussions about the adoption of GPLv3 in 2007.

An interesting counter-point to the issue of "tivoization" came from recent debates in the Linux kernel community about binary device drivers. We know that using binary graphics drivers on otherwise "free" Linux systems stinks of hypocrisy, but many of us are getting addicted to the higher performance and increased feature set some of these drivers have to offer. Some Linux distributions have been making such drivers available for a while as part of their default installation. Things came to a head in December 2006 with the proposal to finally make

it impossible for these drivers to load on systems running Linux through technical restrictions in the Linux kernel. It wasn't until Linus Torvalds stepped in and pointed out how much such actions smelled like those of the big movie companies (who love their DRM technologies) that some people saw how the power of free software often comes from the ability to do "evil" things with it.

One of the most interesting things to happen in the Linux community over the past year came from one of the most unexpected dark and dreary corners. Microsoft, having realized that Linux and FLOSS (Free, Libre, and Open Source Software) are here to stay, decided to shift its whole anti-Linux strategy toward supporting certain Linux projects and a variety of attempts at standardization in order to further the company's efforts to break into new markets. Where this ultimately will lead is unclear – I'm cynical when it comes to anything involving Microsoft. It's hard to see how the traditional "Embrace, Extend, Extinguish" philosophy will apply to Linux, but I wouldn't be too surprised if we see the first release of a major Microsoft product for a popular Linux distribution sometime later this year. In fact, I think that if we don't see such an offering in

Figure 1: Greater London discussed the EU Streaming petition.

2007, that'll speak even greater volumes about the continually evolving strategy over in Redmond.

Finally, the past year has seen further growth at the local level. As I mentioned last month, I'm noticing tremendous growth in countries such as India, where users are often stuck with older releases of popular distributions (due to a combination of bandwidth and lack of good infrastructure to promote alternatives), but I'm also noticing the continued evolution of existing communities.

Some Linux User Groups are now more than 5 or even 10 years old, and some members have known each other for years. We're all growing together in different ways, and the growing popularity of community-organized social events illustrates this. Haven't been to one of these yet? Check out a BarCamp [1] coming soon to city near to you.

Canadian Association for Open Source (CLUE)

Members of CLUE [2] have been taking a retrospective look at 2006, with thoughts of a transition the group made last year away from being just a meeting point for cross-LUG communication, toward an advocacy and policy-making role. CLUE now engages in discussion concerning key pieces of Canadian (and worldwide) legislation affecting technology and Linux users, while also serving to promote Linux both at home and abroad.

New York Linux User Group (NYLUG)

The group recently discussed an article on linux.com [3] about getting a refund for your "windows tax" (the cost of a Microsoft Windows license that's rolled into most new PC purchases) and how to get a refund for your unused copy of Windows. Many people were actively praising Dell for their continued efforts to offer the Linux community a choice of products without a pre-installed copy of Microsoft Windows. Dell Linux systems may not be easy to order via the website, but you have to consider that the site is still designed for the legions of buyers who *think* they want Microsoft.

Figure 2: Our Boston LUG contended the problem of a lost database.

Birmingham Linux User Group (SBLUG)

A group member started a discussion about the lousy state of WiFi support on many Linux systems (a popular topic on many LUG lists). In this case, they were using the "madwifi" drivers and experiencing lockups from time to time. This isn't surprising – the Linux wireless stack is getting a much needed overhaul, but problems persist. The member uses the Broadcom bcm43xx driver and still has an occasional hard lockup on his Apple Powerbook.

Another member brought attention to a pledge drive for open source 3D drivers for Nvidia graphics cards, noting that a US$ 10 donation could help the project with hardware and other resources. The Nouveau project [4] looks interesting – interesting enough that at least one Linux distribution intends to support Nouveau in its next release.

Greater London Linux User Group (GLLUG)

A longish thread called "EU Council Streaming Petition" noted that the Council of Europe makes various sessions available online through electronic media streaming, all of which is only supported on Mac and MS Windows systems, because they choose to use Microsoft's proprietary WMV (Windows Media Video) format for the streamed content. Most disturbing was a quote from the EU FAQ, which notes "We cannot support Linux in a legal way. So the answer is: No support for Linux." A petition is underway to convince the Council of Europe that supporting Linux wouldn't really be such a bad thing.

GLLUG also discussed the various Linux magazines available on the market. Included was mention of this publication and the choice quote, "Linux Magazine bills itself as 'the magazine for advanced Linux know-how', and its content is much more technical; it's less flashy and is a sister title to a German Linux magazine." It's always good to feel appreciated.

And finally...

My local LUG had an outage last month, which wiped out the subscriber database for the mailing lists; there wasn't a recent backup to restore from. It's always interesting to be reminded that all technology will fail in the end; disks are volatile, and backups are of utmost importance. Yet, like many others, I now suffer from having too much data to easily back up. I've taken to using external disks to back up a few hundred GB at a time – really the only alternative unless you love sitting around while hundreds of DVDs are burned one at a time. As Roger Light mentioned on the Nottingham Linux User Group mailing list – encfs is finally in Linux 2.6.19 if you need a lightweight encrypted filesystem that's reasonably easy to set up for off-site backups. ∎

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[1] BarCamp: *http://barcamp.org/*

[2] CLUE: *http://www.cluecan.ca/*

[3] Refund for Windows tax: *http://community.linux.com/print.pl?sid=07/01/03/227237*

[4] Noveau Projects: *http://nouveau.freedesktop.org/wiki/*