



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

PROJECTS ON THE MOVE

In this month's Projects on the Move, we observe the battle between man and (chess) machine and check out the free Colonization clone. Also in this issue, tools for Linux users who find themselves facing the Windows prompt. **BY CARSTEN SCHNOBER AND MARTIN LOSCHWITZ**

It is hard to recall a game of chess that has seen as much publicity as did the game between world chess champion Wladimir Borissowitsch Kramnik and the computer Deep Fritz, a multiple CPU machine running the Fritz [1] chess program. Although this world champion software is a commercial Windows program, players who need something less challenging than Kramnik may appreciate free chess engines such as GNU Chess [2] or Crafty [3].

Man vs. Machine

Most chess enthusiasts probably don't want to type in their moves at the command line. XBoard [4] offers little more than the bare necessities in the line of functionality. glChess [5] has more appealing looks (see Figure 1). glChess is a GUI program that lets humans battle computerized opponents, although glChess does not have its own engine and resorts to existing engines instead.

glChess's optional three-dimensional view is designed to make the computer-

ized game more accessible to players by simulating a real board. If you prefer, you can do without the eye candy and switch to a traditional 2D mode (Figure 2), which makes chess training easier, of course. You have plenty of time to train against opponents like GNU Chess, Crafty, and the others before world champ Kramnik takes revenge on Deep Fritz in two or three years time.

Commands

If you need proof that Linux is mature, consider that there is a whole generation of sysadmins who are unfamiliar with any other operating system. Even Linux-only users have to admit that they occasionally stumble across Windows within their own four walls. If you are familiar with the Linux shell, you will find even the most simple tasks, such as viewing a text file, inconvenient. Windows lacks an equivalent to the *less* program, and also for most other GNU tools.

If you need to simulate a complete Linux system on Windows, you can in-

stall Cygwin [6], for example. Doing so gives you a Linux environment with the GNU developer tools, and thus the ability to build, and even run Linux applications under Windows. You can even run an X server in Cygwin to hide the underlying Windows version completely.

If you simply need the GNU tools at the Windows prompt, installing Cygwin is overkill. The GnuWin32 [7] project has Windows ports of the major tools, including: the *coreutils*, which in turn comprise *fileutils* such as *cp*, *dd*, *df*, and *touch*; and the practical *textutils*, including *cat*, *cut*, *tail*, *wc*, *sort*, and more.

In addition to this, GnuWin32 includes Windows ports of typical Unix-style archiving and compression tools *tar*, *bzip2*, and *gzip*. The free tool collection for the Windows command line users leaves nothing to be desired in the line of daily tools from the Linux world.

Free Compiler

If the many Windows ports of GNU programs are not enough, you can build

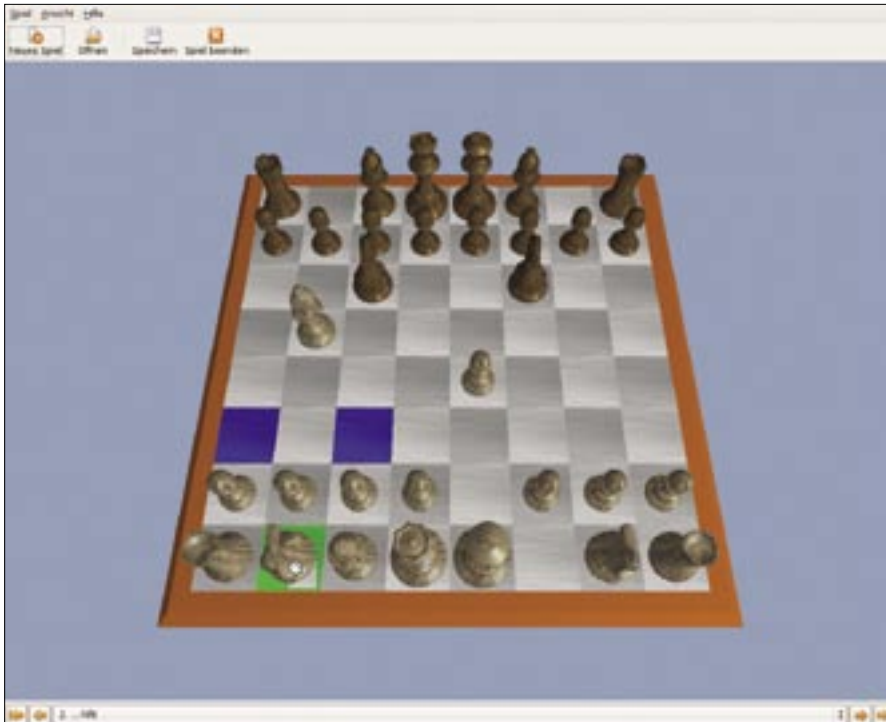


Figure 1: gChess uses popular chess engines to let humans battle computerized opponents on a three-dimensional chess board.

programs by using the Windows version of the Gnu Compiler Collection (GCC), also called wgcc [8]. wgcc produces native Windows binaries that work without any non-Windows support. The wgcc compiler works much like its Unix counterpart, with most command line parameters behaving as expected.

Colonization

You may be familiar with Civilization [8], by programmer Sid Meier. The aim is to guide a civilization through as many rounds of development from pre-historic times, through the Middle Ages and the present, into the future. Colonization, also by Meier, follows a similar pattern. Players land in the New World with one of the major colonial forces, with the aim of leading a colony to independence either in the face of hostile indigenous tribes or other colonists, or with friendly indigenous tribes or colonists who are willing to trade with you.

A free clone of Civilization that goes by the name of Freeciv [10] has been around for some time. Fans of Colonization have also applied the principles of the game to another free program. Initial results, dubbed FreeCol, are now available from the FreeCol site [11] (Figures 3 and 4). The look of the Java program is reminiscent of the 12 year-old original,

and thus similar to Freeciv. However, the latter can't hold sway with the current version, Civilization IV, whereas there have been no further versions of Colonization since the original release, thus putting the free alternative on par with its role model.

FreeCol compares well with Colonization with respect to gameplay, although

the artificial intelligence demonstrated by computerized opponents and the controls are less sophisticated.

Almost in Time

Debian GNU/Linux 4.0 alias etch should have been completed by December 2006, but it hasn't happened. Accompanied by much gnashing of teeth, the developer responsible for this release, Steve Langasek, confessed that etch was about three months behind the official schedule. Despite much bravado up to just a few weeks ago, Langasek admitted that it had been impossible to keep to the December date originally planned for the release.

The delay had not entirely been due to a lack of capacity, Langasek explained, and the distribution benefited from improvements in many fields. For example, the Debian Installer release candidate was released at the end of November and allowed most users to complete the install with a minimum of fuss. Langasek was particularly pleased that the critical bug count continued to drop in the weeks since the latest status update. The release team is now focusing on ditching buggy packages to help speed up the process.

Smirking Over Dunc-Tank

The "Debian won't be ready on time" message provoked a bout of derisive

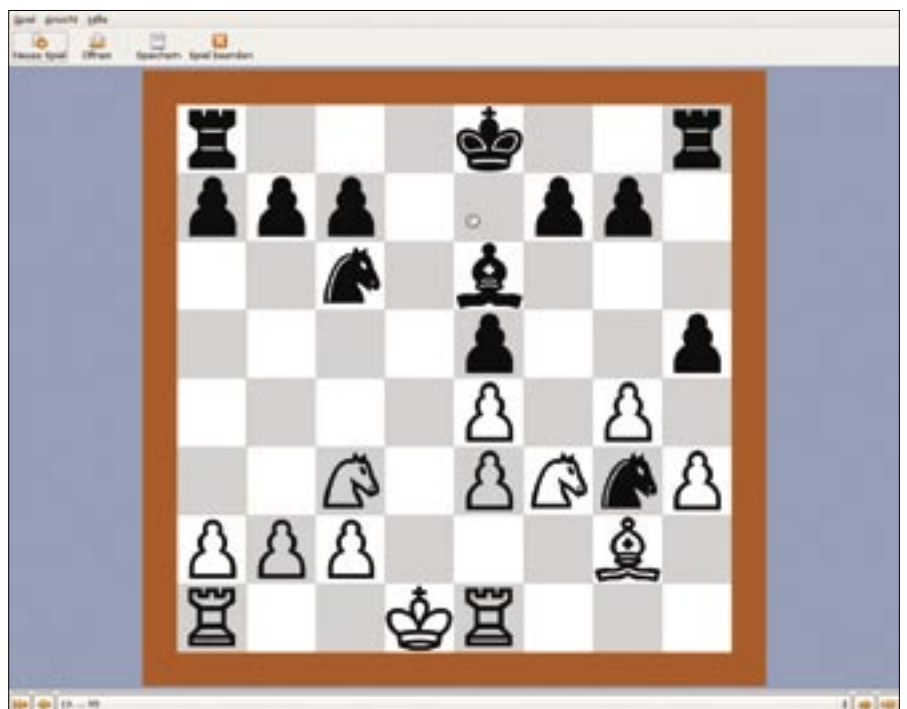


Figure 2: If 3D graphics confuse you, why not switch to the 2D view?



Figure 3: The free game, FreeCol, emulates the classic strategy game Colonization, which in turn is similar to Civilization.

comments on the subject of Dunc-Tank, the endeavor initiated in the main by project leader Anthony Towns to pay US\$ 6,000 to release managers Steve Langasek and Andreas Barth for two full months of work on etch. Even prominent Debian developers like Josselin Mouette had something to say. Despite

all the criticism, few actually questioned the future of the Dunc-Tank concept, as is evidenced by a couple of carefully formulated, but positive comments about Dunc-Tank on Planet Debian [12].

The author of Debian Weekly News (DWN), Martin Schulze, was less forgiving. As reported in this column, Debian

Weekly News appeared only once in October and November, rather than weekly. The November issue of the newsletter contained a statement in its introduction that the delay between subsequent Debian Weekly News publications could be considerable due to “unfortunate circumstances”. The link hiding behind the word “circumstances” took readers to the Dunc-Tank homepage.

Debconf 7 on the Horizon

Registration for Debconf 7, which is due to be held in Edinburgh, Scotland in the summer of 2007, has been opened on the Debian-Devel-Announce mailing list [13] by Moray Allan, the main organizer. Suggestions for talks and workshops are welcome as of now. Developers interested in claiming travel allowances from the large sponsorship kitty can download an application form. Also, a Deb-camp will be taking place prior to the developer conference proper, as in the past, to give developers an opportunity to exchange and directly implement some of their ideas.

In the past few years, Debconf has produced many constructive suggestions that found their way into the distribution later. The impromptu Debconf bug-squashing parties, which quickly eliminated many an intractable bug, are also legendary. ■



Figure 4: FreeCol's looks are reminiscent of its commercial role mode, which admittedly is now 12 years old.

INFO

- [1] Fritz: <http://www.chessbase.com/shop/product.asp?pid=304>
- [2] GNU Chess: <http://www.gnu.org/software/chess>
- [3] Crafty: <ftp://ftp.cis.uab.edu/pub/hyatt/>
- [4] XBoard: <http://www.tim-mann.org/xboard.html>
- [5] glChess: <http://glchess.sourceforge.net>
- [6] Cygwin: <http://www.cygwin.com>
- [7] GnuWin32: <http://gnuwin32.sourceforge.net>
- [8] wgcc: <http://interix-wgcc.sourceforge.net>
- [9] Civilization: <http://www.2kgames.com/index.php?p=games&platform=&title=civ4>
- [10] Freeciv: <http://www.freeciv.org>
- [11] FreeCol: <http://www.freecol.org>
- [12] Planet Debian: <http://planet.debian.org/>
- [13] Mail from Moray Allan: <http://lists.debian.org/debian-devel-announce/2006/11/msg00005.html>