Jon Masters is a British-born Linux kernel developer who works for a US-based Linux vendor. He has been actively involved with the Linux community since he started his first degree at age 13. Jon is a member of more than 50 Linux User Groups around the world.

January featured the usually eclectic mix of LUG discussions in Europe and in North America. Topics covered everything from electronic tax filing software to network configuration, discussions of the design of the RFID technology used on the more recent London Underground subway transportation tickets, and a BBC plan to support Microsoft's proprietary formats in a new online streaming service. There were, of course, the usual recurring themes – Linux on the desktop (including where to buy a Linux Desktop computer in Australia), Asterisk server configuration, and building proprietary Linux kernel drivers for unsupported

LUG of the Month

Send a description of your LUG (along with some high-res images) to: *jcm@jonmasters.org*

Community Notes

LIFE IN THE LUGS

LUGS debate tax time, free BBC content online, hosting Linux swap on LVM, and more. **BY JON MASTERS**

hardware. The OLPC Project (One Laptop Per Child) announced more fun, too.

Tax Time

With the new year in full swing, it's tax time. Many Linux users would like to use electronic tax filing software on our Linux systems, rather than having to file manually or use Windows, but there's a lack of specifically ported Linux versions of mainstream tax software.

Other Linux users are concerned about the ability to run such tax software under emulation on a Linux machine (I plan to try out various software under CrossOver, as was even mentioned in a "Replacement for Quickbooks" discussion thread on Boston's BLU LUG). This is an issue that is bound to recur again next year. As Benjamin Franklin said, "In this world nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes."

Free BBC

The BBC announced a consultation surrounding plans to provide much of their content online for free for a limited period of time after it is broadcast. There are strings attached – in this case, in the form of a DRM mandate. Apparently, the only way they could be convinced to provide content online involved implementing a proprietary, restrictive Digital Rights Management (DRM) system layered on Windows.

London GLLUG list posters debated the following excerpt from the BBC Trust website at some length: "Our understanding is that the BBC Executive aspires to offer an alternative DRM framework, which would enable Apple and Linux users to access the service, but has yet to identify a satisfactory solution. In either case, we will expect this to have been addressed within 24 months." Of course, that's still

up to two years before Linux users have an easy route to access this content. UK readers can still offer feedback.

Getting Technical

Technical questions raised this month on LUG lists included the merits of hosting Linux swap on LVM (Logical Volume Manager). Historically, there have been many issues involving the existence of swap on anything other than a pure hard-disk partition or other similar block-level device, due to the way that memory management works on Linux. Often, some memory is needed in order to free up other memory – that is, when your Linux system is running low on memory and begins to thrash as it writes data to disk, it may require more free memory in order to perform this operation. The amount of memory required can be surprisingly large, especially in the case of attempting to host swap over a network. These days, some of these issues are of less practical concern, and so came the following reply to SVLUG (Silicon Valley LUG) as to whether swap-on-LVM had significant performance impact: "It's not noticeable. If you're swapping enough that it may be an issue, buy more RAM." Problem solved.

One of the most off-topic discussions of the past month began with an empty

Figure 1: The OLPC kid-friendly and colorful laptop.

message called, "Is that right that the Oyster card got RFID on it?" [sic], which refers to the "Oyster" RFID-based stored-value card system used on the London underground subway network. Readers added technical detail in the thread – the fact that the cards use a 13.56 MHz DESFire chip, the expense of acquiring equipment to examine these cards, and the limited range of practical reading equipment. One poster worried about RFID tags embedded in all products, everywhere. Messages like, "No you can be scanned without knowing – you don't know how far the radio frequency reaches – you don't know how far special equipment can scan you," were greeted with, "Terrorists could scan your house remotely and determine that you buy food." And that's the point; even this tin-foil hat-wearing author is not going to claim RFID technology is fundamentally designed to erode privacy.

OLPC

The OLPC project is considering a trial in Australia as part of their wider rollout, which begins over the next year. Users of

Figure 2: The "unconference", FUDCon in Boston.

the laptop won't be solely confined to the developing world, even if that is the primary market. Although those of us with access to mainstream laptops are unlikely to ditch them in favor of OLPC units, there are many viable uses for low-cost, durable, capable devices such as these the whole world over.

Conferences

January saw the 8th annual LCA (Linux Conf Australia) conference. Attendee numbers continue to increase, and I can't help but wonder whether the location has anything to do with the popularity of the event.

This year, the Ottawa Linux Symposium will be held earlier than usual, at

the end of June, rather than the end of July. There's still time left for paper submissions and to register at the early rates at *linuxsymposium.org*.

I checked out the FUDCon (Fedora User and Developer Conference) in Boston. Like a growing number of other community events, FUDCon is often organized as a BarCamp, an "unconference" in which participants meet and self-organize into particular anticipated talks and tracks. Hot topics at this FUDCon included ongoing work to merge Fedora Core and Extras into one community-maintained distribution, competing Linux virtualization technologies, desktop concerns, and the various funky release tools currently under development.

Conclusion

I follow activities of many Linux User Groups around the English and French speaking world, but I can only do so much. I would like to hear about discussions on other mailing lists and parts of the world that don't get covered. If you've got something to say, drop me a line at *jcm@jonmasters.org*. ∎