

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 projects, that it can be hard to find the perfect tool. We pick the best of the bunch. This month we examine Bluefish, Bidwatcher, KWappen, Capi4BSD, and current events at the Debian project. **BY MARTIN LOSCHWITZ**

An anthropologist at the University of Chicago recently defended a PhD dissertation on ethics and politics of the free software movement. Although Debian wasn't the sole focus of the work, Gabriella Coleman interviewed several Debian developers, attended Debian conferences, and was a regular on Debian IRC channels. You'll find an excerpt of the dissertation at [1].

KWappen Game

In contrast to modern 3D shooters, KWappen does not need a powerful graphics adapter. KWappen is a game of skill, and thanks to the simple rules, it is

suitable for filling in those workday breaks.

As the name suggests, KWappen is a KDE application. The object of the game is to remove four stacks with the coats of arms of the 16 German federal states as quickly as possible. Each coat of arms has one of the four suits of cards: diamonds, hearts, clubs, and spades. Two cards with matching coats of arms on top of each other are removed from the stack. And if all four cards have the same coat of arms, all four disappear. Players can interact with the game by distributing the cards, which are dealt by the computer, across their stacks.

To improve the way the cards are

stacked, players can swap cards between stacks. The simple rules make for a simple game, and this means that the fun factor sets in after just a few minutes. The game's author, Jens Schulz, also had the educational aspect of the game in mind when he designed KWappen; players also get to memorize the coats of arms. If you are interested, you can download the program at [2].

Do I Hear Twenty?

eBay has developed into a national pastime. In some households anything that has outlived its usefulness ends up in a virtual auction. At the same time, virtual auctions can lead to genuine bargains,



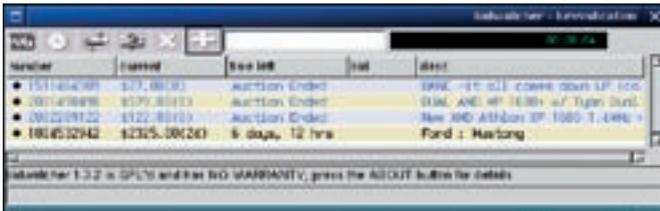


Figure 1: The Bidwatcher user interface may be retro, but it works.

and many items exchange hands at far less than store prices.

Keeping track of auction items in browser windows is not everyone's idea of fun, but Bidwatcher can help put the fun back into online auctions.

Bidwatcher [3] uses the GTK1 interface, which makes it look slightly retro (Figure 1); this said, the GUI is clear-cut and intuitive. After launching the program, enter your username and eBay password preferences, and off you go! An input box in the main window lets you input the article number of any auctions you want to monitor (the number is available on the homepage for the auction), thus providing an at-a-glance overview of the auction status.

Bidwatcher shows the official eBay clock, thus giving you official timekeeping even if your real time clock is inaccurate. Users do not even need to switch to a browser to enter a bid; an input box in Bidwatcher takes care of this. Bid input is a useful feature when an auction is drawing to a close. The couple of seconds that a browser can take to redraw a web page can be decisive. Bidwatcher also gives you the ability to automate this process; that is, to enter your bid just seconds before the auction closes, although eBay's conditions of use explicitly forbid this kind of hacking.

Programming Made Simple

Many developers still prefer simple editors such as Vi or Nano. In some cases, these programs may have syntax highlighting for various programming languages. Things start to get more complicated if you need to edit multiple documents at the same time, or if you need line numbering. The Bluefish editor (Figure 2) has features for various scripting languages neatly packed in a GUI.

Olivier Sessink originally authored Bluefish. Chris Mazuc, Neil Millar, and Hylke van der Schaaf have been with the project right from the outset. The four programmers needed a powerful and

flexible editor for their own programming work. At first, Bluefish was distributed as an HTML Editor. Bluefish is still advertised as a "Web development environment", but now it can also handle programming in languages such as Perl.

The program had a lot of potential and followed the path that many free software applications take: more and more developers patched the code and publicized their patches. Despite ongoing development, it took five years for the developers to publicize the milestone 1.0 release in January 2005.

The GTK-based interface uses tabs to separate individual sections of code. Each tab contains buttons that automatically generate preset code snippets. HTML is clearly still the main focus of Bluefish: the tabs allow users to specify fonts and insert HTML tables. There is also a separate section for CSS.

Bluefish additionally supports Docbook, PHP, and SQL commands. The program can also check your websites for W3-compliance and spellcheck your

work with an integrated spellchecker. Support for C, Perl, and other languages is restricted to syntax highlighting.

Bluefish also has a convincing help function that includes a complete index of HTML, PHP, CSS, and Python functions. This gives web designers a complete reference with all the information they need for daily tasks.

Intelligent project management supports the parallel development of various projects by displaying only the files that belong to the current project.

ISDN with FreeBSD

On the server market, FreeBSD is gaining ground as an alternative to Linux. It is an excellent choice for Voice over IP (VoIP) and landline gateway applications, in combination with Asterisk, as FreeBSD now has a Capi driver that supports communication over ISDN cards.

The developer of Capi4BSD, Thomas Wintergerst, states that he used the Linux Capi implementation as a knowledge base for his own work. The Linux *libcapi* is a major component of the Capi4BSD environment. Just like on Linux, the FreeBSD implementation adds a kernel driver that handles the communication between the Capi library and the ISDN card.

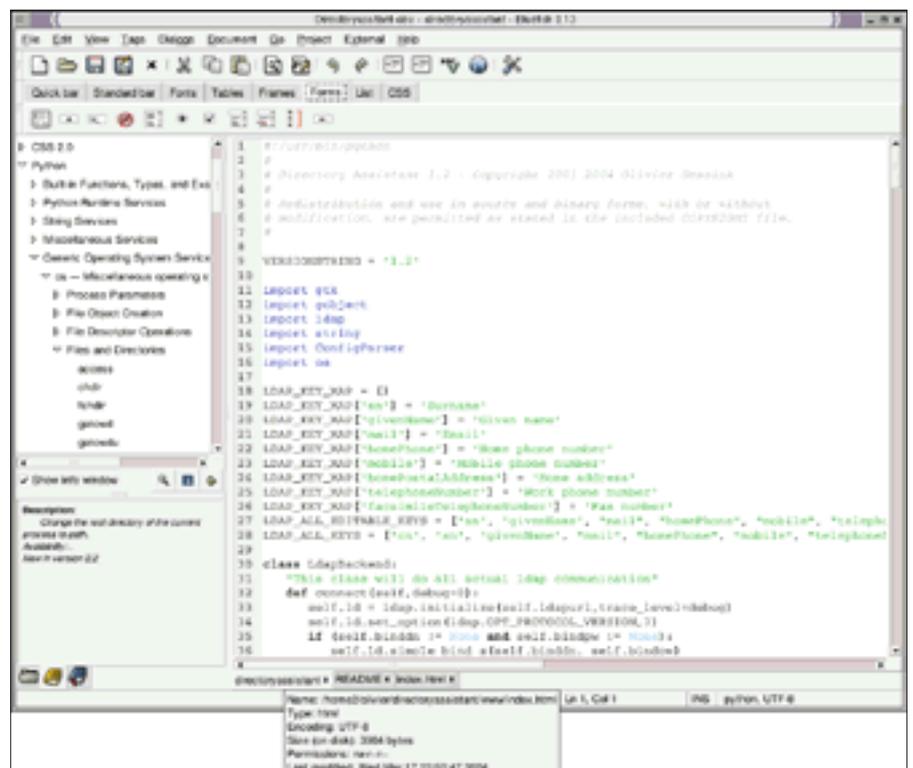


Figure 2: Bluefish started life as a HTML editor but now supports programming in various scripting languages.

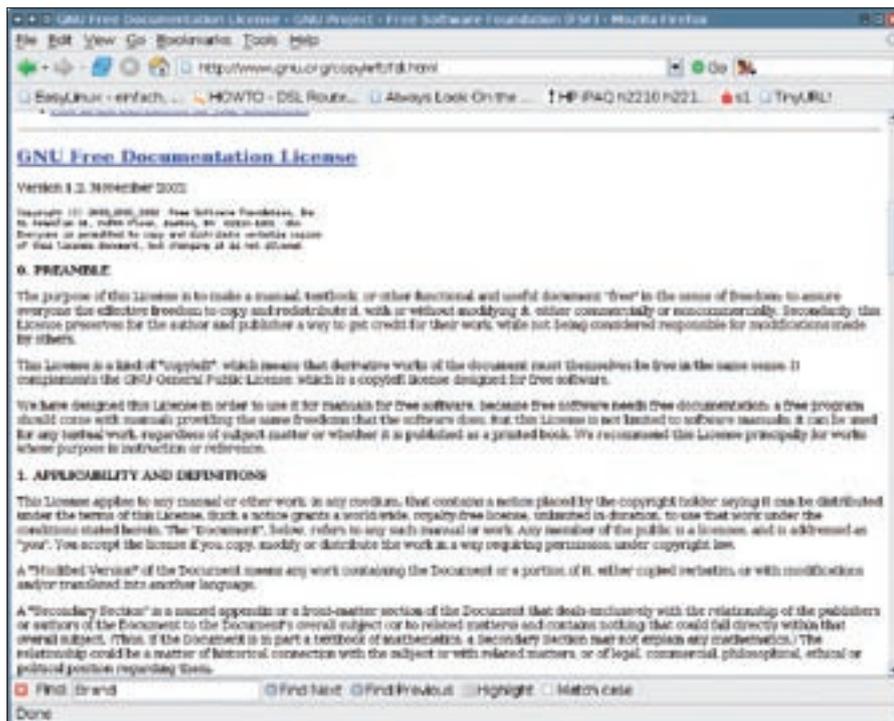


Figure 3: The GNU Free Documentation License is a source of a dispute between GNU and Debian.

As of this writing, it is still fairly difficult to integrate Capi4BSD with an existing system. If you would like to experiment with the ISDN suite, you can start by downloading the source code of the project website and patching the FreeBSD kernel and userland sources before rebuilding. Patches are available for the current stable version 5.4, but if you have FreeBSD 6, you will need to create your own patches from the Capi4BSD source first.

Finally, install `libcapi` and `chan_capi` for Asterisk from [4] and enable `chan_capi` in Asterisk. The Asterisk documentation describes how to use ISDN lines with Asterisk.

Capi4Hylafax gives you the ability to use your telephone system as a digital fax machine. At this time of writing, only active ISDN cards are supported; cheaper cards are typically passive. But if you have an old AVM-B1 card, you might like to try your luck.

The testing Branch

One reason for the delays to the Sarge release was the ongoing issue of security support for the new version. There were not enough machines available to automate update builds. To avoid similar issues with the next release, Joey Hess first set up security support for the *test-*

ing branch, which will be the next *stable* branch, in the guise of the Debian-Edu project (Skolelinux).

Joey Hess states that users should not regard this service as an adequate replacement for security support in the stable release. The security team in the *testing* branch does not resolve security issues by replacing a vulnerable package directly with a patched package. Instead it aims to resolve problems when packages migrate from *unstable* to *testing*.

Trash?

The dispute between the Debian project and the GNU project that has been going on for a few months now often degenerates to emotion-laden flaming. The current bone of contention is the GNU Free Documentation License “GFDL.”

Shortly after the GNU Free Documentation License (GFDL) was published (Figure 3) representatives of nearly all camps in the open source scene criticized the license for being “non-free.”

THE AUTHOR

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Martin's leisure time is mainly occupied with activities in the Debian and GNU communities.

One paragraph in particular gave rise to criticism: the license lets the original author of a document tag some passages as unchangeable.

This clearly contravenes the rules for free software, and this is what prompted the Debian project to remove all texts published under the GFDL from the Debian distribution. As this was not possible prior to the Sarge release, the task was postponed.

Frank Lichtenheld from the Release team has now made it clear that Debian is getting serious. He called for all maintainers to check their packages for non-free documentation and remove it [5]. The bug tracking system classifies reports of non-free documentation as serious, and that makes them release-critical.

Unfortunately, nearly all the GNU documentation is now under the GFDL, and this causes some to question the usefulness of a distribution without documentation for essential features such as GNU Glibc or the GNU compiler.

The idea of moving the documentation to Debian's *non-free* area also seems impracticable. This would force users who wanted to read the documentation to have Internet access, as *non-free* is not available on the distribution CDs.

On this note...

... it's time to say goodbye again, for this month at least, 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 [6]? I look forward to your comments! ■

INFO

[1] PhD thesis on Debian by Gabriella Coleman:

<http://lists.debian.org/debian-devel-announce/2005/08/msg00010.html>

[2] KWappen, a game for KDE:

http://www.lcs-chemie.de/kwappen_eng.htm

[3] Bidwatcher: <http://bidwatcher.sourceforge.net/>

[4] `chan_capi` for FreeBSD: http://www.junghanns.net/en/chan_capi.html

[5] Frank Lichtenheld on the GFDL: <http://lists.debian.org/debian-devel-announce/2005/09/msg00007.html>

[6] Tips and suggestions: projects@linux-magazine.com