

The Open Pitt



What's cooking in Linux and Open Source in Western Pennsylvania

Issue 21

February 2006

www.wplug.org

Book Review: *Debian GNU/Linux 3.1 Bible* by Robert Comella

Authors: Benjamin Mako Hill, David B. Harris, Jaldhar Vyas
Publisher: John Wiley & Sons
ISBN: 0764576445
\$39.99, 672 pages, 2005

Start your engines—with Linux under the hood.

Let's set the stage. I am an MCSE and work mainly with Microsoft systems. Many times I have had to deal with Linux in network storage devices, web servers, and routers, and found it foreign and annoying. Despite this, stories abounded about how Linux is faster and more stable than Windows, works on older hardware, and most importantly it's free. Microsoft continues to maintain the line that Linux is not well supported and difficult to use, and my initial experience showed that to be true.

But as I got further and further into Microsoft's products I found that their "simplicity" was deceptive and that prices put direct support out of reach, except in rare cases. That "free" thing kept coming up in my mind. So one day I Googled Linux and gaped at the 1,370,000,000 listings. Daunted, but still determined, I started reading and found myself lost among the distributions and versions and hundreds of different programs.

Debian turned out to be one of the easiest distributions to download, so I started playing with it and purchased *Debian GNU/Linux 3.1 Bible* to help make sense out of it all. The book

starts out with a description of the Debian project, how Open Source software works, what Debian tries to be and what it does *not* try to be. It also goes into what distributions are and how Debian fits into the picture.

Chapter 2 is a great treatment of installation. It explains each question you will encounter during the install process and recommends an answer. Following these instructions to the letter will build a simple system that will show you how Linux works. The chapter is easy to follow, but note that there is not much advanced discussion. There are a few errors, but these are minor.

Once the main system is installed, the book takes you on a journey through many aspects of a Linux system, installing new software as you go. Topics covered include:

- Basic shell commands and file system management
- Debian's famous package system—the book goes into great detail, and can be a little confusing until you've gotten some experience
- Users and groups
- Backing up and restoring files

Next up is installing and configuring KDE and GNOME. With the instructions given you will get these two desktop environments up and running without much trouble. Once these are set up, however, you are left on your own. If you really want to customize KDE or GNOME, you will have to find more details elsewhere.

The second half of the book covers a number of administrative subjects: Internet applications, networking, security, e-mail, remote access, printing, databases, file sharing, and web hosting among others. You will get a good overview of all these, but I had trouble making things work using the book as my only reference. I could get most of the way there, but would be stumped by some small issue. More reading is definitely required to truly master these concepts, but the book is a great starting place.

Two CDs come with the book. The first is the Debian installation CD, which is enough to get you online so you can download the rest of the software. If you can, I'd advise downloading the Debian DVD release and using that to install instead. The other is a live-CD version of Debian which allows you to try things out without touching your computer's hard drive.

All in all, I found *Debian GNU/Linux 3.1 Bible* very helpful and I still refer to it as I continue to learn more about Linux. However, it will only be the first in a long line of books, manuals, whitepapers, and FAQ lists you will have to read to get the most out of your Linux systems.

Robert Comella is an IT manager at a large manufacturer and also owns Grem-lins' Computer Solutions, a small consulting/repair business at (724) 309-6992.

January Roundup

Jan. 21 General User Meeting: Aaron Powers of the CMU Human-Computer Interaction Institute gave a live demonstration with Pearl the Nursebot. Pearl is a robot designed to assist people living in nursing homes or who are disabled with their daily
[Robot interaction project - <http://www.peopleandrobots.org/>](http://www.peopleandrobots.org/)

tasks. He described his research into how humans react to robots based on their appearance and how robots can adapt their behavior to people's expectations. The audience also got the chance to communicate with Pearl and see some of her inner workings.

Coming Events

Feb. 11: Linux Basics Tutorial.

10AM to 2PM, 3002 Newell-Simon Hall, CMU

Mar. 4: Installfest. 10AM to 5PM,

Newell-Simon Hall 3rd floor atrium (Perlis Atrium), CMU

Mar. 11: General User Meeting.

10AM to 2PM, 3002 Newell-Simon Hall, CMU

The public is welcome at all events

Links of the Month *by Michael P. O'Connor*

This month, I have a list of links that will help you organize your favorite weblogs and other sites.

First, we'll look at bookmarks. You can make a list of your favorite sites at <http://del.icio.us/> and get recommendations from others based on your list. An extension for the Firefox web browser, available at <http://dietrich.ganx4.com/foxylicious/>, will synchronize your browser's bookmarks with your delicious list and organize them based on the tags that you assigned to them. For those of you who have a Mac and use Safari, a program from <http://tuxtina.de/software/> will do the same thing.

You can download many news aggregators to help you keep up with multiple weblogs or news sites. However, if you use more than one computer it can be hard to keep track of what you've read without some way to coordinate between them. One choice is Drupal, which is more than just an aggregator, but it does a good job at that and can be found at

<http://drupal.org/>. It requires you to have web space available, and also to have access to PHP and SQL on that web space.

The next news aggregator is the Planet Software which you can get at <http://www.planetplanet.org/>. Planet requires web space also and access to Python on that web space. Planet was designed from the ground up to be an aggregator unlike Drupal that was designed more as a content management system.

For those of you who can't use these options, take a look at <http://news.google.com/>. If you are signed up with a Google account, Google News will allow you to customize it to the RSS and Atom feeds you want. It is by far the easiest of the three aggregators to set up, but on the downside you cannot customize it as much as Drupal and Planet.

Once again, if you have any links to suggest, send them in to me at wplug@mikeoconnor.net.

Till next month, enjoy these links!

The Open Pitt is published by the Western Pennsylvania Linux Users Group

<http://www.wplug.org/top/>

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What is Linux?

Linux is a *kernel*, the core of a computer operating system, created by Linus Torvalds. It is typically packaged as a *distribution*, which includes the extra programs necessary to make a computer functional and useful. Since 1991, it has grown from a one-man project which ran on one computer to one with thousands of contributors running on everything from personal organizers to million-dollar supercomputers.

What are Open Source and Free Software?

Open Source and Free Software provide you, the user, with the opportunity to see the source code of the programs you use. You are free to use it, share it with others, and even make changes to it if you wish. While the Free Software and Open Source communities differ in their philosophical approach, in practical terms they share nearly identical goals. Learn more at <http://www.opensource.org/> and <http://www.gnu.org/>.

This newsletter was produced using Open Source and Free Software.

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From the Editors: What's an Installfest?

If you've paid attention to the "Coming Events" section of *The Open Pitt*, you've probably noticed that WPLUG events tend to fall into three categories: General User Meetings (GUMs), tutorials, and installfests.

A GUM is the standard monthly meeting, typically including an hour-long presentation on a particular topic. Tutorials, as you might expect, also have a presentation but are usually longer and go more in-depth. Both of these types of events are probably familiar to most people, but what the heck is an installfest?

In contrast to GUMs and tutorials, which are mostly talk, an installfest is a hands-on event. Their main purpose is to help you with any trouble you may be having running Open Source software on your computer.

The name, of course, comes from helping people install Linux or another Open Source operating system on their machine. WPLUG maintains a CD library containing many popular

Linux distributions, and a (wired) network is set up with Internet access to download other distributions or to update your system once it's installed.

Besides these physical resources, you'll find a number of experienced people at each installfest to help guide you through installation. We can't guarantee that there will be an expert available on every possible distribution, but there is quite a broad range represented at each event.

But an installfest isn't just for installations; bring along any problem you may be having with Open Source software and chances are excellent someone can help you through it.

There are a number of items you should be sure to bring with you, starting of course with your computer. Also needed are any accessories, including keyboard, mouse, monitor, speakers, and power cables. It's a good idea to have a power strip, since electrical outlets are usually at a premium. We'll have a cart handy to

Trading Spaces

WPLUG has moved two floors up from its long-time meeting space in Newell-Simon Hall on the Carnegie Mellon University campus. Most general meetings will now be held in Room 3002, and installfests will take place in the large open atrium.

The new location is conveniently located near the third floor entrance to the building. It will also help us avoid some of the construction activity coming to the CMU campus in the next few years.

Detailed directions and parking information are on the web site at <http://www.wplug.org/pages/wplugmap/>.

help bring everything into the building, so don't be concerned about carrying equipment from your car.

WPLUG's next installfest is on March 4—hope to see you there!