Impressions from Ohio LinuxFest 2004

Here’s a sampling of LinuxFest sessions, from WPLUGers who made the trip out to Columbus.

SELinux on Fedora

Colin Walters of Red Hat started with security challenges facing Linux systems. Perhaps most numerous are attacks on web applications. Facilities like chroot can keep an application exploit from compromising the system, but these have their weaknesses.

The National Security Agency funded development of Security Enhanced Linux (SELinux) to create an operating system enforcing mandatory access control. Colin demonstrated how the kernel partitions processes and files from each other, only allowing them to interact as prescribed by the system’s security policy.

SELinux is now included in Fedora Core by default. Setting up a security policy can be a complex undertaking, so a “targeted” policy has been adopted starting with Fedora Core 3. Most of the system runs in an unconfined state, but the administrator can target selected demons and potentially troublesome applications as needed.

BoF: MySQL

Jeremy Cole of MySQL AB held a birds-of-a-feather session on his company, the MySQL database, its emphasis on lightning-fast speed, its dual licensing model, and improvements made over the past few years.

MySQL didn’t start out as a full relational database management system (RDBMS), and it still lacks many features larger databases offer, like views and stored procedures. But each new iteration has offered more of the features that users have come to expect, including transactions, prepared statements, and subqueries. Still, performance remains a top priority.

We got the chance to win books and “Transactions: check!” T-shirts. (My girlfriend won a shirt, then gave it to me as a gift. Thanks, Evelyn!)

—David Ostroske

BoF: The Art of the LUG

Anyone involved in organizing a Linux User Group (LUG) knows how difficult managing geeks can be. This well-attended birds-of-a-feather session led by WPLUG’s Beth Lynn Eicher provided a forum for sharing ideas on management, preventing the death of a LUG, and legal issues of forming a non-profit organization.

In attendance were LUG members and organizers from as far away as Canada and locals from Cleveland and Columbus. Jon “maddog” Hall also shared his wisdom with the group.

Much of the discussion focused on keeping people interested and actively participating. One idea explored was adopting a project to give the group a sense of purpose. The difficulty of finding meeting space was discussed as well, with some suggesting brew-pubs and the like as a place to allow the social aspect of a LUG to thrive.

The discussion showed how diverse the Linux community is and how difficult it can be to accommodate the different needs of all those involved.

—Chris Teodorski

BoF: PowerPC and Linux

Henry Keultjes described why desktop Linux and the PowerPC processor are the “perfect pair” to challenge the Intel duopoly, and showed off a demonstration model of his LinuxPC. Look for an interview with Henry in next month’s issue.

Asterisk: VoIP for the Masses

Greg Boehnlein of N2Net detailed how Asterisk, fresh off its 1.0 release, can turn even a modest PC running Linux into a private branch exchange, voice over IP switch, voicemail system, and automated attendant.

The Asterisk philosophy is about connecting “anything to anything.” If it has to do with telephones or voice communication, Asterisk will probably interface with it.

Coming Events

Nov. 13: Installfest. 10AM to 5PM, 1507 Newell-Simon Hall, CMU

Dec. 4: General User Meeting, Topic: Creating Flexible Documentation with DocBook. 10AM to 2PM, 1507 Newell-Simon Hall, CMU

Dec. 11: Tutorial, Topic: Kernel Configuration. 10AM to 2PM, 1507 Newell-Simon Hall, CMU

Jan. 8: Installfest. 10AM to 5PM, 1507 Newell-Simon Hall, CMU

Jan. 15: General User Meeting, Topic: User Mode Linux. 10AM to 2PM, 1507 Newell-Simon Hall, CMU

The public is welcome at all events

October Roundup

Oct. 9 General User Meeting: Ryan Brown from The Burgh Live discussed Asterisk, the popular open source telephony software. He went into topics like choosing a voice over IP provider and various system configurations, sharing his real-world experiences and examples. A PDF copy of Ryan’s slides and an audio recording of the presentation are available.

Oct. 16 New User Tutorial: Beth Lynn Eicher gave the latest version of her Linux basics tutorial covering the essentials of selecting, installing, and configuring a Linux system.

Asterisk - <http://www.wplug.org/meetings/one-meeting?wp_meeting_id=3141>
The Burgh Live - <http://www.thlive.com/>
From the Editors: A Festivus for the Rest of Us

Most of this issue is dedicated to last month’s Ohio LinuxFest. While not quite on the same level as the Ottawa Linux Symposium or LinuxWorld Expo, it’s nevertheless a significant—and growing—regional event.

Several of today’s hottest projects like Apache, Asterisk, and Samba were represented. Distributors Novell and Red Hat sent people as well. And the final coup was having the closing address given by Jon “maddog” Hall.

But at the same time, the sessions were small enough to have an intimate feel, and the entire event was obviously community-rooted, not driven by marketing interests.

Instead of taking up any more space, we’ll let the other articles speak for themselves. Enjoy!

Opinion: Who Cares? We Do! by Bill Moran

It may seem odd to start out saying what a great event it was, then go on to complain about all that went wrong. The point is that I really care about doing a good job. And I find myself doing very, very well in that feeling in the world at large. Most importantly, I don’t feel alone around other Open Source advocates.

It seems like Open Source people aren’t like others. We seem to care more about what we’re doing. See, I wasn’t worried about being embarrassed in front of a lot of people, or getting in trouble for doing poorly. What was really upsetting was that I wasn’t able to completely teach others everything that I had learned.

Imagine if everyone were like this. If every time you called a support phone number, the person on the other end really cared about getting your problem solved. If every auto shop really cared about fixing your car right...the first time. Sure would be a different world, wouldn’t it?

I’m not saying that our community is perfect. We certainly have problems and disagreements. But it is a welcome change from the average day-to-day community life I live in, and I suspect that it is for many other people as well.

Many of the complaints you hear about the Open Source community are really our strongest points. We’re called fanatics...I just think we’re very passionate. Some gripe about fragmentation, yet a close look reveals that we refuse to accept that the first attempt at something is the best, and frequently fork our work to try other methods. Often the community itself is upset at the amount of infighting that seems to occur, but those flame wars are people standing up for different viewpoints. Imagine what you’d think if you saw two mechanics arguing over the best way to fix a particular car up on the rack. I know I’d keep bringing my car back there.

Someone who understands people much better than I should write a book entitled The Care and Feeding of People Who Really Care and give us some advice on how to go on caring about things passionately, without driving ourselves crazy when it doesn’t work out quite like we wanted.

I got a lot of feedback about my talk. It was all thanks and praise for providing so much useful information. Not one person even mentioned the technical difficulties or complained that I rushed through the last few slides. It’s almost like I’m the only one who noticed. It really took the sting out of my disappointment in what happened.

It seems like when you really care about something, it cares back for you. In conclusion, I say care. Really care. It seems to be worth the risk.