

Free CDs and ISO Images

WASTE NOT, WANT NOT

maddog explains the difference between free software and gratis

media. **BY JON “MADDOG” HALL**

In preparation for September 19, Software Freedom Day (SFD), I was discussing with the Linux Australia User's Group the trials and tribulations encountered when creating and distributing CDs of free software.

I still remember the first “Live” CD I ever saw several years ago: the venerable Knoppix done by Klaus Knopper. This, I thought, was close to magic – a runnable distribution that did not touch the hard drive.

Over time, many other distributions chose to go this route, which allows you to try a plethora of distributions without making the investment of installation. For example, some distributions are targeted for education, some for multimedia, and some for scientific work.

Later, the concept of booting off a Live CD but storing your data in a persistent file on your hard (or thumb) drive led directly to the concept of the “bootable USB thumb drive with persistence.” Now life is really sweet, and I have worn an emergency distribution around my neck for the past year. The thumb drive magically goes through security checks at the airport, and if something were to happen to my laptop (knock on wood), I would not be stranded.

Still, some issues did come up in the Linux Australia email discussion about providing free CDs on SFD.

People were objecting (and rightly so) to the unequal ordering of CDs. Some groups over-ordered and had leftover boxes of CDs that they were trying to get rid of – perhaps even throwing them out as the software became dated. Some groups under-ordered and put software on hand-labeled CDs, which looked “unprofessional.” To address this issue, the

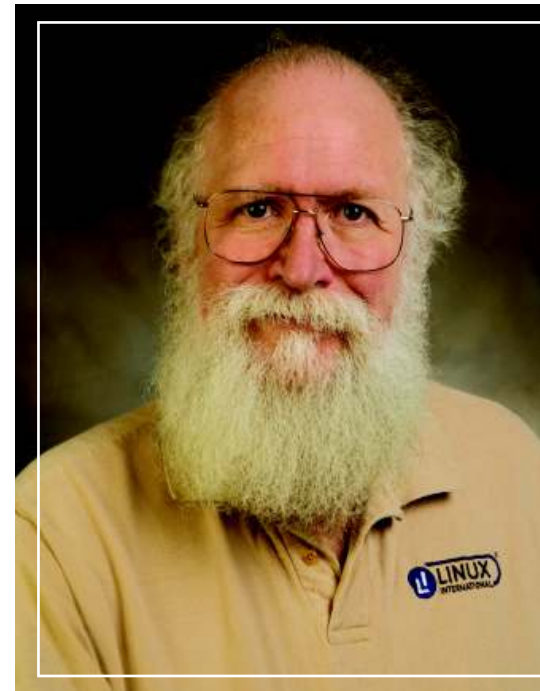
Australian Linux User's Group decided to pre-manufacture some CDs and ship them out “ready to go” but also to pre-print additional CD-Rs and allow the ISO images to be burned onto the CD-Rs at the SFD event. Thus, if some of the pre-printed CDs were not used, they would still be good for burning CDs at future SFD events.

Some people on the mailing list objected to CD manufacturing or burning altogether, saying that broadband was a good enough way to instruct new SFD recruits about how to download the images and burn their own CDs. The problem with that approach is that a significant number of people still do not have access to broadband or have really expensive data plans, so it was agreed that media-based distribution for SFD was still necessary.

One solution to the “CD waste” problem is to use the slightly more expensive CD-RW disks, pre-print the top surface, then burn the ISO onto the media. The person who receives the CD-RW disk at SFD can update the ISO image when it becomes too ancient, but the printed information (website address, instructions for making the CD-RW, booting, etc.) would still be there.

Even better is to use a DVD-RW, which can hold several ISO images. These take a bit longer to burn, but they provide the SFD attendee the ability to understand and choose a couple of different types of Live distributions to take home with them.

The ultimate solution, of course, is the bootable thumb drive. However, these become a bit expensive to provide “gratis” to everyone who comes along at SFD, and the suggestion inevitably



brought about the “Free as in Beer” discussion on the email list. When the thumb drives were mentioned, someone pointed out that some people might expect a thumb drive “for free.”

This provides a perfect opportunity to discuss with SFD attendees the difference between “Freedom Software” and “Gratis Media.”

Although the software might be available gratis because the developers licensed it to be freely distributable, the cost of putting the software on the CD is a real cost, as is the blank media. Additionally, it should be explained that even if someone might have chosen to donate the media, just as the software itself is a gift through its licensing, it becomes really expensive over time.

I have participated in giving away free software on donated CDs at events where people took CDs not even realizing what software they contained. Sometimes they thought the software was “some type of game for Windows.” Once, I found some of these same CDs in the trash outside the venue. On the other hand, if I charge even the smallest amount for the CD or ask for a donation, the recipients’ tone changes, and people are much more cognizant of what is on the CD, even if they choose not to donate.

Appreciation and understanding are a small price to pay for free software and can prevent a lot of waste. ■