

An up-to-date look at free software and its makers

PROJECTS ON THE MOVE

Debian GNU/Linux [1] users have waited over two years for a new release of their distribution. But Debian has finally made it, and version 3.1, alias Sarge, has now replaced its predecessor Woody after almost three years.

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The news in the free software community is the long-awaited appearance of Debian 3.1, code-named Sarge. Sarge comes with a large number of major changes, although users wanting to update the previous version will not immediately notice the most important change: the new installer.

Changes

There were moves to replace the obsolete boot floppy-based install in the previous version, Woody. These plans were ditched for lack of time, and Debian 3.0 had to make do with a newly-shod boot floppy approach. Now, finally, the new release replaces the installer.

The new Debian Sarge installer brings a modern installation tool with a modular structure to Debian. The installer first launches a minimal Linux system in RAM, installing a few packages required for the basic setup. A special version of the Debian package manager DPKG handles the special installer packages, which are identifiable by their *.udeb* extension. This design allows other Debian-based distributions to feed their own udebs to the Debian installer.

Debian Woody had been far removed from the cutting edge for ages, espe-

cially, but not only, with regard to the desktop. In contrast, Sarge makes quantum jumps. Of course, there are many areas where the Sarge developers have not gone for the cutting edge. Take the major desktop environments, for example: Debian Sarge gives you KDE version 3.3 and Gnome 2.8. Don't expect X.org. Instead, Debian still uses XFree86.

Other program packages enter the Debian distribution for the first time with Sarge. One prominent example is the free OpenOffice suite. In total, the new release comprises over 10,000 packages, which occupy either 14 CD ROMs or 2 DVDs.

A Hard Slog

Throughout the long development process, new issues continually appeared while the developers were still working on resolving existing issues. This vicious circle started with the Debian installer. During Sarge development, the installer was a major construction site for a long time. Finally, Joey Hess stepped in to work full-time on the Debian installer – kudos to Joey that the program ever reached release status.

Another major project that also took far longer than expected was moving the Gnu Compiler Collection to version 3.3. When the installer was completed and the GCC migration looked to be coming to a close, the release manager at the time, Anthony Towns, waxed optimistic and announced that Debian Sarge would be released in December 2003. However,

it was impossible to reduce the number of release-critical errors by that time or to complete work on porting the Debian installer to all eleven support architectures.

What followed was a seemingly endless procession of possible release dates announced by Anthony Towns, but all these bubbles burst, and in August 2004 the release manager quit. Anthony Towns' leaving was not a good thing for Sarge development, as the replacement release team needed time to get a grip on the subject. And when the release team got over its teething trouble, it too was faced with a seemingly endless succession of old and new issues.

In May 2005, Sarge finally went to *Freeze* status, shortly after the security team infrastructure had been reinstated. The developers managed to stamp out the release-critical bugs by June 6, and the press department got the go-ahead to announce the release.

That's all folks...

... for this month at least, but I 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 [2]? I look forward to receiving your comments! ■

INFO

[1] Debian: <http://www.debian.org>

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