

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

PROJECTS ON THE MOVE



This month, we examine two Gnome programs: Tomboy gives users Wiki-style notepad management, and Searchparty helps Google users find people with similar interests. We'll also report on WW2D and the Debian-Private mailing list.

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Linus Torvalds recently sparked a flame war with his comments on the merits of a certain desktop environment [1]. Although this is just the opinion of one admittedly well-known user, it does put a whole new perspective on the recent overtures of friendship between KDE and Gnome camps. This month we'll look at two young but ambitious Gnome projects.

Tomboy

The first of these programs is by Gnome developer Alex Graveley, who recently became a member of the OSDL [2] team dedicated to improving cooperation between Gnome and KDE. The application, titled Tomboy [3], provides a solution for a familiar problem: note management. Of course there are hundreds of programs that aim to help users tackle the

chore of organizing notes on their desktops, but Tomboy adopts a new approach. Each "note" is a Wiki-style page. To create a new note, a user just types a heading and enters the body text in a simple text box. The tool supports simple formatting with bold, italic, or strike-through typefaces.

The interesting thing about Tomboy is that the text can contain links to other notes. If you select a word or a whole sentence, and then click the *Link* button, Tomboy automatically creates a new note, using the selected text as the heading.

Tomboy also gives users the ability to enter URLs. When a user clicks a URL, Tomboy pops up a browser window displaying the target page. The search tool helps users handle larger numbers of note windows. The integrated search tool displays results from each note that contains

the search key, and you can double-click on a note to view the details.

Graveley uses Mono as the developer environment for Tomboy, and it is definitely worth going to the considerable trouble of installing the libraries for the Mono environment.

Searchparty

Our second Gnome-based project is Searchparty [4]. Searchparty's inventor is Seth Nickell. Sanford Armstrong and Raphael Slinckx implemented Nickell's idea in the course of Google's Summer of Code. The name Searchparty gives a rough idea of the underlying principle. Users searching with Google for the same or similar keywords can join forces and exchange information.

Armstrong and Slinckx developed a plugin for the Firefox Epiphany browsers. After installing the plugin, Searchparty displays a *Join Search Party* button in your browser when you search with Google. Clicking the button takes you to a chat window (Figure 1).

The chat room provides a meeting place for users who have entered similar search keys. Users can then exchange links or discuss topics of interest. The meetings are spontaneous and typically short-lived.

Client/Server

A server component handles user management in Searchparty chat sessions. Only one machine provides this service to date: *searchpartyproject.com*. The server component manages search keys, displays user statistics for the various chat rooms, and can even create new chat rooms.

The Searchparty project introduces a simple but groundbreaking approach to finding information. As Searchparty is at an early stage of its development, and

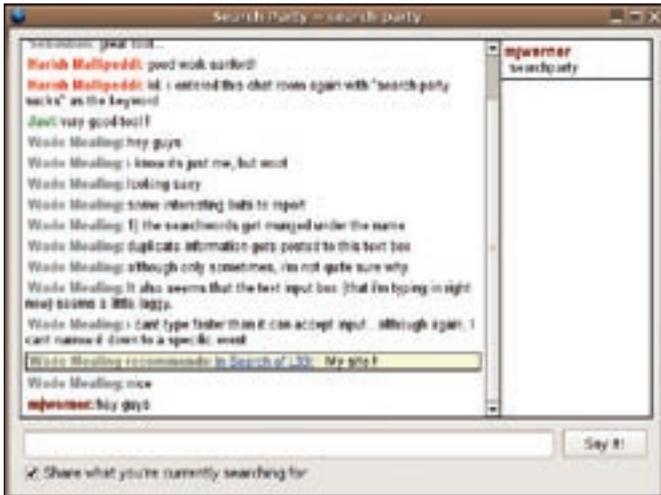


Figure 1: The Searchparty project lets users join ad-hoc chat sessions for more effective searching.



Figure 2: WW2D is a free application that recently took the challenge of competing with Windows programs such as Google Earth.

the developers are still working hard on the code, there are not many users right now. Don't be surprised if chat rooms are unoccupied most of the time. This said, if the application continues to develop as quickly as it has thus far Gnome users can look forward to a very powerful new search tool.

WW2D

When NASA released its NASA World Wind [5] program under an Open-Source license in September 2004, it opened up globe-trotting to couch potatoes. World Wind lets a user zoom in on an image of the Earth from satellite distance to a close up of any location on the planet. Google recently created a similar tool called Google Earth [6], causing unprecedented hype that has still not died down. But Linux users have not been able to benefit from either development, as both World Wind and Google Earth are restricted to Windows.

Vitaliy Pronkin set out to remedy this situation by developing WW2D, a Java-based, platform-independent solution. WW2D runs on Windows, Mac OS X, and Linux.

Before launching the program, users need to install a Java runtime environment and Java OpenGL bindings (JOGL), but this is typically quite simple. After downloading and unpacking the WW2D tarball, users can enter `java -jar WW2D.jar` to launch the program, which comes up with a 2D view of the globe (Figure 2).

WW2D uses a layering approach, allowing users to display or hide individual layers. Just click *LM* (Layer Man-

ager) and select the required layers in the dialog that then appears. The resolution in each layer increases with the zoom factor. If your mouse has a scroll wheel, you can use the wheel to zoom in. WW2D then shows you the *Boundaries* or *Flags of the World* layer.

WW2D still can't give you the kind of detail its Windows competitors have. (There are no city maps at this time of writing.) But the program does have a number of interesting features: for example, the *RF* button (Rapid Fire mode) pops up a window where users can enable options such as *Dust & Smoke*, *Storm*, or *Fire*. If you enable *Fire*, for example, WW2D displays icons to mark the spots where major fires are blazing.

The program always uses live data from various free, Internet-based databases. Add-ons [8] let users extend the data repository to show internal borders within countries, or to add information from the Unesco World Heritage database. Let's hope that more developers feel inspired to contribute to WW2D.

Taking a Peek at Debian-Private

In the past, the Debian-Private mailing list, which is only accessible to Debian developers, has been the subject of many myths and legends. Many conspiracy theories have described what happens on the list. The truth is that the only sensational thing about the list is its secrecy; this clearly goes against Debian's usual policy of openness, which lets users monitor the workings of the project's internal affairs.

In line with the openness policy, the former Release Manager, Anthony Towns, has now suggested opening up some of the Debian-Private archives in a posting to the Debian-Vote list [9]. Anthony Towns' aim is to give "outsiders" a chance to follow the important discussions that have shaped Debian since the founding of the project. These archives contain the thoughts and opinions that led to fundamental project documents, such as the Debian Free Software Guidelines and the Social Contract.

To implement these plans, Towns suggests founding a group within the project to search the Debian archives for interesting tidbits. ■

INFO

- [1] Linus Torvalds on Gnome: <http://mail.gnome.org/archives/usability/2005-December/msg00022.html>
- [2] Open Source Development Labs: <http://www.osdl.org>
- [3] Tomboy: <http://www.beatniksoftware.com/tomboy/>
- [4] Searchparty: <http://live.gnome.org/SearchParty>
- [5] Nasa World Wind: <http://worldwind.arc.nasa.gov>
- [6] Google Earth: <http://earth.google.com>
- [7] WW2D: <http://ww2d.csoft.net>
- [8] WW2D add-ons: <http://ww2d.csoft.net/index.php?title=Category:Add-ons>
- [9] Posting by Anthony Towns: <http://lists.debian.org/debian-vote/2005/11/msg00001.html>
- [10] Tips and suggestions: projects@linux-magazine.com