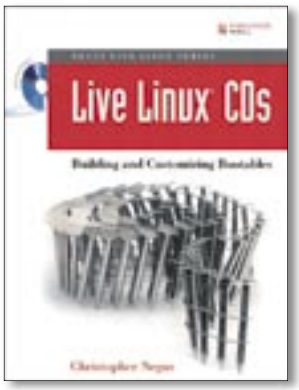
BOOK REVIEWS

BY JAMES PYLES

Live Linux CDs: Building and Customizing Bootables

The name "Christopher Negus" is so closely associated with Linux books that I had hopes for his latest work Live Linux CDs even before opening the first page. After reading it, I wasn't disappointed. If you are looking for a book that will take you through a tour of the various Linux live CDs (Linux distros that boot directly from a CD or DVD without accessing the computer's hard drive), you'll find it here. However there's more to the topic of Live CDs than you might expect.



Bootable Linux CDs are sometimes associated with Linux newbie users. The idea is that someone unfamiliar with Linux can boot a distro directly from the CD/DVD on their Windows machine and try out Linux while making no changes to their Windows box. Another common use for Live CDs is as "rescue" tools that can access and retrieve files on an otherwise unresponsive hard drive.

Negus introduces the reader to many other types of specialty discs, such as Gaming Live CDs, Clustering Live CDs, Multimedia Player Live CDs, Firewall Live CDs, and more. Up to this point, you might still believe that the content of Live CDs is static and immutable, but nothing could be further from the truth.

Parts II and III of Live Linux CDs shows the audience the nuts and bolts behind building customized versions of Knoppix, Fedora, and Gentoo Live CDs, as well as creating specialized Live CDs from scratch. This gives the user the advantage of manufacturing the exact computing environment that fits their needs.

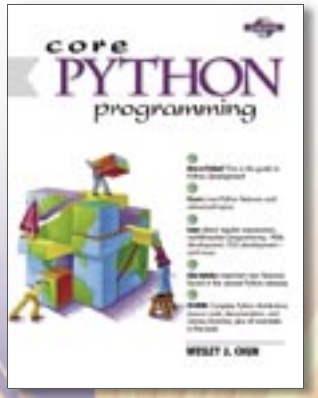
Not all of the specialized tools necessary to accomplish these tasks are available with the CDs, but Negus shows the reader where to find them. Some experience working with the Linux shell is helpful but not absolutely necessary. If you lack much Linux experience but are willing to do your homework, you'll find this book as useful as would a seasoned Linux hacker. Negus shows both newbie and guru that there is much more to the world of Linux Live CDs than meets the eye.

Christopher Negus
432 pages
Prentice Hall PTR
0-13243274-9
£ 21.51, US$ 39.99, EUR 46.90

Core Python Programming, Second Edition

Part of the front matter for this book states, "This book is meant for you if you are a programmer completely new to Python or already know some Python but want to know more…" I didn't know very much about Python before picking up Chun's book, but I thought I'd take him at his word.

The author is obviously knowledgeable about his subject, and he has the ability to write to more than just software engineers. While this book is anything but "light reading," it is extremely readable. If you have any background in programming, you will find Chun's book a real page turner.



The true audience of this book are programmers who are looking for a beginning through intermediate knowledge of Python. I don't believe anyone can become a true "expert" at programming (or anything else) by reading just one book. This tome however, comes as close to being Python's answer to "one-stop shopping" as any. It is very likely that as you progress through Core Python Programming, if you learn to love or just to appreciate the language, this book will take you about as far as you'd ever want to go.

You'll start out by picking up programming basics, including statements, syntax, and identifiers, and if you go the distance, you'll also learn advanced topics, like GUI and web programming.

Without trying to start a programming language "flame war," the book makes the case for Python as a relatively easy to learn, extensible, scalable language. If you are considering learning Python, Wesley Chun's text is a good choice.

Wesley J. Chun
1120 pages
Prentice Hall PTR
0-13-226993-7
£ 28.99, US$ 44.99, EUR 29.30

Moving to Ubuntu Linux

I previously reviewed another Marcel Gagné book, and was generally impressed with his writing style and knowledge of his audience. Gagné seems devoted to helping the Windows user make the move to Linux, and his easy going manner and focus on traditional "home user" computer tasks are well suited to this goal.

I was curious to see how *Moving to Ubuntu Linux* would compare to Gagné's previous book *Moving to Linux*, and was a little concerned that it might not compare too well.

A casual thumbing through the table of contents of both books reveals that they are remarkably similar. I wasn't sure if this meant that the TOCs reflected Gagné's organizational style, or if perhaps large portions of Moving to Linux had been ported to Moving to Ubuntu Linux. Peering into the book was the only way to find the answer.

Fortunately, the vast majority of the book is very "Ubuntu-centric" and where it's not, the subjects are rather generically Linux or sometimes Debian. Even if the author did lift certain portions of one book to the other (quite a time saver, after all), the important questions are, does this book stand on its own and does it teach the newbie how to use Ubuntu?

Generally, the answer is "yes." I run Ubuntu on my Dell laptop, so I'm a day-to-day Ubuntu user. While I'm a little too close to Ubuntu and its big cousin Debian to see the Gagné book with complete objectivity, I can see he does hit the high points a home user will want to know, including the OpenOffice.org Office Suite, printing, web surfing with Firefox, and so on. He also includes sections on using the shell.

While there was a significant section on music, the book seemed light regarding multimedia in general. Gagné does mention certain potential "gotchas" for the new Ubuntu user, but not enough to present a realistic picture of how life changes under Ubuntu. (I had problems getting Totem to play movies at first, for example.)

On the whole, *Moving to Ubuntu Linux* is a good starter book for the home user new to Linux, but it could have been beefed up just a little more.

Marcel Gagné
496 pages
Addison-Wesley Professional
0-32142722-X
£ 24.99, US$ 34.99, EUR 33.12

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