

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

PROJECTS ON THE MOVE

Hundreds of thousands of registered users have chosen their favorite Sourceforge projects in 14 categories. Also in this issue: Linux electrified, and Freenet's plans for freedom of speech on the web. We'll also round up the latest Debian news.

BY CARSTEN SCHNOBER AND MARTIN LOSCHWITZ

The community has made its choice! A major part of the free developer community – totaling over a million programmers currently registered with Sourceforge.net – were asked to cast their votes for the most popular Sourceforge projects in 14 categories.

Sourceforge organizers asked the community to choose between a preliminary selection of the 40 most active projects. And if you accept the 250,000 voters as a representative cross-section, the results make very interesting reading. The two most popular projects, Azureus [1] (see Figure 1) and EMule [2], are platform-independent filesharing clients. Third place went to 7-Zip [3], a free archiving tool for Windows.

Open Windows

The Sourceforge community apparently places a lot of emphasis on free software for the world's most famous un-free operating system. Most winners in the individual categories run on Windows, some of them exclusively. Of course, the Sourceforge vote does not tell how popular these tools are with the masses of Windows users, but it is an indication of

a trend to open source software for closed source systems.

Representatives of some corporations and industrial associations have a simple explanation for the popularity of file-sharing clients: they see it as evidence that the open source scene is mainly made up of pirates. A more realistic explanation of the results is that more and more free projects are distributing software using Bittorrent and other filesharing services to avoid overtaxing their own servers' bandwidth.

The winners in the individual categories were: the Zimbra Collaboration Suite, the Windows FTP client and server Filezilla, the Bittorrent Queue Manager, the PHP Paypal API, WinSCP, PHPMyadmin (in the categories Databases and System Administration), the Xbox Media Center (Games and Multimedia), Wine for Darwin and Mac OS X, Linux for the Microsoft Xbox, the Asterisk GUI client, and the Gaim Instant Messenger. Details of the results are available from [4].

Elektra

Configuring a Linux system, and the applications that run on it, can prove too

big an obstacle for some desktop users. GUI-based programs and desktop environments do what they can to help the user, but differences in the configuration tools can add even more confusion.

Experienced users and admins typically know where to look for the required configuration files, and how to modify these files to suit their needs. But the process of learning the various syntaxes used by applications and distributions can still be a time-consuming, or even nerve-racking experience. According to the developers of the Elektra project [5], the answer to this is a standardized configuration.

Elektra's role models are the Windows Registry and the Gnome project GConf. Both provide centralized configuration management of the operating system or desktop, and in GConf's case, let administrators use their preferred user interface.

Elektra uses an XML file that comprises keys and assigned values for configuration elements of any kind. The file can be viewed and edited using the KDB command line tool, the KDBEdit front-end (Figure 2), a text editor, or applications that use the Elektra API.

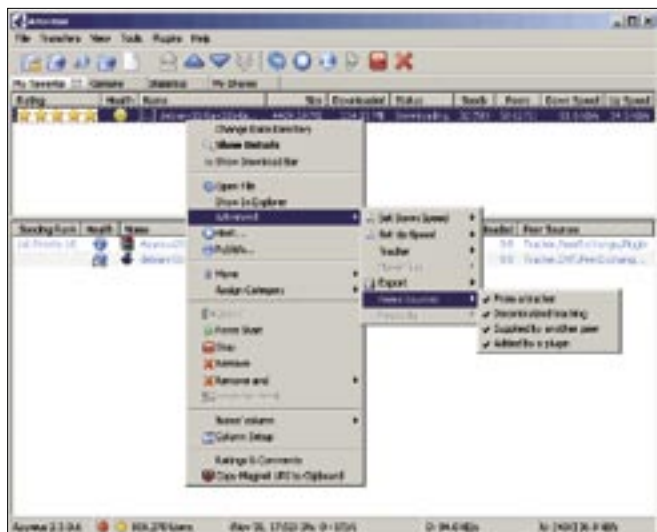


Figure 1: And the winner is: Azureus! The platform-independent Bit-torrent client was chosen as the most popular program by the Sourceforge community.

“Elektrafying” Linux, and the applications that run on Linux, would eliminate the need for distributors to develop GUI-based system configuration tools. Elektra patches for X.org and SysVinit are already available, as are RPM packages for Mandriva, Red Hat Enterprise Linux, CentOS, and Fedora. The developers aim to add support for major applications such as Samba, and Gnome, and KDE, via GConf or KConfig XT. The project has called on programmers to help standardize the configuration jungle by utilizing the Elektra interface.

Freenet

The Internet has become an important part of daily life for many people outside the fringe group of computer experts. The Internet’s breakthrough as an everyday medium has often been accompanied by strict regulations. In the opinion of some civil rights organizations, restrictions placed on the use the Internet are not only too strict in totalitarian regimes; Internet activists view government controls in western democracies as also dangerous to freedom of speech in what used to be a quasi-anarchistic global network.

This view is shared by Ian Clarke, who would like to contribute to freedom of speech on the Internet by guaranteeing anonymity. This was one of the two reasons that prompted him to start working on Freenet [6]. Freenet is free software that uses the Internet as a carrier for a self-enclosed *Darknet*: a dynamic net-

work comprising a number of independent peers. This aim poses a few technical challenges, which provided the inventor of Freenet with additional impetus for his work. Clarke discovered the perfect network technology when investigating an algorithm that was developed years ago. Version 0.1 of the Java program from the year 2000 was primarily a filesharing service that guaranteed anonymity to its users. The alpha version of the 0.7 release, which was published in early April, implements Freenet mostly from scratch and introduces a number of changes. Instead of using TCP, Freenet now uses UDP; a more efficient routing algorithm minimizes problems with firewalls and NAT routers, and the new interface makes it easier for programs to use Freenet. Freenet surfers can either use their browsers to access the Web interface for the Java-based Freenet software or opt for Telnet.

The new API encourages the growth of Freesites parallel to the World Wide Web, where both the provider and the surfer retain their anonymity.

The Freenet developers are committed to the concept of total freedom of expression and even view restrictions on pornographic, racist, or violent content as a first step towards censorship. However, they do point out that Freenet supports individual censorship, giving individual

nodes the freedom to restrict forwarding of this kind of content.

Development is currently making rapid progress, mainly thanks to Matthew Toseland, who works as a full-time developer for Freenet. Matthew’s wages, and thus the future Freenet, depend on contributions. Donations of money, bandwidth, hard disk space, or programming skills are all welcome.

Debian News

Controversy erupted at Debian when Andres Salomon requested the ousting of the well-known developer Sven Luther in March. Salomon’s reasoning for this request was that Sven Luther’s behavior towards other Debian developers was impossible to tolerate and was threatening to other developers. Salomon maintains various packages on the Debian archive, although his major claim to fame came when he took over *ndiswrapper*.

Debian developers are not exactly known for being squeamish, and as you might expect, all hell broke loose shortly after Andres Salomon’s email was posted. The official developer list [7] soon split in two warring factions with one camp confirming Salomon’s allegations, and coming down heavily in favor



Figure 2: Elektra is designed to standardize Linux system configuration. The central XML file can be edited using a text editor, the KDB command line tool, or the KDBEdit front-end.

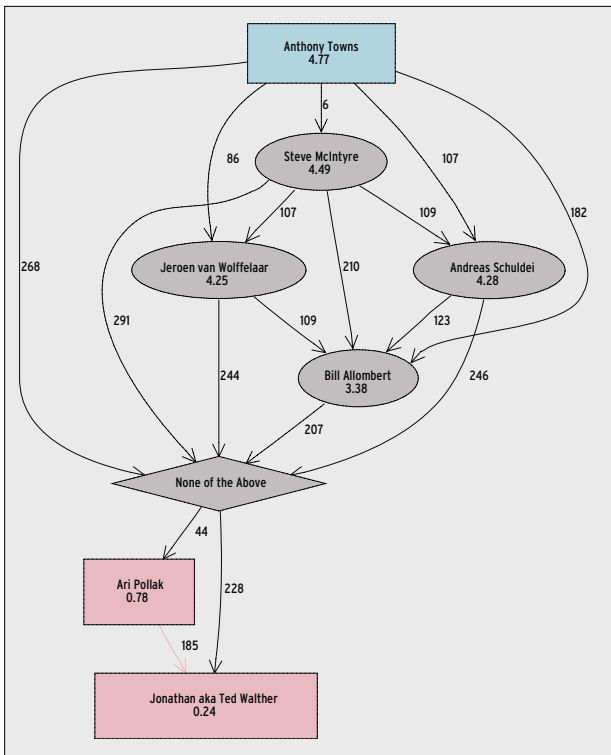


Figure 3: The Debian Project Leader Election 2006: Anthony Towns won, with Steve McIntyre a close second.

of the sacking, and the other side saying everyone should calm down and try to find a peaceful solution.

The flame war that ensued demonstrates where Debian's problems truly lie: communication between groups, and even between individuals, has a fatal tendency to go drastically wrong.

Communication problems leading to the opening of formal expulsion proceedings is something new in the history of the Debian project. The process for expelling a developer was instituted only two years ago. It was James Troup, the sole Debian Account Manager at the time, who laid down the rules for expulsion. Based on Troup's rules, a developer needs the backing of at least 15 other developers to initiate expulsion proceedings. And even if a developer has this backing, there is no saying that the request will be honored; the final decision is in the hands of the Account Manager.

Sven Luther was aghast at Salomon's request, however, he only commented on the discussion in the early stages before withdrawing. Luther is an active contributor to various Debian ports for alternative architectures to the Intel x86, and troubleshooting PowerPC issues is his speciality.

on similar escapades.

Transitions

By now, most Debian followers are aware that Martin (alias Joey) Schulze resigned as Stable Release Manager. Schulze cited the actions of the FTP Masters (especially James Troup) as his major motivation for resigning. An email in which Schulze officially requested FTP Master privileges was turned down personally by James Troup.

Seen in the light of the Sven Luther affair, this event is all the more explosive, and it is ample proof that Debian has put a few people's backs up. Martin Schulze's resignation should not affect users, however, as Andreas Barth and Martin Zobel-Helas immediately announced that they would step in to take care of the stable version.

In last month's issue, I talked about the trouble brewing over the GNU Free Documentation License. The vote on how to deal with the GFDL has produced what could be called sensational results: the project members voted for Debian to accept the GFDL as a free license if the passage about non-modifiable parts of the documentation is removed. The current GFDL allows authors to tag passages as non-modifiable. If this condition

A short time later, the whole ruckus seemed to have been settled – at least, there were no signs of official steps being taken. But once more, nobody has anything to gain from the spectacle of the expulsion process. The discussion stopped some developers from putting in any meaningful work for a few days. One very active member, Sven Luther, has been mightily offended, and will probably think twice about spending time working on the Debian project in the future. A project that continually points to the fact that its members are volunteers would be well advised not to waste time

is dropped, works published under the GFDL will be allowed in Debian.

Debian Project Leader

...Anthony Towns! Anthony won the election [8] to become Debian Project Leader 2006. In the Condorcet election proceedings, which probably appear equally complex to developers and observers alike, Towns beat his closest rival, Steve McIntyre, by a narrow margin of six votes. The gap to the other candidates was far bigger: the youngest candidate, Jeroen van Wolffelaar, came closest, losing out by 86 votes.

The poor turnout is something to worry about, with a mere 43 percent of developers actually casting a vote. Although this is partly due to the fact that many Debian developers are so by name only, there is no escaping the fact that there are far more active members than the 421 that bothered to cast a valid vote.

Developers have shown a mixed reaction to Anthony Towns' electoral success. Many responded positively, whereas others expressed criticism in the light of the program that Anthony Towns had proposed before the election. They expect another year of waiting for changes to happen, following Branden Robinson's DPL year. Other developers fear that hard times are ahead for many Debian package maintainers. During the campaign, Towns stated his intent to make hard choices and to become more deeply involved in decisions, even technical decisions, affecting the Debian project. ■

INFO

- [1] Azureus: <http://azureus.sourceforge.net/>
- [2] EMule: <http://sourceforge.net/projects/emule>
- [3] 7-Zip: <http://sourceforge.net/projects/sevenzip>
- [4] Sourceforge.net 2006 Community Awards: <http://sourceforge.net/awards/cca>
- [5] Elektra: <http://www.libelektra.org>
- [6] Freenet: <http://freenetproject.org>
- [7] Expulsion request concerning Sven Luther: <http://lists.debian.org/debian-devel/2006/03/msg00620.html>
- [8] Results of the DPL election: http://www.debian.org/vote/2006/vote_002