

Running a Linux User Group

COMMUNITY

SPIRIT

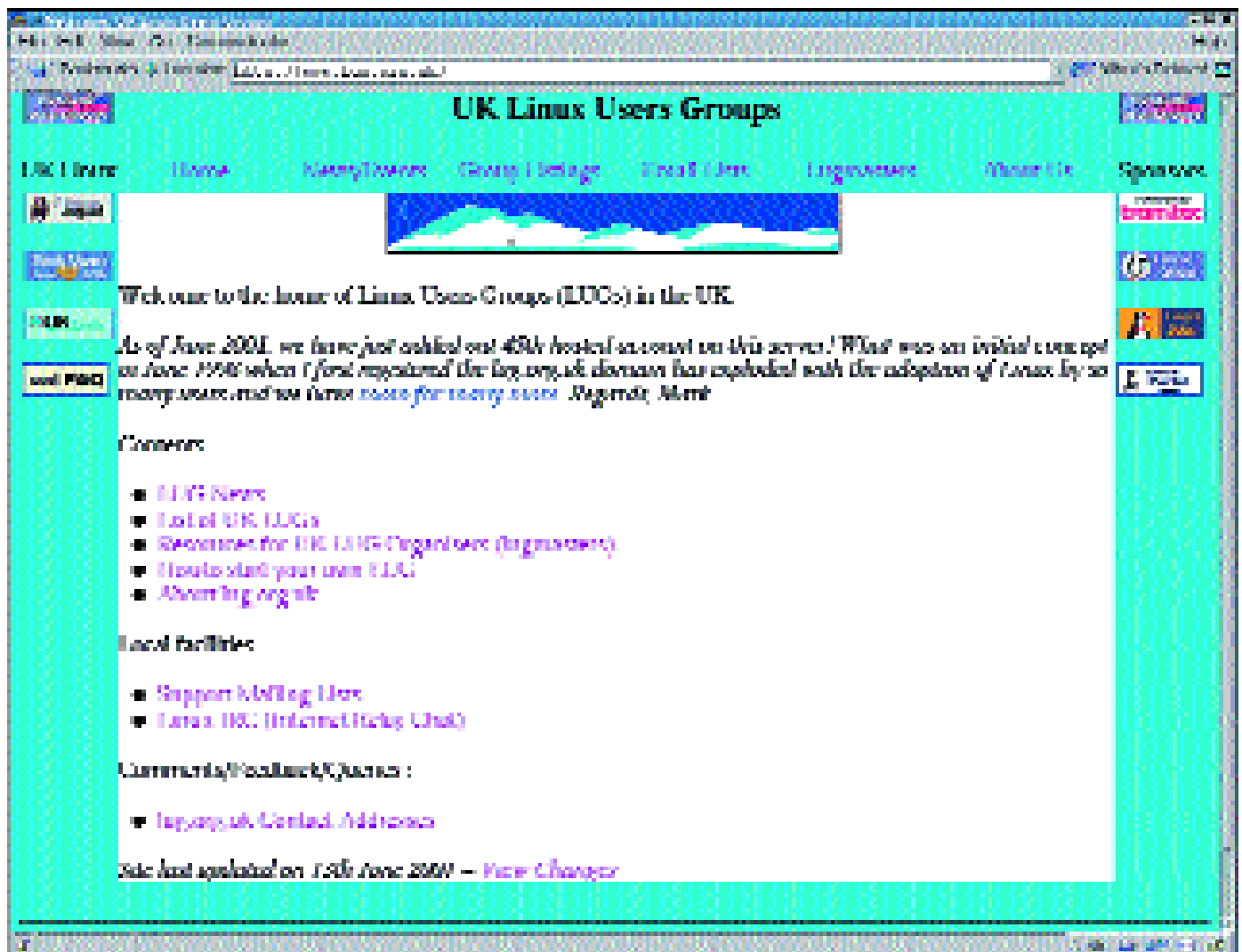
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Linux is a community effort – it grew out of a single message that Linus Torvalds posted to Usenet 10 years ago. That community effort is still growing, through Usenet, email, IRC, CVS and Linux User Groups – or LUGs.

So, what is a Linux User Group?

A User Group is no more than a group of Linux users with a similar mindset or reason to “hang together”. Maybe they are interested in using certain applications, so a group might form just to discuss how to use and abuse KWord, or just console each other after it crashes on them. Developers with a passion for a particular programming language can group together, maybe

The place to start



so they can persuade themselves that their language *is* the one true language, or again, maybe to shelter as a group against those telling them that their language is really the lowest of the low. Or, which is more often the case, it can be a collection of Linux users with a much wider, more general interest in all things that make the OS what it is.

Groups like these can use Usenet, email, mailing lists, Web pages and other resources to keep in touch with group members. Quite often User Groups will also have a location in common – which makes them a local LUG, allowing users to meet each other in person. When people talk of LUGs it is usually the local variety they are thinking of.

These local LUGs vary in size and type. Some may have as few as four or five regular members; others may have 50 or more. Some might just meet in a pub, going through members' problems or solutions, other groups may put on talks and demonstrations for their meetings. Some may want to encourage and introduce new users to Linux, some, though not many, may want to remain lofty and technical. The reason for such a wide range of LUGs is the way they develop, they can just spring up when and where the need arises, just so long as someone is there to plant the first seed.

Finding out about LUGs

As Linux is developing and growing, more and more local LUGs are forming to offer help, friendly support and camaraderie, so it is becoming more likely that you will have a group near you already. The Linux print magazines put great effort into listing LUGs, but you should also check out what is available by looking on the Web, <http://www.lug.org.uk/lugs/index.html> will start your search off, or ask in Usenet, in groups like *uk.comp.os.linux*.

Starting a group

There is a long way to go before every town and village can boast its own LUG, so there may not be a group in your area, or the group which is in your area just doesn't meet your needs. If you do find yourself in this situation then maybe you should consider starting your own. The only personal cost is one of spare time, and, even then, not a lot of it as a group can grow out of simply sending a few emails.

First of all you had better assess the need for the group, the 'L' in LUG is for Linux, or possibly for local, but definitely not for loner, so you will need to make sure that the group you hope to start will be fulfilling the needs of more people than just yourself. You should advertise your needs somehow and see if they are shared by anyone else. This could mean posting an announcement in a free-to-advertise type newspaper or magazine, putting cards in supermarkets or flyers in your local technical bookshop or computer shop, or sending

letters to Linux magazine editors, as well as the good Internet stalwarts like Usenet.

There is one very important resource that you really should call upon: the local LUGs that already exist. Even if you think of them as being remote, those LUGs might be a long way away for you and your new group might be nearer or convenient for some of the members of the surrounding groups. So send an email canvassing support or outlining your proposition to the mailing lists of those groups, or ask the group admins to post a link to a Web page so you can gauge demand.

Do remember though that it's not a case of competing with your neighbouring groups, but of complementing them. You don't want to end up being accused of poaching users from an area. You should always try to avoid clashing with other groups meetings – you will be surprised how many members will want to go to both.

Once you have started to generate interest you will need to set up some channels of communication so that those in your fledgling group can discuss issues and plan together for its future. Mailing lists are ideal for this and the 'UK Linux Users Groups' organisation will help you with setting one of these up for free, as well as providing other useful online resources like space for a Web page link and Internet Relay Chat rooms. See their Web page at <http://www.lug.org.uk/> for more information on how to do this. There you will find lots of help, advice and support with setting up your own LUG along with a mailing list specifically for 'lugmasters'.

So, with any luck, you will have proved to yourself that you are not alone, and at least someone, but hopefully lots more users, share your hopes for a group of their own. If you intend to all meet in person you will need a venue. Often, the first few meetings will be held some place neutral, like a pub. This will allow you all to assess what type of group you are and how you might develop. If you are just a small group, you may find it suitable to meet in each others' houses, assuming you don't mind having the kids frightened and you don't mind inviting people who are still strangers into your home. Larger groups can present more of a problem when finding somewhere to meet, church halls, scout huts, libraries and schools might fit the bill, but they usually want money and for the sake of simplicity, it's far easier to stay away from charging if at all possible. You could also try some of the local computer companies. They might appreciate the opportunity to tap into your group as a Linux resource for themselves, offering you a venue for free. The general rule of thumb is that you can't afford to leave any stone unturned – opportunities appear from the most unlikely of sources.

The community spirit of Linux can't be overestimated, and there is no better place to see that spirit than as part of a LUG. We suggest that you make every effort to be part of it yourself. ■



A User Group in action