

An up-to-date overview of free software and its makers

Projects on the move

Free software covers such a diverse range of utilities, applications and other assorted projects, that it can be hard to find the perfect tool from all that programming effort. As the range increases so rapidly, you occasionally need a little help to make your choice of what to use. We pick the best of the bunch for you: Kopete, Prokyon3, Arson, Phoenix, and call for a ban on Word documents in e-mail.

BY MARTIN LOSCHWITZ

This month we take a look at a range of projects that includes a pleasant tool for managing CDs, an appealing chat client, a fast web browser, menus in DOC format and a hot burner.

Prokyon3

Anybody who is using their Linux computer for digital storage and management of their CD collection will have a problem sooner or later. In fact, you are bound to lose track, if your hard disk contains thousands of MP3 and Ogg files stored in hundreds of different directories and subdirectories.

Holger Sattel must have been faced by a similar problem, when he started programming Prokyon3 [6]. Prokyon3 is a Qt 3 based front-end for a MySQL database [7] that provides for the intelligent archiving of music files in both MP3 or Ogg Vorbis format. The program is able to create multiple databases. The databases can have the tracks sorted by title, artist, filename and other criteria.



MP3 files use so-called ID3 tags to store information on a track along with a track itself. Prokyon3 can read these tags. The ID3 tag editor that the program provides is a welcome extra that can be used to modify the

ID3 information for a track so it suits your needs.

The program also conveniently provides a player that allows you to play your tracks: Prokyon3 uses the titles stored in the database to create a playlist

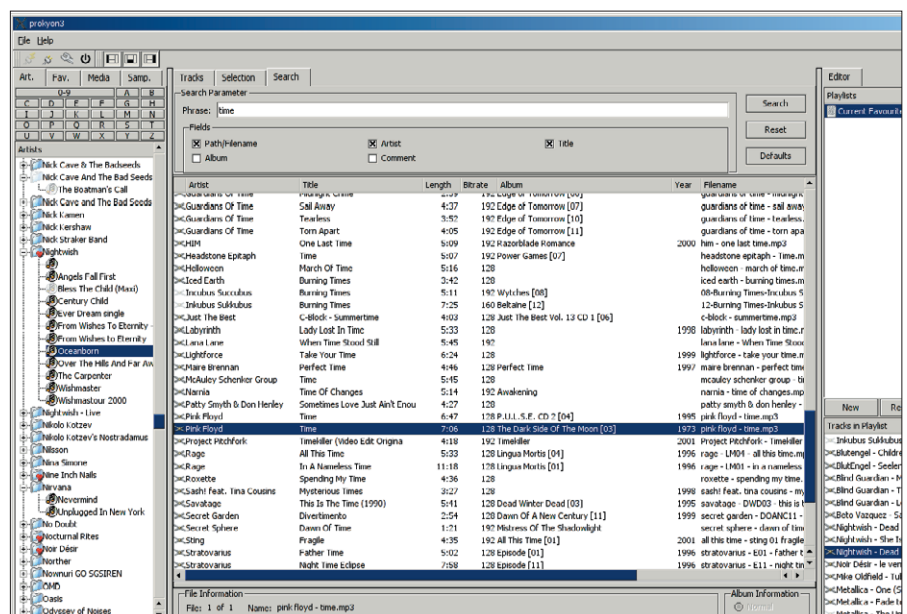


Figure 1: The Prokyon3 search dialog leaves no wishes unfulfilled

that can be used in a program such as Xmms [8]. Alternatively, you can launch any programs of this type from within Prokyon3.

The intelligent database search function that provides access to music files, via SMB, NFS, or from your personal list of favorites, is what makes Prokyon3 wonderful for music fans. If you are losing control of your music collection, or simply want to pre-empt the kind of chaos that would otherwise occur, it might be a good idea to take a look at Prokyon3 to see if it satisfies your multimedia needs.

Kopete

The ICQ protocol continues to gain popularity – and this is hardly surprising, as it allows simple communication over the Internet without following the roundabout route of using e-mail. Messages for users who are currently offline are stored and passed on when they log on to an ICQ server.

Of course KDE cannot do without an ICQ client and Kopete [1] is a talented all-rounder only too willing to take up the fight with competitors such as Licq [2] and MICQ [3].

Kopete supports the standard features that all ICQ clients should offer. These include defining a variety of contact lists, or playing a sound file when a buddy goes online. The program also include KDE GUI based configuration of the user interface.

Kopete's true quality does not become apparent until you delve more deeply into the program. What reveals itself to

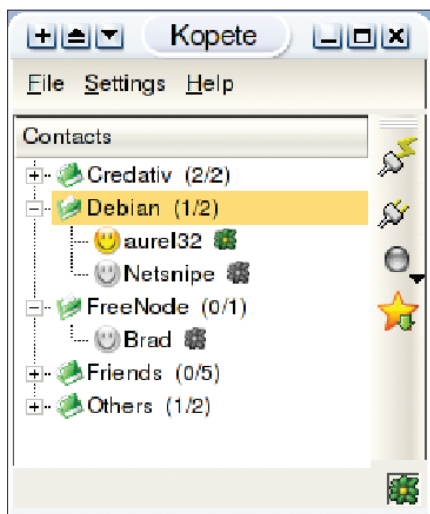


Figure 2: Kopete in action: main window

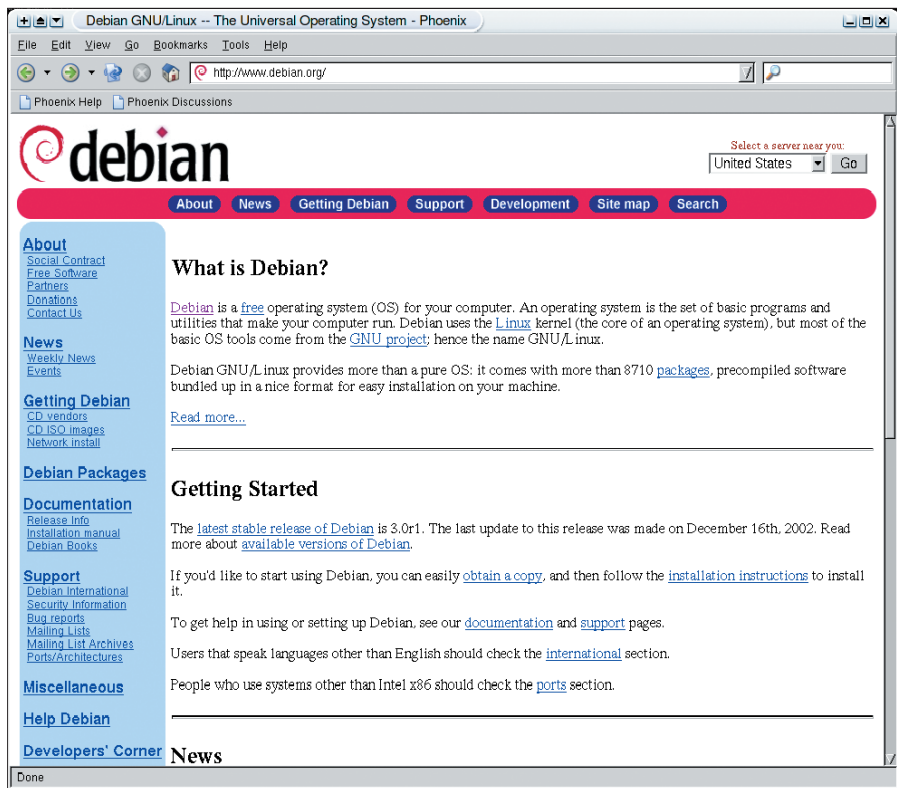


Figure 3: The Debian GNU/Linux page viewed in Phoenix, Mozilla's lightweight and quick smaller sibling

the user is not a ready-made ICQ client, but a GUI framework extensible by loading protocol modules.

This means that Kopete can handle any communication protocol you can think of. At present modules are available for AIM, Jabber, and MSN. Additionally, the IRC module allows Kopete to perform as a fully functional client for the IRC protocol that fares well in comparison with XChat [4] and KViric [5].

The fact that Kopete provides highly granular configuration facilities is a good thing. Each module has its own dialogs that allow you to set up your personal preferences; users can even customize individual windows. The dialog box used for creating contact lists also permit a fully granular setup.

Phoenix

The number of web browsers for Linux has grown rapidly in the last few months. This is why the goals of projects working on new browsers have fundamentally changed.

It is no longer a question of creating a perfect, multitasking browser suite, but a quick program with a small footprint that allows the user to display as many

web-sites is possible with the least possible resources.

This is also the aim of Phoenix [12], a Mozilla [13] sub-project based on the same code. Mozilla itself has grown to become an enormous browser suite that provides programs for any imaginable scenario, and this has impacted Mozilla's speed and footprint size.

Phoenix, on the other hand, works in a similar way as the Kopete program described above. Although the central element of the browser, that is the HTML rendering component, is a fixed part of the Phoenix kernel, the main part of the program actually does nothing apart from loading any extensions, when required.

The Phoenix project has not wasted time on calendaring functions, e-mail or chat clients. This soon becomes apparent in daily use of the browser, as it renders HTML pages twice as quick as its big brother, Mozilla.

Although the project is fairly new to the Linux community, its numerous extensions have already begun to impress. In addition to the tried and trusted Google toolbar, these include an extension that interprets mouse movements, or a filter that removes

advertisements based on customizable criteria. Refer to [14] for a complete list of extensions.

The number of themes available for modifying Phoenix's appearance is amazing [15]. Some of them customize Phoenix to reflect the standards of major distributors such as Red Hat or SuSE. Phoenix is a serious contender in the battle for the top-notch lightweight browser.

Word Documents in E-Mail Attachments

Opening Microsoft Office files on Linux can be tricky. What are you supposed to do if a spreadsheet or text document in this format is attached to an e-mail message?

There are programs that convert these attachments, however, there are also practical reasons for not using them. Besides the added effort of installing the programs and the time, it is also detrimental to the propagation of free software.

The pervasiveness of alternative and free file formats will be endangered if proprietary formats are accepted without question. This would quickly force Linux users to install and use Microsoft programs.

This is why the GNU project has officially called for a boycott on DOC format files in e-mail attachments. A document written by GNU's founder, Richard Stallman, (see [16]) explains

why the transmission of files of this type should not be supported.

It also includes free formulated responses that users who receive files in DOC format can return. It will be interesting to see if this petition can influence the way that users handle ".doc" files in e-mail attachments.

Arson

Burning CD ROMs on Linux is still regarded by many – and incorrectly so – as being difficult or complex. Most users tend to think of programs such as Cdrecord and Cdrdao. Programs such as Gtoaster for GTK++ or Cdbakeoven for Qt paint a different picture.

Arson [9] is another GNU project aimed at winning over the user community.

At first glance it seems to be yet another member of the endless chain of front-ends for Cdrecord and Cdrdao, however, the program provides facilities that many other multimedia projects on Linux lack.

Files can be burnt directly in MP3 or Ogg Vorbis format, which means they can be played on any typical CD-RW player. Arson can master or burn (S)VCDs. This makes it easier to manage VCDs on Linux; previously, there was virtually no alternative to Vcdimager and Cdrdao.

Arson's author not only took care of simplifying the data path from the hard

disk to finished CD, but also the reverse path from the CD to disk.

Arson can read CDs and save tracks in MP3 or Ogg format, as well as data CDs to disk.

Arson combines the functionality you expect from a burning program with a few nice extras and an uncluttered interface.

This becomes apparent during the configuration dialog which restricts itself to vital aspects, such as the burning device to be used, or the default quality for tracks.

When all is said and done, Arson is a genuine alternative to burning programs like Gtoaster [10] or Xcdroast [11]. ■

INFO

- [1] Kopete homepage: <http://kopete.kde.org/>
- [2] Licq homepage: <http://www.licq.org/>
- [3] MICQ homepage: <http://www.micq.org/>
- [4] Xchat homepage: <http://www.xchat.org/>
- [5] Kvirr homepage: <http://www.kvirr.net/>
- [6] Prokyon3 homepage: <http://prokyon3.sourceforge.net/>
- [7] MySQL homepage: <http://www.mysql.org/>
- [8] Xmms homepage: <http://www.xmms.org/>
- [9] Arson homepage: <http://arson.sourceforge.net/>
- [10] Gtoaster homepage: <http://gnometoaster.rulez.org/>
- [11] Xcdroast homepage: <http://xcdroast.org/>
- [12] Phoenix homepage: <http://www.mozilla.org/projects/phoenix/>
- [13] Mozilla homepage: <http://www.mozilla.org/>
- [14] Extensions for Phoenix: <http://texturizer.net/phoenix/extensions.html>
- [15] Themes for Phoenix: <http://texturizer.net/phoenix/themes.html>
- [16] GNU on DOC attachments in e-mails: <http://www.gnu.org/philosophy/no-word-attachments.html>

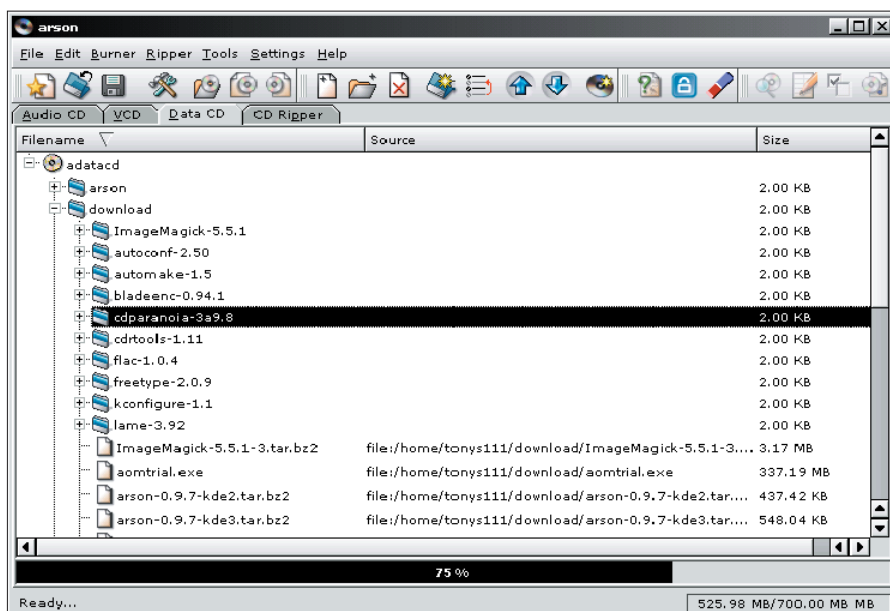


Figure 4: Arson's dialogs for selecting files to place on CD are extremely neat

THE AUTHOR

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