

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: XChat 2.0, grip, and some interesting facts on OpenBSD and Debian.

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This month we take a look at a chat program and a ripping tool. We will also be investigating the background of the DARPA / OpenBSD éclat. This month's *Projects on the Move* also introduces a new section for Debian GNU/Linux.

OpenBSD, DARPA and UPENN

It is a well-known fact that US government authorities are not all that friendly towards people or institutions who do not support the USA's political course at present. This is the first time that an Open Source project, the Unix derivative, OpenBSD [6], has been on the wrong end of the stick.

The story so far: In early April the "Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency" [7] (DARPA), a subdivision of

the US defense department provided funding to the tune of 2.3 million US dollars to the OpenBSD project.

OpenBSD claims to be an extremely secure operating system, and DARPA was looking forward to a "Portable Open Source Security Elements" system (POSSE) [8] aimed at hardening the IT landscape of government agencies.

As legal restrictions do not allow US authorities to sponsor foreign research projects, Jonathan Smith from the University of Pennsylvania (UPENN) was chosen as the front man for the deal. Work on POSSE was to take place in Pennsylvania, but the funding was to go to support OpenBSD.

A surprising turnabout occurred on April 17 when Theo de Raadt, the principle of the OpenBSD project disclosed to OpenBSD developers and members of the project's "misc" mailing list [9] that DARPA had cancelled the POSSE program with immediate notice, and withdrawn financial support for OpenBSD. This has far-reaching consequences.

The "Hackathon", a meeting of OpenBSD kernel developers, was due to take place at the Hyatt Regency Hotel in Alberta, Canada round about now. UPENN paid the 80% deposit that the hotel requested from DARPA funds, but cancelled the reservation when funding was rescinded. The Hyatt's terms meant that the hotel was entitled to retain the deposit - UPENN states that DARPA has now lost at least the sum deposited, any claims to reimbursement will relate to any money left over. To "punish" DARPA, UPENN's Business Manager, Mark West, has vowed to prevent developers from paying the remaining congress fees themselves, and carrying on with the congress regardless. "Cancelled is cancelled!" as Theo de Raadt stated, "the hotel is not allowed to accept the difference from OpenBSD people!" It would seem to be a matter of principle.

There is one official explanation for DARPA's change of mind, but a whole bunch of theories. The Agency simply stated routine budgetary checks had revealed that funding could no longer be

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upheld. Theo de Raadt has another theory: he had published an anti-war statement in a Canadian newspaper shortly beforehand, stating “I try to convince myself that our grant means a half of a cruise missile doesn’t get built”. De Raadt understood the pulling of DARPA funding as clear indication not to exercise his freedom of speech.

XChat 2.0

Users moving from Windows to Linux may initially miss a substitute for mIRC, the de facto standard IRC chat client on Windows. XChat [1] is very similar to mIRC, and might just do the trick.

XChat is based on the GTK+ library and has been through a lot of changes recently. The last major release of XChat Version 2.0 dates from the beginning of February and is based on GTK2.0. Version 2.0.2 sees the 2.0 tree firmly move to “maintenance mode” – and that is reason enough to take a quick look at the new major version.

Users will notice the changes as soon as they launch the client. Moving to GTK2 has made the GUI more modern and smoother in many places. As XChat2 uses GTK themes it automatically adapts to reflect your personal preferences, as selected in the Gnome configuration menu, for example. Many icons are new and the menu structure has been revised.

There have also been some changes to the font-set: XChat2 now supports fast

font rendering. Additionally, a number of smaller changes have been incorporated, such as the ability to enable a transparent background for the client.

Progress has also been made below the surface of the GUI: Perl support was statically compiled into XChat 1.8 whereas the newer version uses plug-ins. There are several advantages to this approach: plug-ins allow for better management of the available resources, and a program that supports a plug-in interface is almost universally extensible. Shortly after plug-in support became available, additional extensions for Python and TCL scripts were introduced. With Perl, Python, and TCL support, the IRC client supports more script languages than most other clients on the market today.

IRC Clients – especially in technically oriented channels – tend to use different character sets. This often prevents one user from reading what another has written. Red Hat uses an UTF8 character set, by default. If a Red Hat user is chatting on an IRC channel any channel users with the older ISO-8859-1 character set will see nothing but cryptic characters, if the RedHat user types non-standard characters. Fortunately, XChat 2.0 provides an intelligent solution for this problem with the `/charset` command allowing you to change the character set used by XChat “on-the-fly”. This allows you to select a character set based on the current scenario and avoids issues with

non-readable characters on one end of the chat connection.

When all is said and done, XChat 2.0 made a very good impression all round. The GUI is functional without being intrusive, the menu structure is clear, and it should not take users too long to find the right switch for a specific function. The offering is completed by excellent font rendering and stability.

Martin Michlmayr Voted New DPL

Martin Michlmayr has been appointed Debian Project Leader by a narrow margin, as Manoj Srivastava, the General Secretary of the Debian Project announced in a mail [10] to the *debian-devel-announce* mailing list. Martin came out on top in a close battle between his predecessor Bdale Garbee, and competitor Branden Robinson because a large percentage of second votes went in his favor. Moshe Zadka took fourth place, but was easily outdistanced.

Martin Michlmayr officially took up office on 17 April 2003. Prior to this he mailed [11] the list thanking his voters, the other candidates and Manoj Srivastava, whose work had made the election possible. He additionally stated that he had talked to Bdale Garbee to ensure a smooth transition between the retiring and the new DPL.

In his goodbye message [12] Bdale Garbee promised to continue speaking on behalf of Debian in future. He summed up his time in office, hoping that Martin Michlmayr would be in a position to leverage and continue his work.

In his first message as DPL [13], Martin Michlmayr also promised to speak on behalf of Debian, and called on Debian developers to take an interest in the development of the new *debian-installer*, which is planned for the upcoming Debian version 3.1 (codename Sarge).

Of course, all the bugs currently tagged as “release critical” in the Debian Bug Tracking System [14] would need to be fixed before the new release, he stated.

Grip

Many users store song tracks on their disks in *mp3* or *ogg* format. This is hardly surprising as it allows them to

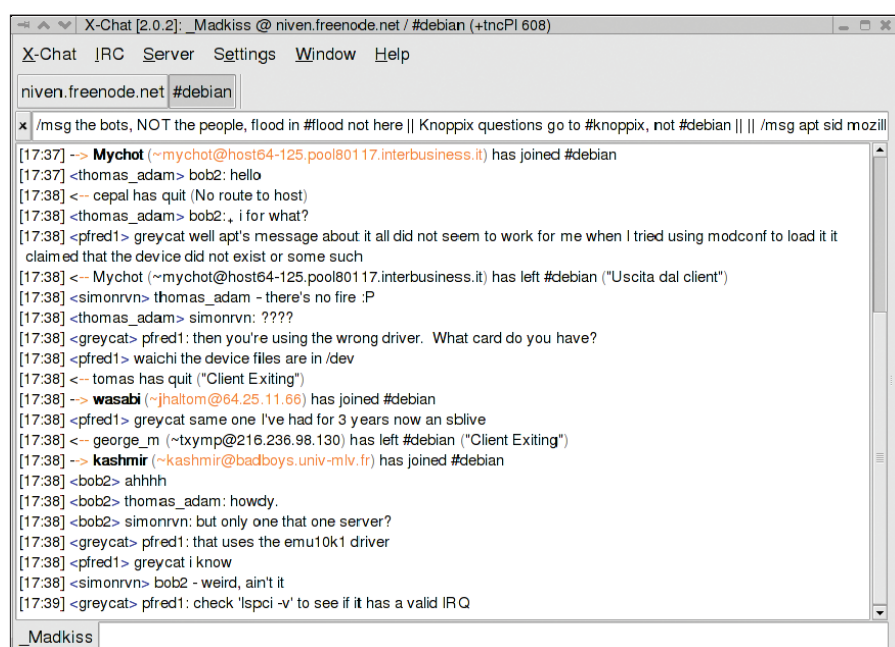


Figure 1: Lots of attention to detail in XChat 2.0

catalog the contents of several hundred CDs centrally. Since many modern computers are remotely controllable, a computer with a CD ROM drive can easily replace a small stereo.

Copying music to your hard disk is trivial – assuming you have the right software for the job. But there's the rub, as there are not many really comfortable ripping programs around for Linux. Although some burning software provides extremely modest ripping facilities, handling this task is normally not their strongest point.

It looks like Mike Oliphant must have been facing the same problem: following the “If you can't find a program you like, write one” principle, Mike went to work on a solution. His program answers to the name of Grip [2] and has reached version 3.0.7 by now. Grip is a fully-featured program for playing and cataloging CDs and is based on the GTK library.

One feature clearly distinguishes Grip from other ripping tools: whereas most ripping tools use *cdda2wav* [3] or *cdparanoia* [4], *cdparanoia*'s source code has been incorporated into Grip. Users do not need to install a separate ripping tool any more. Of course, if you do not want to use this mechanism, you can use the ripping tool of your choice with Grip.

Grip provides painless conversion of *wav* files to *mp3* or *ogg* format. Grip supports many programs that can perform this task – of course you need to install the tool you opt for first, (typically *lame* [5]), but then you can copy to your heart's content. One practical thing about Grip is the fact that it supports

asynchronous ripping and encoding operations. That means, you do not need to convert the track that you are copying from your CD to *mp3* or *ogg* at the same time, the advantage being that you could make a stack of 5 CDs while waiting for the first CD to finish encoding.

Additionally, Grip offers the standard feature set of programs in this category: you can add *id3* tags to *mp3* files – even automatically by referencing the *CDDb* database – and there are no restrictions on the names you store tracks under.

The ReiserFS Dispute

In a recent mail [15] to the *debian-devel* mailing list, Hans Reiser, the inventor of the Linux filesystem he lent his name to, accused the maintainer of the *reiserfsprogs* of removing the copyright notice displayed by programs such as *reiserfsck* on launching from those programs in recent patches, although the license explicitly prohibits this. The README file was also missing, he stated.

In doing so Reiser cites a clause from the future GPLv3. Reiser states that he has repeatedly asked Richard Stallman to release Version 3 of the GNU General Public License.

Messages like this frequently provoke discussions in the developer community, and the developer mailing list was soon hit by flamewars. One tack was that the clause prohibiting the removal of the copyright notice was not below COPYING, which is where one would expect to find it. Instead it was in a separate section of the README file contained in *reiserfsprogs* and thus easily overlooked.

Ben Collins, the former Debian Project Leader, tried another tack [16], stating that *reiserfsprogs* could hardly be viewed as “free software” if the license prohibited the removal of screen output of this type. If he is right, the *reiserfsprogs* might need to be shifted to the “non-free” section of Debian.

Luckily, things have cooled down recently. The *reiserfsprogs* maintainer, Ed Boraas, stated in a mail [17] that the missing README in the Debian package had been purely unintentional. A package containing the file is now available in the distribution's *unstable* tree. The question of the copyright notices displayed on launching the program is currently under review. One solution

could be to add a new “-q” option to the program to prevent the notices being displayed.

That's all folks...

... for this month at least, but we do have one request before we go: If you can recommend a program that you would like to see featured in *Projects on the Move*, why not mail me with your suggestion [17]. I look forward to your comments! ■

INFO

- [1] XChat 2.0: <http://www.xchat.org/>
- [2] Grip: <http://nostatic.org/grip/>
- [3] *cdrecord*: <ftp://ftp.berlios.de/pub/cdrecord/>
- [4] *cdparanoia*: <http://www.xiph.org/paranoia/>
- [5] *Lame*: <http://lame.sourceforge.net/>
- [6] *OpenBSD*: <http://www.openbsd.org/>
- [7] *DARPA*: <http://www.darpa.mil/>
- [8] *POSSE*: <http://www.cis.upenn.edu/~dsl/POSSE/>
- [9] Message from Theo de Raadt to the *openbsd-misc* mailing list: <http://marc.theaimsgroup.com/?l=openbsd-misc&m=105061580500738&w=2>
- [10] Results of the DPL election: <http://lists.debian.org/debian-devel-announce/2003/debian-devel-announce-200303/msg00025.html>
- [11] Martin Michlmayr's first message as DPL in waiting: <http://lists.debian.org/debian-devel-announce/2003/debian-devel-announce-200303/msg00027.html>
- [12] Goodbye message from Bdale Garbee as retiring DPL: <http://lists.debian.org/debian-devel-announce/2003/debian-devel-announce-200304/msg00008.html>
- [13] Martin Michlmayr's first message as new DPL: <http://lists.debian.org/debian-devel-announce/2003/debian-devel-announce-200304/msg00009.html>
- [14] Debian Bug Tracking System: <http://bugs.debian.org/>
- [15] Message from Hans Reiser: <http://lists.debian.org/debian-devel/2003/debian-devel-200304/msg01295.html>
- [16] Response from Ed Boraas: <http://lists.debian.org/debian-devel/2003/debian-devel-200304/msg01687.html>
- [17] Tips and suggestions: projektekueche@madkiss.org

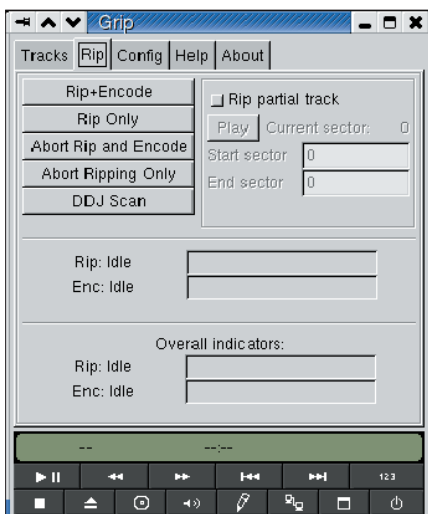


Figure 2: Launching the ripping session