

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

Projects on the Move

Again, we picked the best of the bunch for you: a DVD player from Sweden, trouble down at the Xfree86 project, and the latest news on the imminent election of the Debian Project Leader.

BY MARTIN LOSCHWITZ

Linux is great – at least most of the time it is. Occasionally, it causes problems that drive us to the brink of insanity. If you need to let off steam, Ping Win [1] is a good start. In this flash splatter game, the object is to club cute penguins as far into the icy landscape as you can. Let's return to a less macabre project, the Ogle video player.

Video on Linux with Ogle

The flood of video formats for the Internet has led to a whole crop of players. Many of them are all round talents that can handle nearly any format. Most of them can also play DVD videos on your computer screen. If you are looking for a specialized DVD player, the selection is not quite as large. Ogle, which was at version 0.9.2 when this issue went to press, looks set to close the gap.

The project was started by students of the Chalmers technical university in Sweden. The welcome page on the Ogle website [2] is anything but understated: "Ogle, bringing you what you've always wanted" is the message it puts over.

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Ronald Raefle, vishix.com

Unfortunately, there is one problem that not even Ogle can do anything about: the disaster with libdvdcss for DVD decryption. To legally allow a player to decode encrypted DVDs, you need to license the player. Intervideo has been working on LinDVD – a licensed DVD player for some time now. The only way to view DVDs on Linux at present, is the illegal one that requires libdvdcss.

Masses of Features

Ogle is included with most current distros. If you prefer to build the program from the sources, check out [3] for the downloads, and a list of required and recommended libraries. After installing the player, make sure that you enable DMA mode for your drive to provide maximum transfer speed.

Ogle has an impressive list of features. It can display DVD menus, and play DVD images from disk. This is particularly useful if you intend to create a video archive, assuming you have enough disk space. Ogle recognizes the format, automatically selecting the appropriate height and width values. The program also supports searching DVDs by title and chapter.

Of course, Ogle has all those standard features that any DVD player needs. This includes digital sound via SP/DIF, full-screen mode, and a subtitle display. Ogle

can also produce screen-shots on the fly – a feature that other players tend to make quite a meal of. The player can also play individual MPEG2 files without any fuss.

The Ogle developers make no attempt to conceal Ogle's weak spots. For example, users wanting to view another DVD need to re-launch the program after playing a DVD. Most users will be unconcerned by the fact that Ogle does not provide a backward viewing feature.

Normal desktop users may not be too happy with the fact that Ogle does not have a GUI. If you want a GUI, you have to add it yourself.

The easiest way to do this, is to download the Ogle developers' GTK interface. If you prefer QT and KDE, check out Okle [4] instead.

Ogle leaves a good impression on most users. The tool works well, and it plays DVDs reliably. The only thing to spoil your viewing pleasure is the unsatisfactory copyright situation with regard to decoding encrypted DVDs.

XFree86 On the Way Out?

Linux without a GUI desktop would be unthinkable. The XFree86 project, with its founder David Dawes, was mainly responsible for helping Linux establish itself as an alternative to the Microsoft Windows desktop. Ever since version 4.0 removed the need for video adapter manufacturers to provide X servers for their own chips, allowing them to produce dynamically linkable drivers instead, XFree86 has become virtually irreplaceable.

Recent events have definitely damaged the project's reputation. Many major distributors have announced that they will no longer be including XFree86 4.4 with future distribution releases, as the project has changed the licensing for this version [5].

The first sign of problems at XFree86 came when Keith Packard was thrown out of the core team. The reasons for this

ousting were the subject of heated debates; but the project members failed to provide an official statement. The most probable reason was Keith's harsh criticism of XFree86's development structure. In his opinion, development cycles are too slow, and the whole process is not open enough.

The next act occurred last December, when David Dawes announced the disbanding of the core team. Up to that point, each team had been responsible for monitoring XFree86, and assuring coding standards. In a short email message to the *xfre86-developer* mailing list [6] David stated that the other members of the team had agreed to his suggestion to disband the team. Ever since, no members of the project have been responsible for auditing – with the notable exception of David Dawes, who just happens to be the President of the company that maintains XFree86.

Another report caused turmoil in January, concerning the merger between the X Consortium [7] and XFree86 to jointly produce XFree86 in future. Many users and programmers seemed to favor this development, that is until David Dawes personally denied the reports.

No longer GPL compatible

David Dawes is also behind the latest act in this saga, the license change that accompanied release candidate 4 for version 4.4.

Members of the Debian project immediately set about examining the new license. It quickly became apparent that it really is incompatible with the GPL. Meanwhile, distributors such as Suse, Red Hat, and Debian have announced that they will not be using XFree86 version 4.4.

One should also be aware that this problem does not only affect the Linux community; the OpenBSD developers have also expressed clear opinions on the new license [8]. Most groups are considering using the Free Desktop project's X



Figure 1: The Ogle video player. In its most basic state, Ogle only has command-line controls. Users need to install a GUI themselves.

server. Fedora is planning to distribute both X servers in parallel. It seems questionable as to how long a solution of this kind can survive.

Criticism has been on the increase for quite a while now regarding the lack of true innovations. Also, the Free Desktop X server [9] looks to be a powerful alternative. Ousted developer Keith Packard has joined forces with the project and is now working on creating a new X server with new ideas, along with many former XFree86 developers.

Debian Leader Election

This year sees the regular election for the position of the Debian Project Leader. This election decides who will be responsible for the Debian project's fate in the months to come. The Project Secretary, Manoj Srivastava, announced that the three-week nomination period would commence on February 7 [10]. This pro-

vides official Debian developers with an opportunity to run for Project Leader.

The potential candidates are expected to convince the Debian developers of their ideas and plans. During the election campaign, the candidates present a platform where they can introduce both themselves and their election programs. The election proper was opened on March 20, and will again go on for three weeks.

The current Project Leader, Martin Michlmayr, Gergely Nagy, and Branden Robinson have again taken the opportunity to put themselves forward as candidates for the position of Project Leader. This year, there are only three candidates, whereas there have been four the last few years. Just like in 2003, Branden Robinson once more announced his candidature just prior to the deadline, causing a commotion in some circles.

Martin Michlmayr had announced his candidature at an early stage, and Gergely Nagy, the third candidate, announced his candidature just prior to Branden Robinson's announcement. As February 28 deadline approached, it was unclear until the last minute if Martin Michlmayr would have any competition.

Since taking up the position in April 2003, Martin Michlmayr has represented Debian at numerous meetings and other venues. He also helped promote and organize the Debian developer conference, Debconf, and has addressed numerous internal issues. The backlog of new maintainer applicants has been more or less resolved, and Matt Zimmermann, who was previously an assessor on the security team, was appointed as a full member of the team during Martin Michlmayr's term of office.

To support his campaign, Martin Michlmayr has added his collection of projects as DPL to the arguments he already presented last year [11]. Branden Robinson has completely reworked his platform from last

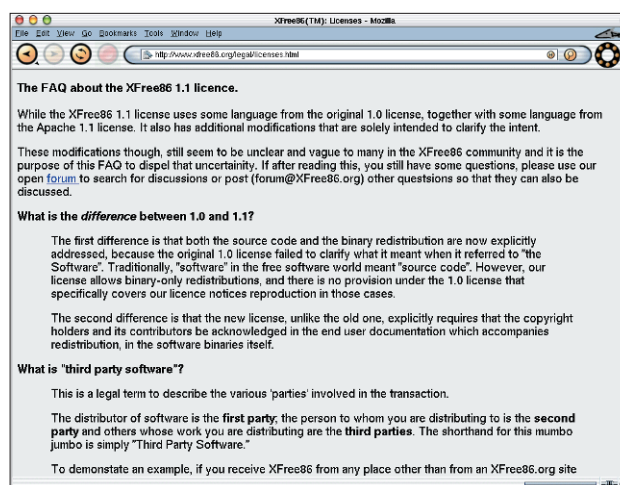


Figure 2: Many important developers believe that the new XFree86 license is incompatible with the GPL. Most distributors have decided to revert to the older XFree86 versions instead.

year [12]. Branden Robinson was only narrowly beaten in last year's election. He is also looking to score points with his track record as a developer, alluding to the fact that he has maintained the XFree86 packages for several years, and that he is actively involved with Software in the Public Interest [13].

Gergely Nagy's platform should raise a few laughs. It seems he is not campaigning to win. In fact, Nagy is actually using his platform [14] to prevent developers voting for him. If he wins, he has promised to disappear immediately.

This year's DPL election looks set to be another neck-and-neck affair between Michlmayr and Robinson. Developers who voted for Bdale Garbee last year might cast the decisive votes. The election period ends April 10, 2004. You can check out the results at [15].

Despite the election battle, Debian developers have been working hard. Recent discussions on mailing lists have once more focused in on a perennial issue, the Debian non-free directory.

The Non-Free Future

For software to be incorporated into the official Debian distribution, it must be free in the sense of the Debian Free Soft-

ware Guidelines. Any Debian packages that contain non-free software are thus added to the non-free directory. This directory owes its existence to the Debian Social Contract, which dictates that Debian users and free software should have priority. The developers have agreed on the compromise of providing the infrastructure for software which is not part of the official distribution.

This directory has been a perennial subject of heated discussions. There are two camps within the Debian project. One of them wants to provide users with as big a selection of software as possible, the other is in favor of restricting the selection to free software, and would like to see non-free abolished.

Abolishing non-free would mean changing the Social Contract, and a 75 percent majority of the Debian developers is required to do this.

In a posting to the *debian-vote* mailing list [16], Andrew Suffield put forward a general resolution to remove non-free, and quickly found the required number of supporters. Numerous Debian developers, such as Branden Robinson, and Tore Anderson, gave their approval.

A short time later, Anthony Towns, the Debian Release Manager, put forward an alternative proposal. He suggested that the Debian project should reaffirm its support of the non-free branch without any changes.

Again a number of developers expressed their support.

One thing is for sure: theoretically, Anthony Towns' proposal stands a better chance being successful. After all, it would take a 75 percent majority to re-

move the non-free directory from Debian. Towns is merely asking for confirmation of the current status quo. A simple majority is all it would take to do just that.

That's all for this month, folks. Don't forget to check out [17] for the election results. As usual, if you can recommend a program that you would like to see featured, why not mail me at [18]. ■



Figure 3: Martin Michlmayr, the current Debian Project Leader (DPL).



Figure 4: Branden Robinson has also renewed his candidature.

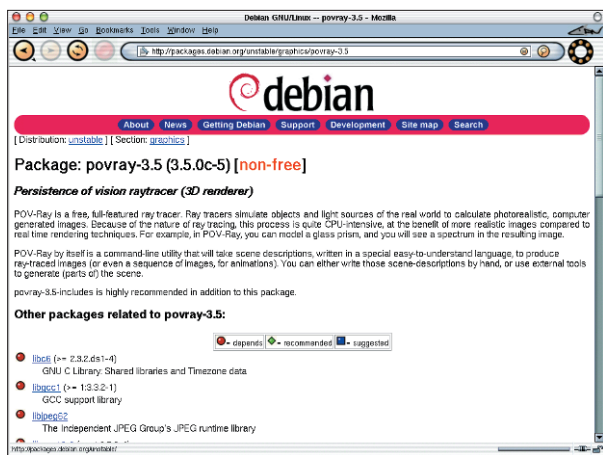


Figure 5: Programs like Povray might completely disappear from the Debian distribution in future, as some developers are in favor of abolishing the non-free directory.

INFO

- [1] Penguin bashing: <http://www.elek.bydg.pl/flash/pingwin1/>
- [2] Ogle website: <http://www.dtek.chalmers.se/~dvd/>
- [3] Ogle sources: <http://www.dtek.chalmers.se/groups/dvd/downloads.shtml>
- [4] Okle, KDE GUI for Ogle: <http://okle.sourceforge.net/>
- [5] XFree86 4.4 license change: <http://www.xfree86.org/pipermail/forum/2004-January/001892.html>
- [6] Email from David Dawes: <http://www.mail-archive.com/devel%40xfree86.org/msg04639.html>
- [7] The X Consortium: <http://www.x.org/>
- [8] Theo de Raadt on the new Xfree86 license: <http://marc.theaimsgroup.com/?l=openbsd-misc&m=107696705911864&w=2>
- [9] Free Desktop project: <http://www.freedesktop.org/>
- [10] Mail from Manoj Srivasta: <http://lists.debian.org/debian-vote/2004/debian-vote-200402/msg00002.html>
- [11] Martin Michlmayr's platform: <http://www.debian.org/vote/2004/platforms/tbm>
- [12] Branden Robinson's platform: <http://www.debian.org/vote/2004/platforms/branden>
- [13] Martin Loschwitz, "Projects on the move": Linux Magazine, Issue 40, March 2004
- [14] Gergely Nagy's platform: <http://www.debian.org/vote/2004/platforms/algernon>
- [15] The DPL election page: http://www.debian.org/vote/2004/vote_001
- [16] Suggested removal of non-free: <http://lists.debian.org/debian-vote/2004/debian-vote-200401/msg01138.html>
- [17] The Non-Free General Resolution page: http://www.debian.org/vote/2004/vote_002
- [18] Tips and suggestions: projects@linux-magazine.com