Linux Question & Answer

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The FOSS session in June 2011 was dedicated to some questions people may have with regard to Linux in general, and especially Ubuntu and its applications. This is a brief summary of some of the points brought up.

Ubuntu

Ubuntu is one of the many Linux distributions, and has for the last few years been the favourite for a lot of people, especially those coming to Linux and free software from scratch, or from Windows. It has a reputation of being easy to install and easy to adapt to if you know Windows already. However, recently, it has been moving rather more quickly for some of its users than they are comfortable with.

In particular, they have introduced a new user interface (window manager) called Unity, which has a very different appearance and behaviour than other systems, and consequently makes it not an immediate choice for newcomers to Linux and its methods.

Also, the software needed to view videos and hear music are not necessarily available out of the box unless the user explicitly asks for them. This is not ideal when trying to convert others to the system.

Finally, Ubuntu is moving away from supporting older hardware, especially since Unity is more demanding of the graphics processors than earlier window managers, like Gnome and KDE. This move tends to negate one of the advantages of Linux in being able to make use of old hardware that otherwise would have been discarded. In the current position of many people trying to make ends meet, Linux was a useful way of extending the life of such hardware.

But there is an alternative, now, which removes some of these concerns.

The recent arrival – Mint

Linux Mint was originally designed to be Ubuntu plus all the codecs (see later) so that it had all the necessary software already present for films and music.

But now there are versions that base the distribution on Debian (like Ubuntu), but are independent of what Ubuntu are doing. They are not planning moves away from traditional window managers, and still include everything needed for use out of the box. Mint is now a serious contender for the easiest to use Linux around at the moment. Its future looks good, and some are already converting to it for their general computing needs.

Codecs

The word codec is a contraction of "coder – decoder". It refers to the software required to interpret a stream of bits as a picture, or film, or music. There are several different versions of these for different file types, and some of the more popular ones were developed by a commercial organisation, who believe they have the rights to all software that performs the interpretation, either through copyright or patent restrictions. Whether they do under law depends on the jurisdiction. The

US has more stringent requirements in this regard than almost the whole of the rest of the world. So what is legal in Europe may not be in US, and vice versa.

This unfortunate circumstance complicates the manner in which distribution of the codecs can be carried out. Ubuntu tried to solve it by providing a check box during installation, which would enable the extra codecs to be included if the user asked for them. It was not a box that was necessarily noticed when a newcomer installed.

Linux Mint has produced instead, two different versions. One containing all codecs legal in the US, and another containing all of them and that can be used internationally, but not the US or Japan. By downloading the international version, the user gets everything they may need out of the box with no extra hassles in acquiring extra stuff.

Thunderbird

Some questions came up with regard to the e-mail client Thunderbird. In particular, how to back up its files and mail messages.

Thunderbird keeps all its information as normal files in the user's area of the system. A normal back up of all files would automatically back up TB's files as well.

If you want to export just the mail messages, there is an add-on called ImportExportTools which can be used for this purpose, although a word of warning is in order. Unless recent versions have improved, when I used it, it failed to preserve the folder structure for the mail messages when transferring from one installation to another.

The address book does transfer normally with the straightforward options under the Address Book of Tools → Export.

Another issue came up after the meeting, in that one of our number lost the view of the left hand pane (the message folders) which made it rather difficult to know what they were doing. It took a bit of Googling to find that this is a feature. If you click on the boundary between the message folder pane and the subject list pane, then you can drag the boundary either way. But of you drag it too far to the left, it will suddenly snap to the left side and the folder pane will vanish.

To recover it, click on the left hand boundary of the window when the cursor shows as a double headed arrow, and then drag the cursor to the right until the pane snaps back into view. If you are running with TB maximised, this is not as easy as it sounds under Unity as moving the cursor over there promptly brings the Unity icons into view. You have to ensure that the window is reduced sufficiently to avoid this happening.

News

Microsoft has bought Skype. This concerns the Linux users as it is not clear what their plans will be for non-Windows users. It may even affect Apple users, too. Microsoft have already applied for a patent on a method of tapping into internet voice connections. Whether they plan on implementing that technique to provide governments around the world the ability to listen in on what you say, is not yet clear. However, there was a report that India have banned the use of Skype because they cannot intercept the phone calls, so there are straws in the wind.

But there is another kid on this block that may get a foot in the door, and that is Google Voice. The situation has all the marks of being an interesting commercial fight in the making over the next two or three years.