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technological freedom and everyday rebellions

About this blog

Steven Rosenberg aims to learn what he does not know. He writes about it here.

About this Entry

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First impressions of Linux Mint Debian — I'm more than a little intrigued

By Steven Rosenberg on September 14, 2010 3:30 PM | Permalink | Comments (8) | ShareThis
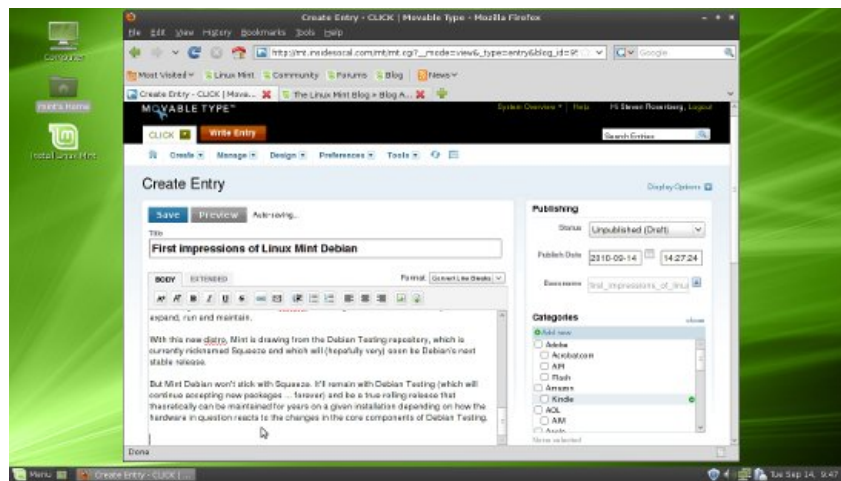
Linux Mint, long known as a multimedia-ready spin on Ubuntu, has gone deeper and released a Mint distro based not on Ubuntu but on Debian Testing, and my first impression running the system from the live DVD is that this is a game-changer in the Linux world.

Here's the deal. Ubuntu is based on Debian and aims to make a more user-friendly desktop, newer packages (drawing packages from Debian Unstable for the most part) in a six-month cycle as opposed to Debian's release-when-ready (generally every 1.5 years).

Ubuntu has also attempted to build a large, welcoming, newbie-friendly community around its distribution and has by most accounts been wildly successful in that endeavor.

Until now Mint has gone further than Ubuntu (on which its based) with more (and different) custom user-interface features as well as almost all available multimedia support built in, whereas Ubuntu makes it easy to get multimedia codecs but doesn't ship them by default for various philosophical and legal reasons.

Mint also has a large, participatory community.

This is my immediate impression of where Mint is in the Linux world, being a Debian user since Etch (2007), an Ubuntu user off and on since Dapper (also 2007 in my case) and never having used Mint before.

Now the Mint team is changing things up with a release based not on Ubuntu but on the project that Ubuntu itself draws from — Debian.

I've written many times that Debian is nothing to be afraid of. If you can install and run Ubuntu with any degree of success, chances are you can do the same with Debian. No, the Debian community is not anywhere near as large, vocal and welcoming as that of Ubuntu, but the Ubuntu community remains of enormous help to Debian users since what generally works in Ubuntu also works in Debian.

And Mint goes even further than Ubuntu in making a distribution that's easy to install, expand, run and maintain.

Debian's huge repository of applications feeds both Ubuntu and Mint, and that flexibility is extremely valuable to any desktop user.

With this new distro, Mint is drawing from the Debian Testing repository, which is currently nicknamed

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With this new distro, Mint is drawing from the Debian Testing repository, which is currently nicknamed Squeeze and which will (hopefully very) soon be Debian's next stable release.

But Mint Debian won't stick with Squeeze. It'll remain with Debian Testing (which will continue accepting new packages ... forever) and be a true rolling release that theoretically can be maintained for years on a given installation depending on how the hardware in question reacts to the changes in the core components of Debian Testing.

I've been running Linux Mint Debian (201009) and its GNOME 2.30 desktop for the better part of a day from the live DVD, and I can tell you that everything thus far works, runs fast and looks terrific (especially if you like the color green).

The most radically different thing about Linux Mint, in either its Ubuntu or new Debian spins, is the Mint menu, which is not what you generally see in the GNOME desktops of Mint's respective parent distros.

I couldn't make a screenshot of the menu, but clicking on the Menu button yields a squarish box that fills up about 1/3rd of the screen and presents your "favorite" applications, which in the default are Firefox, Pidgin, Thunderbird, Rhythmbox, Calculator, Gedit, GNOME Terminal, plus configuration utilities for sound, video and the system.

Clicking "all applications" brings up a more traditional lineup of application categories (All, Accessories, Graphics, Internet, Office, etc.) and mousing over the various categories brings up a list of applications directly to the right.

It's a nice system — and certainly different than what ships with GNOME in Ubuntu and Debian.

Since Debian hasn't jumped headlong into 2.6.33 and later kernels with kernel mode setting for ATI video, I haven't had any of the blurry/sync-challenged video in Mint (or Debian) on my Lenovo G555 laptop and its ATI Radeon 4200 HD video chip. But eventually Debian Testing will move forward, and if the Linux kernel and Xorg developers don't figure out how to deal with ATI chips that don't like kernel mode setting (and often don't even want to work with KMS turned off at boot time), just about any Linux or BSD system could frustrate users.

In the last weeks, I've had success with Debian (and now Mint Debian), I've been able to get Fedora 13 working with an older kernel and proprietary video driver, but Fedora 13, the Ubuntu 10.10 beta, PC-BSD 8.1 and ZenWalk 6.4 are among the distros/projects that aren't working with my ATI video chip. (And yes, I realize this is the same problem I had 2 years ago with Intel video and just about every distribution; video is pretty much back to normal for those machines, or as normal as it's going to get, and yes it's disheartening to have the same problem again except with "new" hardware).

As I mention above, I've still got Fedora 13 working well, though the project's aggressive philosophy on updates not just for applications but core components such as the kernel itself has pretty much broken video in the middle of the release cycle. And while I've had to figure out fixes for my ATI issues, mid-cycle updates in applications such as the gThumb image viewer/editor and gPodder podcast aggregator have been very welcome, making me feel like I really am running a bleeding-edge, rolling release.

Now that I've run both Debian Testing and Fedora for significant periods of time, I can tell you that Testing and even Unstable/Sid are way more conservative about updates than is Fedora — and I'm talking Fedora *releases*, not the even-more-bleeding-edge, rolling Rawhide that is currently spawning future Fedora releases.

Especially if my video issues are not addressed in kernel updates over the next month or so, I can see myself either moving to Debian itself (most likely Stable with Backports for my "go-to" applications) or maybe even this new Mint Debian spin.

While I really like the way Mint runs its community and distribution (the forums are great; the candor and openness in the official blog are refreshing), the one thing holding me back from adopting Mint Debian right now is its lack of an encryption option in the installer.

While I've used the encrypted /home option in Ubuntu, I still prefer the fully encrypted LVM available in the Debian and "alternate" (console-based) Ubuntu installers. Especially on laptops but also on desktops, I think that loss or theft of the hardware is a greater security risk than any over-the-wire attacks or phishing, and keeping unencrypted data where it can be compromised is just asking for trouble.

But while I believe in encrypted machines, I also believe in unencrypted, physically separate and secure backups, which I do on portable hard drives that I store in different locations.

I feel very good about where my backup drives are stored, but I'm not so good about carrying a laptop around with tons of data that can be examined by anybody who gets their hands on the hardware.

And since Debian, Fedora and Ubuntu all offer encrypted LVM or encrypted /home, these are the distributions I've been most comfortable with using on "production" machines. (There probably are others that offer encryption, and I'd like to know about them. Said encryption needs to be *easy to implement by the average non-geeky user*; the fact that security-minded OpenBSD doesn't offer this in its installer baffles me continually).

I haven't mentioned Ubuntu much in this whole thing. While I've thought in the past that a for-profit Canonical would be a good thing for free, open-source software in general, nowadays I'm not quite drinking the Kool-aid so deeply. I've found many of Ubuntu's user-interface changes to be less-than-polished, and while I don't begrudge Canonical trying to make money with things such as Ubuntu One, I'm seeking a lighter, simpler desktop solution (like I get in Debian, Fedora, Slackware and its derivatives and now Mint).

For an initial release, Mint Debian (201009) is incredibly polished and functional (as is Debian Squeeze itself at this point). It's good enough to make me reconsider my requirements for encrypted

LVM and give Linux Mint Debian an extended tryout on my laptop.

Excepting the recent video issues, my last month and then some running Fedora 13 has been a huge success. If your hardware can cope with the frenetic pace of updates, I've never seen a non-rolling release roll as hard and fast as Fedora. It's exciting (in the geeky sense).

But the reality of getting real work done on real hardware means that a little stability can be your friend. The question is whether a Mint distro based on the rolling Debian Testing release will provide a stable-enough platform for your given tasks and hardware. I've generally run Debian Testing as it's gotten close to a stable release, sticking with Stable for a period of time after that.

And my time in Debian Testing hasn't been all smooth sailing. I've had hardware issues and application issues. Not that I haven't had similar issues in "stable" releases. Just as Fedora 13 has broken a few things, it's also fixed more than a few over the past several weeks.

So Linux Mint Debian is a project I'll definitely be watching. If a Mint distro based on Debian Testing proves to be a success, I wonder if the Mint team's next move will be a distribution based on Debian Stable (though it looks like you can easily make your Mint Debian install stick with Squeeze rather than post-Squeeze Testing). An easy-to-use, multimedia-ready version of Debian Stable would be a great addition to the free, open-source OS ecosphere.

Linux Mint Debian is good enough that it almost (but not quite) makes me willing to give up data encryption in the installer. However, a check of the Mint forums leads me to believe that an encryption option may be coming to Mint Debian. That could very well seal the proverbial deal. How's that for an endorsement?

Links

Linux Mint 201009 Debian installation screenshots from EasyLinuxCDs.com

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8 Comments

Wendy said:

According to many experts, the Mint software management programs are unable to cope with package authentication keys. That is a significant security problem. Until it's fixed, I'd stick with pure Debian.

September 14, 2010 8:01 PM

michael said:

I was also put off by the auth key issue. Seeing "Authentication warning overridden" doesn't build trust per se.

If they could fix that AND get some non-Gnome spins together (or just an XFCE one!), I'd be very happy.

September 14, 2010 8:47 PM

KenWeiLL said:

"Ubuntu is based on Debian and aims to make a more user-friendly desktop, newer packages (drawing packages from Debian Unstable for the most part) in a six-month cycle as opposed to Debian's release-when-ready (generally every 1.5 years)."

Correct me if I'm wrong.
Ubuntu non-LTS is based on Debian Unstable.
Ubuntu LTS is based on snapshot of Debian Testing.

September 15, 2010 12:50 AM

Chad McCullough said:

I thought that I had read that there is a XFCE build of Mint Debian but now I'm not so sure (I may have been dreaming). I've searched but have not been able to come up with anything. Would love to find one, though.

September 15, 2010 4:58 AM

davemc said:

Thats correct about Ubuntu releases. LTS is based on Debian Testing since Lucid.

You make the point about Mint basing off Debian Testing that I have been making all over. Testing can be a nightmare sometimes with frequently breaking packages and bug regressions. Mint users are going to come into a rude awakening when Testing repo's open the flood gates again after release to stable. I will be interested to see the reviews on this distro when that happens and how the tiny Mint team is going to deal with that! Probably the smartest thing they could do would be to base Mint off stable and then later create a new spin off Testing when they get the large amount of Dev support they will need in place for it, or provide a GUI that will give users a one-click option to switch to whatever repo they want.

September 15, 2010 7:03 AM

chopeta said:

Linux Mint also offers XFCE, KDE, Fluxbox and LXDE versions. Check the download page: www.linuxmint.com/download.php

September 15, 2010 10:19 AM

Steven Rosenberg said:

It's true that Ubuntu 10.04, the current LTS, was built with packages drawn from Debian Testing instead of Unstable/Sid, which is the source of packages for non-LTS releases.

As far as Ubuntu 10.04 goes, I really think this is in no way a big deal: Debian Testing is basically Debian Sid a few weeks to a month ago.

Since Ubuntu sticks with packages throughout the cycle and isn't a rolling release, In my mind, all that using a Testing snapshot instead of Sid snapshot does for Ubuntu is give it some additional theoretical stability in the first month of release. After that first month, Debian Testing is pretty much where Sid was at release, Ubuntu should be just as stable/unstable and all things are equal.

The fact that Linux Mint Debian IS a rolling release drawing from Debian Testing is extremely significant. I've often thought that Ubuntu would be way better off with two concurrent releases: A rolling "development" release like Fedora's Rawhide (or, conversly, Debian Testing or Sid) and then yearly snapshot releases that are supported for either the next year or 18 months. They could even do six-month releases like they do now, but I think a year cycle is better.

The point is that I think the current Ubuntu setup -- LTS releases every 2 years with other releases every six months -- doesn't really work that well. All six-month releases are to me is a marketing gimmick and an opportunity for my system to break.

September 15, 2010 11:19 AM

Frank said:

Ubuntu LTS versions are based on a snapshot of Debian testing. But doesn't Debian testing eventually become debian stable ? So if Ubuntu 10.04 was released in April using a snapshot of Debian testing, by now that snapshot is well on its way to becoming the next Debian stable release. So in reality, for two out of the three years of an LTS release, you're getting Debian stable, not debian testing.

September 15, 2010 3:56 PM

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