

Universal Packages

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Introduction

What are packages?

A **package** is an archive containing a collection of executable files or source code, along with metadata, which represent a computer program.

What is a package format?

A **package format** is an organizational structure for delivering packages to users.

Why do we need package formats?

- They provide a common way to bundle executables, libraries, assets, etc. for deployment on user machines.
- They provide metadata about programs for use in package managers.
- It would suck if we had to go find the source code for every single program we want to use and compile from source.¹

¹Actually, some package formats do require compilation from source (for example some AUR packages) but at least it helps automate this process.

A bit of history

- 1994 `dpkg` — the package format behind `apt` and `apt-get`. Used by Debian-based systems.
- 1997 `RPM` — the package format behind `yum` and `dnf`. Used by RHEL-like systems.
- 2002 `pacman` — the package manager for Arch Linux. It just uses tar files.
- 2004 `klik/PortableLinuxApps` (2011)/`AppImage` (2013) — a package format built to be Linux-distro agnostic.
- 2006 `nix` — a purely functional package format. Primarily used by NixOS.
- June 2016 `snapd` — the Canonical-backed universal package format is ported to a wide range of Linux distros.
- June 2016 `Flatpak` — the Red Hat-backed universal package format becomes generally available.

Universal Package Formats

Common objectives

- Linux distro agnosticism
- Solve the “dependency hell”
- Create a “single” deployment target for all of Linux

ApplImage

Why is ApplImage cool?

- **ApplImage does not require installation.** The ApplImage file is just its compressed image that is mounted with FUSE when it runs.
- **ApplImage does not require root permission.** The application is run as the user and the base system is left untouched.
- **The ApplImage itself is executable.** Just `chmod +x the .AppImage` file and run.
- **Linus says so**

"This is just very cool."

~ Linus Torvalds

How does ApplImage work?

Application developers use the `appimagetool` converts an `AppDir` into a self-mounting filesystem image.

ApplImages can be integrated with the system via menu entries, icons, MIME types, etc. The `appimaged` daemon handles this registering and unregistering process.

How to create an AppImage

Create an AppDir with the following files (totally copied from their documentation):

- The files of the original application.
- A `.desktop` file that tells `appimagetool` about the name of the application, and the icon it should use.
- A PNG, SVG or an XPM icon with the name given in the `.desktop` file with the `Icon` entry.
- An `AppRun` file, which is used to start up the application inside the filesystem. Once the AppImage ELF has mounted the filesystem, it invokes this file. In the `AppRun` file, you can run some initialization procedures (such as setting environment variables), and then start up the real application.
- Optionally, you should also add AppStream metadata in `usr/share/metainfo`.

Live Demo: Running an ApplImage

snapd

flatpak

nix

Comparison

Advantages of each of these universal package formats

- Snaps are good for deploying single applications.
- Flatpak is good for distributing a set of applications. For example Gnome development builds are in a Flatpak repository.

Love to Hate Them

Proprietary enterprise applications are coming to Linux

Currently, when enterprises want to make a cross-platform application, they see this:

macOS .dmg

Windows .exe

Linux .deb and .rpm and PKGBUILD and ..., then deal with the dependency hell²

However, when companies like Canonical come in and say “just target snaps”, all of a sudden, it may tip the scale at enterprises for them to start targeting Linux. If they create a snap, then they capture all of the Linux market, not just the subset that uses a particular format.

²Yes, you have to deal with dependency hell on other platforms too, but every platform has a different type of dependency hell. Coming to Linux is an expensive prospect for many enterprises.

Pros and cons

Pros

- More application availability.

Cons

- The applications are going to be crap. Bloated, Electron, enterprise crap.

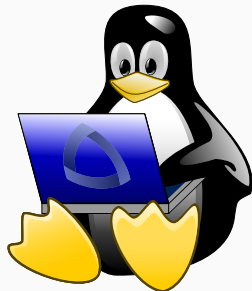
Questions?

- `https://`

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