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In Quest of Freedom

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This is not a brand new story. I imagine it reflects many users' experience with their favorite distro. They get disgusted with windows, try many different linux distros, and finally settling on a favorite to use. I told Reader's Digest Condensed Version of this story on the gentoo forums once and on a mailing list once. But what's a site from srlinuxx without the telling of her journey taken to Gentoo? This is my story.

Why do I love Gentoo? Many many reasons. I'd have to say one of my favorite features is portage. I'm able to run a distro compiled from source and easily upgrade those packages without having to hunt and download packages manually, uncompress and unpack tarballs, read the install and readme, hunt down and apply patches, configure, make, fix errors, make, install dependencies, make, more dependencies, make and finally make install. Gentoo has made me lazy, but mostly Gentoo has given me control over my machines; which is what I suppose this journey has always been really about.

I guess it all started in fall of '92 when I entered college for the first time. I needed a computer, or so I thought, solely for the purpose of writing and printing papers for class. I chose a pre-owned Tandy 2000 with mouse, joystick, dot matrix printer, color monitor, cdrom drive and *both* types of floppy drives for $500. I thought it was neato. It came with a couple games, Dungeon and Dragons I think and some other Wizard of SomethingorOther, a drawing application, and a word processor as I requested. All I can tell you about the specs is it was a 286. I don't even know if it had a modem, but I bet it did. This was my computer until Fall '99 when after returning to college the previous fall that I had quit 5 years earlier and needed to print prettier more modern papers. I purchased a brand new Pionex PIII 500, with 128mb ram, riva 128 graphics, and a 10 gig harddrive attached to a BX440 mobo right off the shelves of the local army base's px for $599. I loved that machine, I was in the big time. In fact my son still using the case. It came with Windows 98 preinstalled and had many issues. I learned my first troubleshooting and repairing skills from Pionex's excellent tech support. They taught me how to reformat and reinstall windows (a skill I would come to hone to perfection) and how to replace faulty or inadequate hardware (cough, cough, winmodem, cough). Besides the unsurpassed tech support, they built a wonderful machine out of quality production parts and didn't cripple the bios and take out features like Dell, compaq, and HP. I was sorry to see them go out of business. But I began to build my own machines soon after anyway.

It was honing of that previously mentioned skill of reinstalling windows due to registry disintegration, file fragmentaion, virus attacks and spyware overload; as well as stability issues, update breakage, and system constraints that lead me to desire something better. I had become so paranoid that I had more security applications on there than I did user programs. I could barely run Office or play a game due to all the anti-virus, spyware watchers & removal tools, firewalls (for a dial up connection now), among other things I've blocked out of my memory. I recall it was a neverending nightmare to stay ahead of or at least one step behind the bad guys.

I was reading one of my favorite newsgroups of that time, news.grc.com , and a couple guys were speaking of their experiences with something called... dramatic pause here... Linux. They mentioned how fast, stable, and secure it could be. They included statements about no spyware, no viruses, no hidden cache and cookies we couldn't delete, little or no fragmenting of the filesystem, no registry, configuration files in plain text and all source code open and free to the public. NO crashes or lockups, hitting hard reset and having reinstall with your latest backup over a week old! I was more than a little intrigued to say the least, in fact this is where it began for me.

I don't think another sun set before I was on ebay buying linux cds (remember, I was on dial up at the time). I purchased Redhat, Suse, and Mandrake 7.0 and watched the mailbox in anticipation of freedom. When they arrived, I delayed about two seconds before popping in the Mandrake 7.0 cdrom. I had searched the internet and read that Mandrake was the easiest for newbies. I was so lost and confused at the os I booted after the surprisingly easy install. "What is this 'crap' in the menu?" Do you remember when the kde menu contained links to all the directories and not much else? teehee. I wondered, "wha'da...?" I was only getting like 640x480 resolution outta my new Geforce2, my modem wouldn't dial even if I set it up right, and no sound. How do I load drivers? Where do I *find* drivers? lol So after trying the Redhat and Suse of the time and getting similar results, I tucked my tail between my legs and reinstalled windows. Later in the nearing Fall of that year, Mandrake 7.2 hit the shelves and received praises all over the internet. Time had come to try again.

I was perusing the software section at our local Wal-Mart (we only had the one at the time), and saw right there in front of me, I could reach out and pick it up, a shiny plastic wrapped box of Linux-Mandrake 7.2. Reached out and picked it up I did. I read the entire box, twice, and slowly walked to the checkout. I plucked down my 25 bucks, scooped up my new purchase and drove home. With trembling hands, I tore off the cellophane and opened the box. I looked at my new 3 cdroms and read the two book(lets) included. I was prepared this time! hehe Within minutes I had stuck the first cd in the drive and rebooted my computer. It walked me through the install and then rebooted... into a beautiful 1024x768 kde desktop. This time the menu contained applications such as kmail, knode, konqueror, and kppp. I tried to put my information in kppp and dial up but nope, no familiar beeps, bops and screeches. None of the modem device choices would dial. This time, I was not deterred. The beautiful desktop with sufficient resolution was enough to keep me intrigued. I booted back to windows googling the internet for answers and forth to Mandrake trying out different things to get that modem to dial. It took me a week, but finally the dream was realized. My modem beeped to life, dialed out and connected. Being a geek afterall, never before or since have I experienced such joy and excitement from a single seemingly-mundane event. My soul, if not my physical self, was turning cartwheels through the house. I've rarely booted windows since. With internet access I could now search for answers to any issue encountered without booting back and forth. It was another week of trial and error before my isa sound card blared to life, but I was in my glory. I was overwhelmed with feelings of accomplishment and satisfaction at taking ownership of my computer away from microsoft and its minions for the first time. I was happy, I was content, I was home.

Much of those first weeks was spent reading this getting started with linux guide I found on the internet. A little outdated even at that time, it covered file hierarchy, permissions, and useful tools and programs. It taught me how to edit files with vi and where to look for configurations files. It taught me how to untar and compile programs. It taught me so many useful bash commands and much much more. To this day that was the best thing I ever did for myself and what I think a lot of newbie miss. It's too easy for them now. Install and go. Many never open the bonnet until a problem arises, and then they are lost. I used to link to this guide in the Mandrake newsgroup when a newbie would inquire where to learn more. I've long since lost that link and doubt that guide is still there anymore anyway. It gave me the foundation I needed to install and run any linux distro available. And so I did.

Over the next several years I test drove about every new release of the differing distros available. I'd download, install, and get stuff working then boot back to Mandrake. I ran Mandrake for three or four years I reckon it was. The first year or so installing each new release, then the next year moving up to installing each beta release, until finally spending the last year or so running cooker updated daily. I was truly a Mandrake addict. I loved the distro's look and feel. I loved that the developers provided the newest software many times straight or patch from cvs, earning it the description of Bleeding-edge. I liked the mailing list and the newsgroup and helped out as much as I could. I volunteered for their short-lived beta-testers group, I ordered goodies from the mandrake store, I sent in donations, and joined their club. I even burnt and gave out cds to anyone who would take them locally. I never thought of running anything else. ...until the winds of change began blowing around the spring of '03. It started at the top and worked its way down, all the way to my desktop. I don't want to recall the gory details, but it will suffice to say I know I was no longer as content with my system as I had once been. But yet all other distros could still not compete in my book. I tried them all, some of you may recall my lilo.conf posted here and there, and was not satisfied with any of them. I was growing more disenchanted in Mandrake by the day but had not found a suitable replacement. Then one fateful day, to my rescue, the November issue of Linux Format appeared in my mailbox.

Linux Format is a great monthly magazine published in the UK and comes with a cdrom or dvd of the lastest linux software or distros. I say it was a fateful day because my subscription had run out. That was last issue I was to receive. That month's issue included the Gentoo Linux operating system. I had heard of gentoo, but when I looked on mirrors I found stages instead of isos. I glanced at the instructions and thought it sounded too much like work, reminiscent of lfs, something that I would someday have time to do. I had yet to try Gentoo when that dvd arrived.

When that Linux Format dvd arrived, I thought yippee, gentoo in a familiar format. I was mistaken. In fact, I couldn't even tell you what format it *was* in now. I recall I had to copy a lot of files from the cd, run a script on them provided by Linux Format, and then burn a cd. I booted that cdrom and followed the readme I found. I installed Gentoo according to those directions. Those instructions were not exactly step by step (or they left some out here and there). Had I not had enough previous experience with linux in general, it would have not completed. There were a couple problems with this method, but I finished getting a base system installed and booted to a familiar terminal screen. The instructions ended there but I proceeded to install XFree86, kde and some of my other must-haves. The next day I was able to boot and log in to my brand new desktop. But it wasn't over yet. I had several problems, one of which almost sent me back to Mandrake. I was having booting errors galore, some of my hardware wouldn't work, and X seemed to just freeze up from time to time. I was about to give up when I had the idea just to try a vanilla kernel. I downloaded and installed the latest stable 2.4 and rebooted. Almost all my problems disappeared and I was able to get all my hardware functional. I truly believe my mistake was in using genkernel as instructed. To this day, I never typed that word again til just now for this article.

I have since installed gentoo on my p3 server, my p1 laptop, my amd slave server and a fresh install around christmas on my desktop machine. I pretty much followed the directions on gentoo's site for these installs. It runs so well on all these different machines, that I do not hesitate to recommend it to anyone. I haven't had a chance to try the 64-bit version, but I'm hoping someday. For best results, some tips that I can suggest for a more successful experience are: 1. don't use genkernel! 2. Don't use the nvidia ebuilds. 3. Don't use the ebuilds for any of the commercial games. I find myself quite happy with gentoo and feel in complete control over my machine. I make the choices. *I* decide. I will always hold a soft spot my heart for Mandrake, for it gave me the ways and means I needed to break away from windows, but I think in Gentoo I have finally found that freedom for which I've been searching. I wish you all the same.

Linux -s

Source URL: http://www.tuxmachines.org/node/65

Links:
[1] http://www.tuxmachines.org/taxonomy/term/63

[2] http://www.tuxmachines.org/taxonomy/term/102