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Please note: This is initially from my Blog, published December 2018! Some stuff has changed, but I'll keep this here as reference.

How I First Transitioned to GNU/Linux

Introduction

For the past several years, my system OS of choice has been GNU/Linux. I've gone from Ubuntu, to Debian, to Fedora, to OpenSUSE and finally, Arch. Through these years, I've also gone through many desktop environments, including Unity, GNOME, KDE, Xfce, i3, then back to KDE. This post start to outline my experiences with each.

The Start

Back in 2014, I built a desktop to accompany my Laptop and for the experience. Initially, I purchased a Windows license and installed Windows 8.1 through the installation DVD.

Windows was very predictable, I had used Windows 8 on my laptop for several years, and despite preferring Windows 7, it was relatively easy getting adjusted. I kept this setup until Fall 2015, when I decided to try out Linux on the desktop.

Vanilla Ubuntu

At that time, I started looking into various distributions, eventually settling on Ubuntu (14.04 at the time for LTS) or Linux Mint (17.3 if I remember correctly), as they were easy distros to get into for beginners with lots of help on forums such as AskUbuntu. I settled on Ubuntu as I didn't want to use a derivative of a derivative system (Mint is based on Ubuntu which is based on Debian). I also noted that Ubuntu had good driver support. This probably wouldn't have been a big issue at the time anyways, since it was running an Intel i3-4130 with the integrated graphics.

At that time, I didn't want anything to do with configuring Xorg (or anything for that matter), or compiling software. I just wanted something that worked, and was easy to switch from Windows. That's one of the areas where Ubuntu still shines. It is a very "mainstream" Linux distribution, providing easy usage for the masses. Driver support is good, the installer works fine, and the computer just works. It is a good starting point, as you get experience into installing programs from the terminal and such. Mind you, you still have to be interested in tech with with the ability to pick things up (like a terminal), so while I realize it's not for everyone, Ubuntu definitely holds your hand.

Package Management

Package Managers

Actually, at first, I was very impressed by the ease of software installation in Ubuntu. No need to go to the website, download some .exe installer, press ‘no’ a bunch of times to avoid crapware and the such. It worked, and installed all dependencies with few hiccups. I was equally impressed with the ease of updating software. Unlike Windows where one had to go to the manufacturer website and re-download and install the latest updates, all the programs could be upgraded all at once through 2 commands – a big improvement.

Apt-get Issues

What wasn’t too nice was when you started to run into issues with apt. Either the versions were incompatible or you had to find .deb files to install with dpkg, I personally found that apt on Ubuntu broke a fair bit. In comparison, dnf on Fedora and pacman on Arch had hardly any software issues, not to mention, no need to backport newer versions on which lead to other conflicts. While I also didn’t find Unity appealing at all, I kept with it because it worked!

Transition Hiccups

Compatible Software

One of the biggest parts of the transition was now finding compatible software to run on both my Windows laptop that I used everyday for note taking at school, and the desktop which I used at home. Up until this point, I had simply been using Microsoft OneNote to take notes, which worked very well. In fact, I still haven’t found an equal alternative, though my current setup is a solid good enough IMO. The problem with OneNote was that it would not run properly on Ubuntu. I tried running all the versions of Office that I could with my student license, and had some luck installing Office 2010 (earliest the student edition worked for), but with limited support – such as no OneDrive sync which was crucial to my workflow back then. Let’s not even mention the broken fonts that came with Wine, and the issues of syncing notebook files that may be open on one computer with the other. (See my next post for my updated fix). I ended up continuing to use OneNote for the few months in that fall, simply resorting to using OneNote online when I had to use my desktop.

File Synchronization

I took care of file syncing with Dropbox initially, then followed by Mega.nz, as they had native clients. While I don't use either anymore (foreshadowing: I went to OwnCloud → NextCloud → Syncthing → rsync) they were easy to use and worked. It was part of easing into the new workflow. For reference, I had hardly used SSH up until that point.

Overall, I was pleased with the way the system was working. Stuff worked most of the time, and in the face of trouble, there was tons of forum support along the way, which definitely helped.

Conclusion to Part 1

In conclusion, vanilla Ubuntu was the first stepping stone on my rabbit-hole journey. There is probably a LOT that I left out from this post, and I may just post them later on. Check back for the next part for my continuation on my note-taking and file management, as well as transitioning into the KDE desktop environment on Ubuntu.

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