

(Note to the college waves type setter. Please set the two command lines using a monospaced font line Courier New, and don't forget the picture with the penguin. If you want, you can set up the links into a floating frame.)

Penguins in Ghana

More about Free Software



You might remember my speech, the one with the penguin. The time then was short, and there was so much more to tell – for example what the penguin is about. In this article, I will expand on the benefits that users of free software can reap.

Tux, the penguin

The most reoccurring question asked after the speech was: What's with the penguin? It is Tux, the mascot of the Linux operating system, and so far the cutest logo in the whole IT business. You can not only find it on my table, but also on most of the computers at your school, on a label next to the Microsoft Windows logo. This means that on these computers you can use Linux, you just have to select it from the menu with the penguins, right after you start (or re-start) the machine.

So why would you want to use Linux, instead of Windows? Doesn't Windows do everything that you need? That is probably true, because you think you only need what Windows has to offer, and you likely do not know about the advantages of Free Software.

Pirating Software?

All the software I use, including an office suite, image manipulation, games and much more, I downloaded off the Internet without paying for it. Now you would probably call me a computer pirate, and this would be true if we were talking about Microsoft Office or Adobe Photoshop. But I am using OpenOffice and "The

GIMP”, which offers the same functionality, and it is Free Software, so I do not have to pay for it.

The story gets even better. Have you ever installed or even upgraded software on Windows? Have you thought it to be a hassle to click through all these questions? On Linux, to install gimp, all I have to do is type in

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apt-get install gimp
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or mark a check box in a nice graphical (“windows-like”) program, and the package containing gimp will automatically be downloaded, installed and set up. If the program package depends on other software, it will be taken care of. If I want to upgrade my system, I will give one command, and it will update all the software on my system, if possible. Software installation was never that easy, and with about 10,000 pieces of Free Software at your finger tips, pirating again is something people do with ships, not computers.

The choice is mine

Do you think that Windows is customizable just because you can change the color theme, or maybe even install themes for the window borders? You have not yet seen the large quantity of choices of graphical user interfaces on Linux. From a fully featured Windows competing environment like GNOME and KDE, to a very fast one like Xfce or exotics for power users like ion, which is keyboard controlled and never overlaps your windows.

You can also leave the world of WIMP (windows, icons, mice, pointers) and start exploring the command line. It might seem a bit 1980ies to type instead of click, but after a short while you will be so productive, that you only go back to draw some pictures (which is hard with the keyboard, I have to admit). Consider this task: You have a directory with images from your digital camera, but they are too large (e.g. to put on you website). You could open each one in your favourite image manipulation program, resize it and save it, or you could run a command like:

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for image in *.jpg; do mogrify -resize 800x800 $image; done
```

This will make sure all the pictures are smaller than 800x800, while keeping the aspect ratio. It will do it for one, two, five or one hundred pictures, and that is only the beginning. With little more effort we could print our name in the lower right corner of the image, and copy it to the website, all in one run!

All that for free?

Yes, and more than that: Free Software is not only free as in “Free Beer” (or “Free Candy”, as someone suggested I should say when talking to students), but as in “Free Speech”. Free Software guarantees you the right to pass on the software, to study it, to modify it and to pass on your modification. With a little bit of programming skills (or a good friend with that) you can have even more control over your computer.

I, for example, have a laptop with a reading light in the frame, which I hardly use for reading. But I tend to miss that someone has written me a message in my instant messenger program (which, by the way, speaks MSN, Yahoo, ICQ, Jabber, Google Talk, all in one program). I thought it would be nice if the light would blink on new messages, so I downloaded the source code and in about one or two

hours, I had written an extension that does just that. Published on my blog, the extension is now used by people around the world (and one student complained that it distracts him if other students use it during the lecture at a university somewhere in the state of New York). For another piece of software I wrote I got calls from Norway and e-mails from Russia, Pakistan and Peru. And I got an invitation to go to a school in Ghana and show them what Linux is about...

Where do you want to go tomorrow?

Got interested? I would recommend you to try it out on your own computer, but that probably has to wait until you have graduated, as the school rules do not allow for that. Until then, you can use the installations in the labs and the library, if they are still functional, as well the pieces of Free Software on Windows: The Firefox web browser and the OpenOffice suite (which, by the way, can edit MS Word documents as well and has a direct PDF export!)

Unfortunately, I had to leave the school sooner than planned. If you want to know more about send me an e-mail: mail@joachim-breitner.de. You can also read more about it on my blog and my website.

Some links

- More about Free Software: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Free_Software
- The Linux distribution I use and work on: <http://www.debian.org/>
- A good beginner's distribution: <http://www.ubuntu.com/>
- Portal for Free Software in Ghana: <http://www.openghana.org/>
- My weblog: <http://www.joachim-breitner.de/blog/>
- My website: <http://www.joachim-breitner.de/>