Readers' Round table

Mike Saunders and **Graham Morrison** venture outside LXF Towers to meet a few readers and discuss life, Linux and the lack of cheap parking in Bath.

A couple of months ago we announced that we wanted to arrange an informal gathering where a few of us could get to meet a few of you. We had no agenda, but we wanted to discuss how Linux should grow, what its strengths and weaknesses are, and how we can all do more to help promote its use. After an *X Factor*-style competition to whittle down the numbers, we arranged to meet six of our readers in a local hostelry on a cold and rainy evening in October.

We met in a cosy room in a public house, a room with walls covered in the typical paraphernalia of the English drinking establishment. That meant mirrors with white writing, blackboards without any, posters and nostalgic flotsam. A single oval table was set aside for us, and over our first drink we arranged ourselves.

> ## "A table was set aside for us, and over our first drink we arranged ourselves."

It felt like a clandestine gathering at the Prancing Pony, before the eight of us head east to tackle the shadow growing on the horizon.

Shevek, the group's *agent provocateur*, kicked off the proceedings by explaining how Linux should be pronounced, thanks to an audio file that was included on one of his first distributions from the early 1990s.

"When I installed it, it came with an AU file saying 'My name is Linus Torvalds and I pronounce Linux Linux'". Shevek says this with what we all presume is a subtle Finnish accent.

"Linux is a fairly close Anglicisation of Leinux though", responds Alex, who works in computer security. This seems to bring speech synthesisers to the mind of Bob, our youngest participant and a programming student: "I've been experimenting with *Festival*", he says. Alex picks up the lead: "I did try *Festival* with the sentence 'I am reading in Reading'" he says, "Just to see. But it was fine with no hints."

"There's something similar on YouTube now in the comments section", our Mike adds, "it can speak out what you've posted. And 90% of the comments on YouTube are rubbish, like 'LOL U SUXOR'. Now you can actually type it and go "Mmm. Perhaps".

Crispin, a Java programmer, then says something sensible. "The thing that irks me about YouTube is that a video stream will always be slower for information than reading", he says. "You can sit through a 10min video blog, and I could have read that in about a minute."

Bob chips in. "It's a similar story with the BBC *iPlayer* in Linux. You seek ahead 10 seconds, and you end up waiting a couple of minutes for it to catch up. Seems to work well on Windows though, funnily enough."

Now we've all got comfy and sated ourselves on fine food, let's see if we can put the world to rights…

Distributions

Alex kicks things off properly. "In a way, Linux has arrived and some of the excitement has kind of gone. It's here, it's going to stay. And it just works. There's less of the 'Oh I'm trying to get SETI installed onto my machine' any more," he says.

Shevek seems interested: "Linux versus Windows has always been a war where only one side is ever fighting," he says. "And the other side was simply trying to get on with the job. The people who were actually creating were never the ones creating the conflict. The ones who were running around creating all the excitement were largely ignored by the people writing the software."

"I find I just use Ubuntu", adds Crispin. "Because I just install it and it works. I've been through all the Slackwares and the Red Hats and SUSE and whatever, and each time… I mean, it used to be fun editing my own **xorg.conf**. But after a while you tend to get, 'I'll install it and then I'll get around to configuring it.'"

Alex responds: "No, I expect my distro to set up all the hardware for me unless there's a legal reason why they can't."

But it looks like Ubuntu might be too much of a good thing for Crispin. "I've got a ThinkPad, and I wanted to install my monitor on it, and the monitor was a different resolution to the display," he says. "And it was a weird ATI driver thing, and I actually had to edit the **xorg.conf**, and I'd forgotten how to do it!"

That brown distro

Which brings Bob back into the conversation: "The only problem I've had with Ubuntu is the sound driver, where it's got Realtec HD or Intel HD audio, because they haven't quite finalised the specification for it yet. And of course, ALSA is playing catchup on that one. So it's a case of hacking it."

"I think really there's a lot less differentiation in terms of the mainstream distributions these days," says Alex. "They all provide support for broadly the same hardware – or not. They all have largely the same level of components, such as a C library, *Firefox*, that sort of thing."

This seems to bring Shevek to the boil. "I contest that statement most strongly," he says. "Ubuntu has stormed the entire part of the market that SUSE has been trying to target for years. And they did it because they have this idea that it does have to work. Whereas it's actually very difficult to make a Red Hat system do anything meaningful.

"You cannot type from any Red Hat system, 'some-install-command java ant' and all the local utilities. You cannot type any

Shevek
Occupation: My current job title is "Chief Scientist" which I kind of like.
Favourite Distribution: If I have to run it, Gentoo, for maximum flexibility, probably on the binary base for speed.
Quote: Linux versus Windows has always been a war where only one side is ever fighting.

command that says 'install boost' and so on. On Ubuntu, you could say 'apt-get install boost', on Gentoo you can say 'emerge boost'. So the traditional distributions, SUSE and Red Hat very much have dropped the ball."

Alex is obviously something of a Red Hat fan: "I think we do have boost, I'm pretty sure, in Red Hat and CentOS", he says.

"What version?" counters Shevek.

"But Red Hat Linux is quite old", says Mike.

But Shevek was expecting that. "It's a version that nothing works with," he says. "You're very lucky if you can find anything that will install with boost 1.34. Almost everything uses Asynchronous IO these days, which is only in 1.35." **»**

Readers' round table

» Crispin leaps to Red Hat's defence: "It's going to be old by its very nature. It needs to be stable."

But Shevek can't be dissuaded, and lays his distribution cards on the table. "Anything that lags behind Debian stable is frankly stone-age, because Debian stable is two years behind. Anything behind Debian stable shouldn't be attempting to hold any part of the market place. I've only had to deal with Red Hat in parts, and the reason Red Hat has the marketplace it has is because it satisfies the corporate tick list by providing commercial support. It has nothing to do with what they provide. And what they provide as a Linux distribution is useless."

Crispin doesn't agree. "I don't think it is useless. I think it fills a gap. It fills the corporate data centre thing where they need the support. They need something that is stable."

Alex agrees: "There is a lot of use for even an old version of Red Hat Enterprise – just out of the box if you want an SMTP server, if you want *MySQL* or *PostgreSQL*. It's there. There are still an awful lot of servers out there. If it's a database server, or it's a print server, a *Samba* server, or an SMTP server."

> ## "Anything that lags behind Debian stable is frankly stone-age." Shevek

"It just sits in a corner, adds Crispin. "But it's the support thing that's vital to a big corporate body. They feel the need for that person on the end of the phone. You buy something like Windows, and you've allegedly got support. And you pay for the support."

To calm things down, we ask Shevek which distribution he would choose.

"For commercial servers, Debian every single time," he says.

"Without support?" asks Graham.

"Without support."

Graham goes on: "I think you have to have support. You have to have the cover. Not for for you at the coalface who's doing the work, but for people higher up. They need the insurance policy."

"People higher up are never going to touch it", Shevek states. "The insurance policy is to hire a guy with a clue. I would reasonably bet that there more Debian servers installed doing jobs than Red Hat installs."

Crispin asks a question: "The guy with a clue goes tomorrow. What are you going to do?"

Shevek seems to sidestep this: "Debian has an excellent long-term support policy. It has an excellent policy of patching bugs. When you start adding all this stuff together, it makes a very stable distribution that just works. It's all very well having a (Red Hat) support policy, but they can't patch anything in. If I call these guys and ask them to install the latest version of *Firefox* they're going to tell me to get stuffed."

Old vs stable

Crispin and Alex rally: "That depends on whether it's enhancing what's there or it's fixing what's broken," says Crispin, Followed by Alex saying "A lot of people don't need that extreme level of support. They just want answers when their *Postfix* server is no longer taking connections.

"I'd probably go with CentOS," Alex continues. "If I were using it out the box, for say something like *Postfix* or something like that and we're quite happy that we have the experrts in house that can resolve any problems.

"I'd pick Red Hat Enterprise if I were using a third-party application that required support," he adds. "If I were building something extensive myself, and building my own special-purpose appliance, where out of necessity I'd need to replace parts of the distribution, then I'd use whatever I was most familiar with. In my case that would be CentOS/Fedora."

"Is that what you use at home?" asks Graham.

"Yep", responds Alex. "Fedora at home, and CentOS at work. It's just that I've got years of experience on Red Hat now. I know its gotchas, and I can work around them. I also know that no distribution is perfect."

Crispin adds: "I would probably use RHEL, but it depends on the size of the company," he says. "If you can get a small company where you know someone in-house is a Linux sysadmin, then CentOS would be cheaper because you don't have to pay for the support, but you've still got the RHEL updates. But when I'm sitting at home, I use Ubuntu because it just works."

"A lot of people just want to install Linux where there's clear documentation and something of a standard," Mike says.

"I think that's fine, Alex says, For somebody who's inexperienced with Linux, then targeting one distribution is probably fine. For anyone else, I could probably take an article published for Ubuntu, for some special-purpose application, and I could see what I'd need to do on Red Hat or Fedora."

Nick Robinson
Occupation: IT (about as narrow as I can make my job description)
Favourite Distribution: OpenSUSE
Favourite Desktop: KDE
Quote: I guess the idea is to just not run as root!

Alex Butcher
Occupation: Computer Security Specialist
Favourite Distribution: Red Hat family; RHEL, CentOS and Fedora
Favourite Desktop: Gnome
Quote: There haven't really been that many Linux worms. If you can count them on the fingers of two hands, I'd be surprised.

Advocacy

After a few more minutes discussing the ins and outs of Gentoo, Mike finally reaches the end of his patience and tries to pull the conversation back in line. "Do you think we should have a united front for Linux?", he asks. "Should we put all our efforts behind one distro and say this is the standard? If you've got loads and loads of distros, and someone calls to say 'I'm having problem A', you have to go through this spider's web of requirements."

Nick, who has just sat down, was the last to arrive, having been stuck behind heavy traffic on the way over to Bath. "When someone, an experienced user, hits a problem," he explains, "they've got to fix the problem so that it becomes automated. Instead of posting a blog entry saying 'This is how I fixed it', rather they should submit their changes to an RPM, or something for the people to download. So that it becomes more automatic."

Shrevek, who seems to place Gentoo in the same category as Debian, offers his opinion. "Gentoo has nailed this one firmly, because this is why the HOWTOs work. Every single person who reads that HOWTO also corrects it, so they've got that one nailed."

Then Stuart ponts out the biggest problem with Gentoo: "But then you've got to get dirty on the command line to do anything."

"Is the command line bad?" Shevek responds.

"My mum doesn't want to use the command line," Graham chips in. "She just wants to avoid viruses."

Linux for the mums and dads

There's now a family vibe to the conversation, as Alex tells us about his experience. "Well, my dad's been using CentOS for a couple of years now," he says. "It was a bit of work for the first two or three months while I set things up for him. I've got an SSH prompt and I can do that over a telephone line – he's still on dialup."

"That's a problem I've had, in that my parents are still resolutely saying 'until we can have broadband for threepence ha'penny, we're not having it'." Crispin says. "I installed Ubuntu on my mum's laptop, and it all installed correctly until she wanted to use the dialup, and in that case I needed to install the thing. I'd got no access to the internet, so I needed to find another way."

Nick sees two ways for Linux to grow. "There are two paths that Linux can take," he announces. "It can go Unix-style, or you have qualified experts who get paid to run big servers – or you have the Microsoft-style where everyone has root access and it's a dime a dollar for a Microsoft Expert."

"But the Microsoft model is all very much about users being their own sysadmins," Alex says. The Unix model is you're either a user or a sysadmin user. I'm my dad's sysadmin, and that works OK for us. But it doesn't scale terribly well."

Nick is obviously interested in the bigger picture, and how people without a particularly technical background perceive Linux. "What do we want people to know about Linux?" he directs at the group, "Thinking about KDE and all its bugs."

This seems to bring about an alternative OS discussion, and suprisingly it's not Mike who's at the forefront. It's Alex. "I think Mac OS is an interesting compromise between the immediacy and the usability of Windows with the stability of Unix." he says.

There's now a hum of dissent, which Shevek brings to a focus: "Apple are now so obsessed with being a vertical market they actually make their systems useless," he says.

But Alex doesn't see the situation as that cut and dried. "Apple will force you down their way of doing things," he says, "but generally, that's not terrible. I mean, they have better taste than

Microsoft in these things. Some tasks are better met with appliances, and some things are better met with general-purpose machines. I think for end-users like mum and dad, an appliance gadget is going to be right for them. It's like the CentOS that I've set up for them, where I've put a button for *Firefox*, a button for CD copying etc."

"My parents too have all they want," adds Crispin, "apart from my mum wanting an easy cross stitch program that needed me to install *Wine*."

This seems to bring Shevek around to thinking about our magazine and the art of communication. "I think what we've got into with the kind of articles you're covering is that you're writing about Ubuntu as an application," he tells Mike and Graham. "That's not Linux, you're writing about Ubuntu. You're writing about the whole thing as an appliance. Then you've got the LSB

> ## "The Microsoft model is about users being their own sysadmins." Nick

and the command prompt level where you're writing about Linux, and the two are completely separate. I've never used Linux as an appliance. I started in 1992, back when that was the only way to do it. When you wanted *X* to work, you had to write a graphics driver. And I've never got into using Linux as an appliance, which is partly why I've had difficulty with some distros – especially Red Hat."

Split standards

"In response to Mike's question about whether we should have a united front," says Nick, "the answer is 'no'. We should have one that's user interfacing, and one that's server interfacing. Different distributions can take on different niches in the market."

"It all boils down to what do we want Linux to become," Mike says. "If we don't want Linux to become a mainstream OS, then you're right, we can get our hands dirty with the command line. But if we want it to be successful, if we want free software to spread, then we have to cater for a wider audience." »

Crispin Veall
Occupation: Java Programmer
Favourite Distribution: Ubuntu
Favourite Desktop: Hmm, probably a nice oak one with a leather inset -failing that, Gnome
Quote: I've been through a strange Slackware period. It's sort of like goth music really, and you have to go through that.

» Alex agrees, and thinks that despite things appearing difficult, we might be on the cusp of a usability breakthrough. "The Windows model is very distributed", he says. "Microsoft is an environment, and you have this very diverse ecosystem of third-party developers. The standard way those developers get their packages out there is to bundle them up into EXEs and ship them out. Whereas Linux only works well if your package is provided in the version you want by your distribution vendor. The moment you step outside that, it starts getting a bit tricky."

Third-party repositories

Alex goes on to explain a great idea for easy installation. "One of the things I do think is positive is Adobe providing a repository for Fedora/Debian. The nice thing is that once you've added this repository, you can go to *Yum* and install the Flash plugin. And when you update, it's included in your system update, and that's the way it should work. I'd encourage more third-party vendors, individuals or Adobe, to create a repository, package your application up, and put it in there along with any dependencies."

This idea seems to bring further enthusiasm from Crispin, "Perhaps it would be easier if you could go to a website and click on something that then adds a line to your repository list and shows you the list of things you can install," he explained.

And that's when Alex sums it up: "One of the problems my employer has is people keeping things like their browser plugins up to date when they don't have admin rights on their own machines. And every plugin manufacturer has their own update mechanism. It's a complete rat's nest. It would be far better if were unified under a single system. I don't care which, and the potential is there for Linux to really knock Windows on the head with that."

Linux testimonials

Mike turns the topic to how we all got started with Linux. "It would be interesting to see exactly what we all use," he says, "before giving a little background information on his conversion. "For me it was 1998 and Red Hat 5.2. It was something different and was on the cover of an old computing magazine."

Stuart is the first to respond. "For me it was Red Hat 5 something or other," he says. "And it was just to find out how to play with this thing on an old computer. It was a 286 Compaq that I'd got second hand from someone. I got it to the point where it was running graphical *X Windows*, and I was using it for email. I had an office suite installed, and it died a death after I got a new job. But in the interview for the new job, they sent me a file where I needed to write a report, and in the format they had done it it. Of course, it was in *Word* format. I could open it and make the changes, but when I sent it back to them, and they opened it, it was slightly different. And that was about six or seven years ago.

Everyone agrees that office applications at the time were generally a bad thing. "I was still using *StarOffice* in 98 or 99", explains Alex, "but I'd started with *StarOffice 3* or something."

Alex isn't so sure. "It depends", he says. "If you're doing no more that editing config information before typing 'emerge', watching packages compile won't necessarily teach you how the system's working."

> ## "I wanted to learn more about Unix, because it was a valuable skill." Alex

Nick is next to take up the baton. "I started in 2002," he explains. "I needed it for work, so I had to learn it for work. Our servers ran SUSE Linux. Our technical expert who we worked with was one of these guys who used to program punched cards and assembler and all the rest, and he said that I would have to learn this at some stage. He gave me an account and he said 'Use this Putty thing'. This is your login. Phone me when you get stuck'."

My experience was similar," adds Alex. "It was 1995 for me and I'd just graduated. A lot of my course was on SunOS machines and I wanted to carry on learning more about Unix, because it was a valuable career skill – very valuable, and something I was interested in. And of course, I'd never had root on any of the machines at university. I went with Slackware 2.2.0 and within about nine months, I switched to Red Hat 2.1 and I've stuck with Red Hat and work-a-likes since because I've build up a stock of knowing how to bash Red Hat around."

Tempted by shiny things

But the ugly spectre of an alternative operating system is haunting Alex. "I must admit that I'm tempted by Mac OS X purely to gain access to some of the special-purpose commercial applications like music and photos," he says. "You can do a lot of that stuff on Linux, but it would be interesting to see whether the commercial tools can really make life easier. Are you less focused on the tools and more on the act of creation?"

Bob's happy to share his first Linux experience too. "The first distro I used was Mandriva 2005. I used that as a Live CD on my parents' machine, I was aged 13 or 14. Since then, I've installed Ubuntu Dapper and never looked back, and slowly upgraded. I'm currently looking at Ubuntu server as I'd like to run a file server, or maybe even Novell. I've only just started to investigate that area."
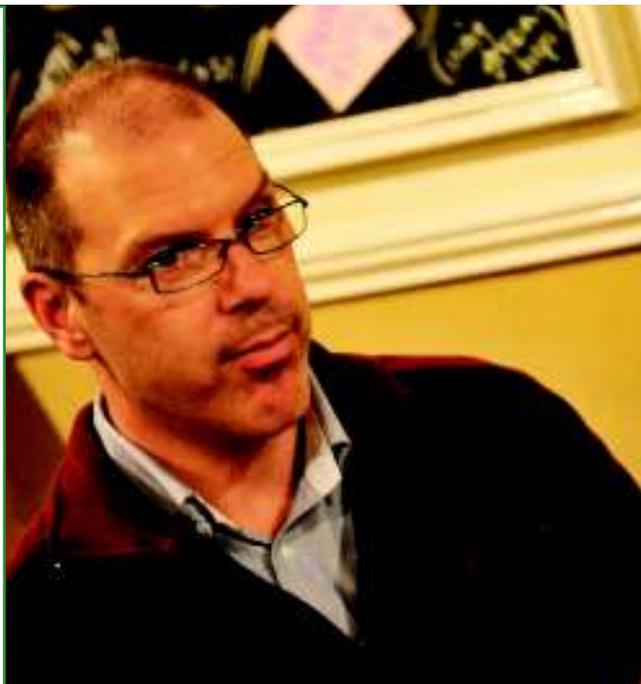
Stuart Ward
Occupation: GSM security
Favourite Distro: Gentoo, though I mostly use Ubuntu
Favourite Desktop: Gnome – it's just something to start up the *Bash* console in.
Quote: My grandmother-in-law first got a computer in her eighties, and I said there's no way she's going to be able to cope with Windows.

The future

Mike jumps straight in with a new question: "So what do we think is the biggest challenge currently facing Linux?"

Nick is the first to respond. "Personally, I think the biggest issue is schools," he says. "At the moment our school systems are purely Windows shops. The son of a friend of mine is currently doing A-Level ICT, and when I had a chat with him to see what he was doing, he was writing a game in Visual Basic. But it's not just that, when my kids come home and say they've got to do some work, but I've got to do it in Word."

"What about advertising?" Nick asks. "Microsoft and Apple both advertise, and while most of us know what Linux is, does everyone know about Linux?"

But Stuart has his own plan: "If you want the magic thing that redresses the balance, there was an EU proposal that no manufacturer should force people into having any particular software. You have to buy the computer separately from the operating system. You could always tick the box and say 'I'll have Windows installed', or you could say 'I don't want an operating system'. If people have the choice…"

Get the message

Nick is still thinking through his advertising campaign. "Maybe Canonical should make an advert that says 'Here's Mac, here's Windows. Here's a Linux desktop and they all look the same'."

"I spotted the recent Microsoft response to Apple's 'I am a Mac', advert the other week," says Alex, "and it basically revolved around the idea that Mac users were a group of snobs – if you want to get real work done, you want to be using Windows, which is quite a clever argument. And I wonder what we would do."

"Well, there was an IBM advert a few years ago that had Linux as a child," responds Mike.

The conversation continues like this for some time. Mike's trusty tape recorder gives up the ghost and clicks to a halt. Graham's digital recorder continues into the night, eating up megabytes of his memory stick, while the landlord servers another round of drinks. It seems that Linux users can talk forever. **LXF**

Bob Moss
Occupation: Programming Student
Favourite Distribution: Ubuntu 8.04.1 LTS "Hardy Heron"
Favourite Desktop: Gnome
Quote: My brother walked into the room as I was experimenting with *Festival*, and it said 'If I said I had a beautiful body, would you hold it against me'.

Thanks!

Many thanks to The New Inn pub on Monmouth Place in Bath for doing such a fantastic job of keeping us all fed and watered while at the same time catering for a large group of Civil War enthusiasts in the opposite bar. We'd also like to thank Alex, Bob, Crispin, Nick, Shevek and Stuart for taking the time and trouble to attend. Thanks guys!