Sidux 2007-03.1 "Gaia": A closer look

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Created *23/08/2007 - 8:29pm*
Submitted by eco2geek on Thursday 23rd of August 2007 08:29:52 PM Filed under Reviews [1]

(Note: gfranken beat me to it[2].  *)*

Some Background

Debian [3] is one of the oldest, best-known Linux distributions, due to its excellent package management system and its huge pool of pre-compiled software for a large number of architectures. Many other popular distributions (most notably, Ubuntu) are based on it.

You may recall that Debian's releases are named after characters from the Disney film *Toy Story*; thus the previous stable release was named "Sarge," and the current release, "Etch."

Debian has three branches, or "suites," if you will, of software. New packages enter the "unstable" branch (a.k.a. "Debian Sid," after the *Toy Story* character who liked to mangle toys). After a period of testing, packages then go into the "testing" branch (currently named "Lenny," which will also be the name of the next stable version). The third, "stable" branch is what's in the current stable release, Debian Etch, and its software won't change except for periodic bug fixes and security updates. (Unlike stable and testing, Debian Sid never changes names.) Although it's got a reputation for having a long, irregular release cycle (one of the main criticisms of Debian), its developers update it with new versions of software all the time. But you usually have to run Sid or testing to get them.

Debian Sid is usually not as unstable as you might think, despite the way the Debian Reference [4] guide puts it: "The advantage of using the unstable distribution is that you are always up-to-date with the latest in the Debian software project ? but if it breaks, you get to keep both parts." Unless you're able to deal with such esoteric problems as diagnosing a buggy post-install script, or figuring out how to deal with a major change in the directory structure of X.org, you might occasionally find running a Debian Sid-based system to be more than you can handle. And that's where Sidux [5] comes in.

(In fact, the reason Sidux came out with version 2007-03.1 [6] is due to one of those "bumps" in Sid.)

Introducing Sidux

[7]Sidux's goal is to allow mere mortals the ability to run Debian Sid on the desktop, in order to take advantage of

the latest Debian software available. Its development team helps guide its users through the occasional bumps in Sid, via IRC and its user forum [8]. Another goal is to offer a consistent release cycle [9]. Sidux comes with a variety of "convenience scripts" and utilities you won't find in Debian proper, that make it easier to do such things as administer your system and install proprietary software.

The Sidux CDs (which come in "lite" and "full" versions for 32-bit and 64-bit platforms) only includes software that meets the Debian Free Software Guidelines [10] (and, as far as I can tell, German law comes into play as well, since so many of Sidux's developers are German). This means that you won't find such software as Adobe Reader, Adobe Flash, mplayer, Microsft web fonts, or multimedia codecs (including the deCSS codec allows you to play commercial DVDs) on the Sidux CDs. (Also, Sidux only ships with KDE by default.)

Sidux's insistence on DFSG-only software carries over to the repositories enabled by default in /etc/apt/sources.list. You will normally need to add the "contrib" and "non-free" sections manually (although a custom script named "smxi" will do that for you; as will the "metapackage installer" in the "Sidux" menu ? read on for more details).

Sidux is packaged as a live CD with a GUI-based installer. It offers a comprehensive user manual [11], available online and included on the live CD. Unlike Ubuntu, Sidux doesn't shy away from the command line. As with Debian itself, the scripts it offers for your convenience are often command line-based.

[12]
Sidux's user manual

Running Sidux

I tested Sidux in live mode on my Presario V2000 laptop, which has an ATI chipset. Sidux booted up using the open-source radeon driver. It didn't configure itself for my widescreen (1280x768) display. Although I could change that using KDE's "Screen resize & rotate" utility, it left too many screen artifacts behind. I used a Sidux "convenience script" named "change-res" to do it for me, and restarted X.

Getting on the network might have been easy if I'd simply plugged in an Ethernet cable, but I wanted to test wireless connectivity. The odd thing is that a kernel module for my Broadcom BCM4318 chipset comes with this kernel, but it doesn't work out of the box. If I'd plugged in an Ethernet cable, I could have installed the "bcm43xx-cutter" utility, which in turn installs more software, and enables the existing bcm43xx kernel module to work.

I decided to use ndiswrapper instead, since I had the Windows drivers for my chipset saved on another partition. But in order to use ndiswrapper, you have to remove the pre-existing bcm43xx kernel module (with "rmmod bcm43xx") before starting. Sidux includes GUI-based utilities to set up ndiswrapper and connect via DHCP, but for some reason they didn't work for me. The tried-and-true command line method ultimately got me online.

Installing the proprietary ATI driver while running the live CD was a simple matter of going to a console with Ctrl-Alt-F1 and running another of Sidux's convenience scripts, "sgfxi," as root. It correctly detected my graphics chipset (it works with NVIDIA cards as well), installed the correct driver, and restarted KDE.

I installed Sidux to a spare partition on my rather low-end AMD Sempron 2200+ test box, which has an NVIDIA GeForce 4 MX 440 graphics card. After installation, everything worked fine. The only "gotcha" came when I used another Sidux script named "get-sidux-binary-gfx" to install the proprietary NVIDIA driver. I probably didn't use the correct script option, because it installed the newest (100.14.11) driver, which doesn't work with my legacy card. However, using the aforementioned "sgfxi" script instead did install the correct driver.

[13] [14]

Sidux's installer (more screenshots of the installer are available in the gallery)

Sidux doesn't come with the Synaptic package manager or many games, but it's certainly easy enough to do from the command line with "apt-get".

Some of the more interesting software that comes with Sidux includes:

- Custom kernel 2.6.22.3-rc1-slh-smp-2
- Mozilla Firefox (or, as Debian dubs it, Iceweasel) 2.0.0.6
- PDFedit 0.3.1
- OpenOffice.org 2.2.1
- The GIMP 2.2.17
- WengoPhone 2.1.1

In addition, Sidux comes with a digital video recorder configurator; several custom utilities that live in the KDE control panel, collectively known as "siduxcc," that allow the user to perform common system administration tasks; and quite a few scripts to help the user administer his or her system. The "daddy" of them all is named "smxi [15]," which will take you through everything from the installation of a new kernel, to upgrading your system, to changing your default repositories and installing particular groups of software, to installing proprietary video drivers. It's quite the Swiss army knife of scripts.

[16]

"siduxcc" custom administration utilities

Sidux includes a "metapackage installer," along with a manual to go with it [17], that allows a user to install popular software without having to spend a lot of time hunting it down. The metapackage installer can also adjust your Debian repository list to include the "contrib" and "non-free" pools, so you don't have to edit "sources.list" manually. Sidux also includes an update notifier (named "siduxcc-hermes") that sits in the system tray, and lets you know, among other things, when there are new packages available.

[18] [19] [20]

Sidux's metapackage installer and update notifier

For those who like eye candy, a Sidux contributor's set up a Beryl and Compiz Fusion repository [21].

[22]

Beryl running on Sidux

Beyond that, the Sidux manual and the Sidux wiki [23] include quite a bit of information for specialized needs, including instructions on how to set up LAMP [24], how to use encrypted filesystems, and how to set up anonymous Internet access.

In Conclusion

For those who have no prior experience with Debian, Sidux offers an easy way to get a working system installed quickly, due to its excellent hardware detection. The Debian learning curve might be steep, but is lessened by the excellent documentation and added scripts. Be advised that Debian beginners will be expected to "RTFM [25]" (including searching the forum for answers ? the forums, in my opinion, can sometimes exhibit [26] a brusque, "pull no punches" attitude).

Sidux is turning out to be a well-supported, stable system. It's obvious that its contributors have done a huge amount of work, producing a lot of useful documentation and customized scripts and utilities in a relatively short amount of time. Anyone wanting to run Debian Sid should take a close look at Sidux.

 [27]

Reviews

Source URL: http://www.tuxmachines.org/node/19352

Links:
[1] http://www.tuxmachines.org/taxonomy/term/57
[2] http://www.tuxmachines.org/node/19292
[3] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Debian
[4] http://www.debian.org/doc/manuals/reference/ch-system.en.html#s-unstable
[5] http://sidux.com/
[6] http://sidux.com/Article290.html
[7] http://www.tuxmachines.org/gallery/v/sidux-2007-03-1/live-desktop.png.html
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[12] http://www.tuxmachines.org/gallery/v/sidux-2007-03-1/sidux-manual.png.html
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[17] http://manual.sidux.com/meta-manual/en/welcome-en.htm
[18] http://www.tuxmachines.org/gallery/v/sidux-2007-03-1/metapackage-installer01.png.html
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