

Why I hate Ubuntu (even though it's awesome)

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Ubuntu pisses me off.

A new release of Ubuntu means another attempt for me to come to terms with Debian's Celebrity Wild Child. I have installed every Ubuntu release since Warty. Each time, I start out being impressed and enthusiastic, become angry when something ridiculous happens, uninstall it in a fit of pique, and then post something on the internet about why I hate it. This time, I am resolved not to uninstall it. I have a second computer, so that living with Ubuntu doesn't mean living with all the time. I want to come to terms with Ubuntu, which is now the most popular Linux distro that ever was, and for good reasons. It's also the most despised distro among the established Linux community... also with good reason. In the past few days, I've read blogposts mocking Ubuntu users as "sheeple" and accusing Ubuntu haters of pettiness and jealousy.

My vague ambivalence toward the Ubuntu Humanity Juggernaut sharpened into dislike when I spent a good part of a frustrating afternoon trying to find KDE in the Butnut repositories. I repeated the experiment last night, with my latest install, and this problem still hasn't been fixed. There is no "kde-desktop" in the Ubuntu repositories. An apt-cache search finds a whole gaggle of KDE applications, but not the desktop itself.

The reason? Because Ubuntu has renamed KDE "Kubuntu-desktop".

Now, at first I was annoyed by the rechristening. I thought it was a pointless inconvenience, but I came to see that this kubuntu-fluxbuntu-xbuntu thing is a great idea for making the major desktop environments comprehensible to new converts to Linux. Looking back to my early days, it was a long time, more than a year, before I understood that Knoppix looked one way because it ran with KDE, and the reason why Red Hat 9 looked so different was because it used Gnome as a default, and that Red Hat 9 could easily be made to run KDE and look more like knoppix. Ubuntu's approach will make this a lot easier for a new user to take in.

This is why Ubuntu deserves its success, because it takes Debian-- one of the most reliable distros, and certainly the one with the richest arsenal of software applications, and makes it available to the Windows-afflicted with some very slick engineering, engineering that is beyond intuitive. It's actually empathetic. Ubuntu is designed with some real insight into the thought processing of the beginning user.

So why am I pissed off? Because of a lack of empathy for me, the experienced linux user. In reengineering Debian, Ubuntu creates detours in the familiar highway of GNU-Linux administration, and then doesn't bother to put up a sign. And so, before I know it, I'm off the road.

The description of "kubuntu-desktop" in the repositories goes like this:

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kubuntu-desktop - Kubuntu desktop system.
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Redundant, isn't it? The desktop so nice, they named it twice.

Now, here's the thing that bugs me. Suppose they had put it in the repositories like this.

kubuntu-desktop - The KDE desktop for Ubuntu.

That's actually a better explanation, and I also believe that it would have put "kde" and "desktop" where apt-cache my apt-cache search would have found them. That's all that it would have taken for me not to spend an afternoon trying to find the KDE desktop, trying to visually scan all of the hundreds of listing generated by "apt-cache search kde", trying to find something that wasn't there.

I'd love for somebody to explain to me why I shouldn't be angry about this. A huge amount of time, effort, ingenuity and money has gone into adding very slick and intuitive interfaces and features so that the "everyday (i.e., Windows) users" can easily use Ubuntu. But it really looks like not one thought was wasted on me, the demographically insignificant Linux user, trying to find KDE the way he always has, after they've made their changes. It would have taken no time, no money, no ingenuity, to anticipate and solve this problem, and it wouldn't have interfered one iota with their grand design. All it would have required is for them to care. But why should they care about us? We're just the ones who gave them the software.

This is one particularly blatant example of how Ubuntu seems to punish me again and again for being a Debian user. You can grumble about Ubuntu being a mediocre product, but it's not. It's the most important Linux distro in years. In many ways, and, it's the breakthrough we're all waiting for, but I feel like those of us who have worked so hard for so long for Linux to succeed are not being considered at all. I'd just like to be invited to the party, that's all.

Another example, somewhat less blatant, and more geeky: I've often complained about the fact that Ubuntu has no /etc/inittab file, which I am used to editing to change the runlevel (to disable the X server and run from the plain console), and sometimes to add additional console screens. For a number of reasons, I prefer to run X from the console, rather than a desktop manager like kdm or gdm. For the first time in any Linux distro in my experience, the file isn't there in Ubuntu. So how about a text file, telling me what the hell is going on? It could be called "inittab-removed.READ_ME or something. Just a little sign post? Maybe some suggestions of what to look for, so I'm not just left standing in the middle of nowhere with my dick in my hand? If the runlevel can be changed, tell me how. If the runlevel can't be changed, tell me so I'm not wasting any more time on it. What would it cost for you to show us that much respect for the veteran Linux user, since you've gone so far out of your way to do everything for the Windows user short of wiping his nose for him?

The Ubuntu Code of Conduct says that when there are disputes, consult the community... and that's what I have done here. If anybody has another point of view, I'd like to hear it.

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