

A look at Debian's new version 4.0 "Etch" release

ETCH ARRIVES

You'll find a new graphical installer and plenty of interesting tools in the latest from the famous Debian Project.

BY MARCEL GAGNÉ

For those of you who may not know, Debian GNU/Linux [1] is one of the most respected operating system distributions in the free software world. Its reputation for stability and security, coupled with a deep respect for the principles of free software, have made it the core of many other popular Linux distributions, including Ubuntu/Kubuntu, Xandros, Linspire, and others.

Along with this respect, Debian has also been derided for being behind the times and slow to release anything remotely close to current software. The recent release of Debian Etch version 4.0 [2] is a departure from that past and an attempt to embrace the new.

What's Inside?

First and foremost, Debian Etch has at its heart, the 2.6.18 Linux kernel. KDE users will find themselves working with a shiny new KDE 3.5.5 desktop while

GNOME users will enjoy their 2.14 environment. XFCE users can also rejoice with an up-to-date 4.4 desktop.

OpenOffice.org, at version 2.0.4, is the featured office suite containing a full suite of applications for word processing, spreadsheets, presentations, and more. A rather odd change is the addition of something called Iceweasel and another oddly named program, Icedove. While the names are strange, these are actually familiar programs to many users when referred to by their common names of Firefox and Thunderbird. In the spirit of the Debian manifesto [3], Iceweasel and Icedove are totally free software versions of their Mozilla equivalents that have been stripped of all trademarks and proprietary plugins [4].

The Gaim instant messaging application (soon to be renamed Pidgin) is included at release 2.0, while the iconic GIMP, the GNU Image Manipulation Program, debuts at 2.2.13. Debian Etch also

features a much-anticipated, new graphical installer, and this is where we start.

It's All about Choice

And what a choice! Downloading and burning a Debian image isn't a big deal in and of itself. The tough part is trying to decide just what to download. You

THE AUTHOR

Marcel Gagné is an award-winning writer living in Waterloo, Ontario. He is the author of the all-new *Moving to Free Software*, his sixth book from Addison Wesley. He also makes regular television appearances as *Call for Help's* Linux guy and is the regular Linux correspondent on the Computer America radio show. Marcel is also a pilot and former Top-40 disc jockey who writes science fiction and fantasy and folds a mean Origami T-Rex. You can discover lots of other things from his website at <http://www.marcelgagne.com/>.



Figure 1: Simple, yet enticing. The road to Debian Etch begins here.

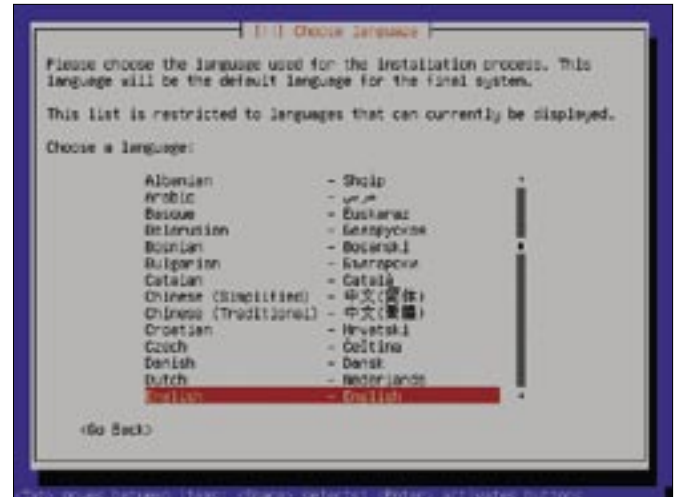


Figure 2: Blast from the past. The classic text installer is still the default.

can get a relatively tiny business card distribution coming in at just 40 megabytes. This is a tiny distribution with just enough of Debian to configure a network connection, which then allows you to download whatever other packages you want to install. Slightly larger, at 180 megabytes, is the official netinst image, which is similar to the business card edition, but it also includes the Debian base system, which means you could run a basic, non-graphical system with it.

From there, it gets more interesting. Debian is available to support an astounding variety of architectures, from the popular x86 Intel platform to AMD processors (32 and 64 bit), MIPS, Sparc, Alpha, S390, and more. For the x86 platform, you can then choose to download the amazing 21-CD set (yes, that's twenty-one), a 3-DVD set, and a handful of single CDs running GNOME, KDE, or XFCE desktops. For the purpose of this review, I downloaded and installed the KDE-based CD.

Install

Still warm from the burner, I put my Debian Etch CD in the drive of one of my test systems (a recent Compaq Presario) and rebooted. I watched the CD drive's light flash a couple of times, and soon there was the Debian boot screen. "Press F1 for help or ENTER to boot:" the message read. I pressed Enter and was shown the old text screen for installing (see Figure 2). Huh? Maybe the graphical screen comes in a little later. I chose English as my language of choice, picked Canada as my country and Amer-

ican English for my keyboard layout, at which point the Debian installer started checking out my hardware, loading drivers, etc. Still no graphics.

There's nothing wrong with this installer, but text installs are somewhat last century, even in the Linux world. Never give up, I said aloud, then I fired up Konqueror on my own notebook and did a little Googling. It turns out that this new Debian does in fact have a graphical installer (see Figure 3). Too bad it's buried. To see something a little more up to date, press F1 for help at the boot screen, then press F3 for install options. From there, you will be directed to type *installgui* to see a nicer, friendlier face

while installing Debian Etch. Of course you don't need the pretty graphical screen – heck, you don't absolutely need a graphical desktop either – but the graphical installer should be the default. At the very least, add a prompt to say "Type installgui to use the graphical installer" at the boot prompt.

Given a choice of two installers, I chose to install Debian Etch on two different systems, one using the graphical installer, and the second using the text installer. The graphical installer does a great job of guiding the user through the process, and it looks great.

By the way, if you feel as though using the GUI takes away some of your expert



Figure 3: The much anticipated Debian graphic installer has finally arrived.



Figure 4: Your shiny new KDE desktop, courtesy of Debian Etch.

options, there's also the *expertgui* boot option. In both cases, the install process was pretty standard. An attempt to configure the network with DHCP failed. No surprise, since I'm not running a DHCP server. Given the option to retry, I chose to configure the network manually, which includes IP address, netmask, gateway, and of course, DNS. I gave the machine a hostname (actually, I accepted the default of *debian*, then I tacked on my domain name).

Next, the partitioner loads with several options, the default being to use the entire disk. On one system, I chose the guided option to use the entire drive. On the second, I chose to manually partition the drive because I had other operating systems running on that machine. No problems here either, though I will admit that the text installer feels nimbler here. The partitioner also provides an option for creating an encrypted file system for environments in which high security is a requirement and your computer falling into evil hands would be disastrous.

I finished partitioning, selected a time zone (Eastern), chose a root password, and added my first account (giving it a password), at which point the installation continued on its own – install base system, connect to network mirror, a question about running a popularity question application, and so on – all this in classic old-fashioned text on one system and graphically on the other.

I won't bore you with every step of the installation. Some 20 minutes later, Etch was up and raring to go. At the risk of repeating myself, however, I wish Debian had chosen to offer the graphical installer as the default or, at the very least, to provided an obvious option to continue graphically on the boot screen.

Scratching the Etch

When you log in, the KDE personalizer comes up, which covers your location and checks on the performance of your processor to suggest an appropriate level of eye candy, mouse-click behavior, and

so on. The KDE 3.5 desktop comes up, offering a nice, clean desktop with a "Tip of the Day" to get you started (see Figure 4). The screen resolution on my desktop system and on my notebook were both reflective of the monitor's resolution. Since I had forgotten to turn on my speakers, I missed the KDE start sound, but as I explain later, sound was working beautifully.

I fired up Konqueror and surfed to a few websites without problem. Things were looking pretty good.

Given the advance billing regarding Debian Etch's better, friendlier desktop and installer, I tried to force myself to think like a new user, rather than somebody who's been using Linux for years. It's hard, however, to leave your expectations behind. Given that I was looking at Debian, a GNU/Linux distribution that prides itself on being free and that has historically meant free of proprietary anything, I expected some rough patches, particularly when it came to multimedia. I was in for a surprise, however. To confirm my suspicions regarding non-free formats, I copied some MP3 files to my home directory and turned on my speakers.

To play your music, you can fire up the Juk music player from the Multimedia menu, load up your favorite tunes, and click the play button. While I expected an error to the effect that the file type was unrecognized, I was rather impressed to hear Smash Mouth coming from my PC speakers. I even had to turn

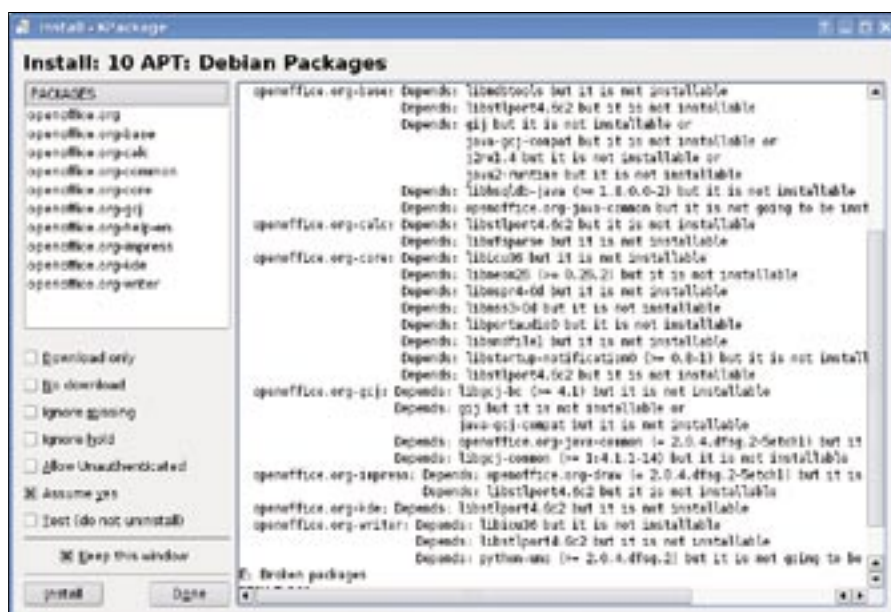


Figure 5: Kpackage works, but it is just a short trip from dependency hell.

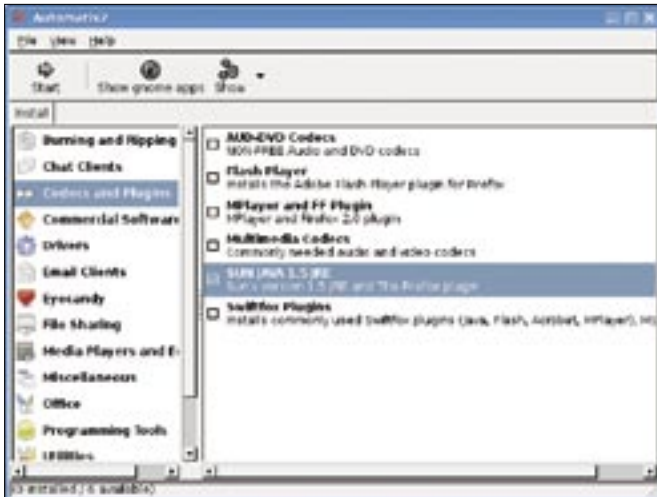


Figure 6: Automatrix makes it easy to install those hard-to-get applications.

the volume down, since the developers decided it would be nice not to mute the speakers. While all this made me happy, I would have rather seen the amazing Am-
arok, one of the finest music players out there. I decided to just install Amarak. That's when things got unfriendly.

Adding software was a bit of a bear, given that you had a choice of Kpackage for graphical installs or *apt-get* for command-line installs. Installing software with *apt-get* is easy, if you know where to look, and if you happen to be familiar with the command line. KPackage, while sporting a graphical face, is not easy when compared with tools like Adept or Synaptic (though Etch's GNOME install does include Synaptic). Take a look at Figure 5 and you'll see the problem with Kpackage. I tried to install OpenOffice.org on a couple of occasions only to find myself in dependency hell. (OpenOffice.org installed fine on one of my test systems, but not on the second).

All this to say that one of the first things a new user of Debian Etch, KDE edition, will want to do is install the Adept package manager. This can be done by going to a

Konsole command line, switching to the root user (by typing *su -* and entering the root password), and installing Adept with the *apt-get* command:

```
apt-get install
adept-manager
```

Life, for the new, non-techie Linux user, will be a lot nicer from here on in. To search for and install software, look under the KDE System menu and select *Adept Manager*.

There is still no built-in support for Flash, Sun Java runtime, and a DVD movie player is still not built in. Rather than hunting around for these things, I recommend that new users pay a visit to www.getautomatrix.com, then download and install Automatrix for Debian Etch (see Figure 6). Automatrix describes itself as "... a free graphical package manager for the installation, uninstallation, and configuration of the most commonly requested applications in Debian-based Linux operating systems" [5].

Some of the packages provided by Automatrix may not be legal in some countries, so it's worth reading the disclaimers included with each

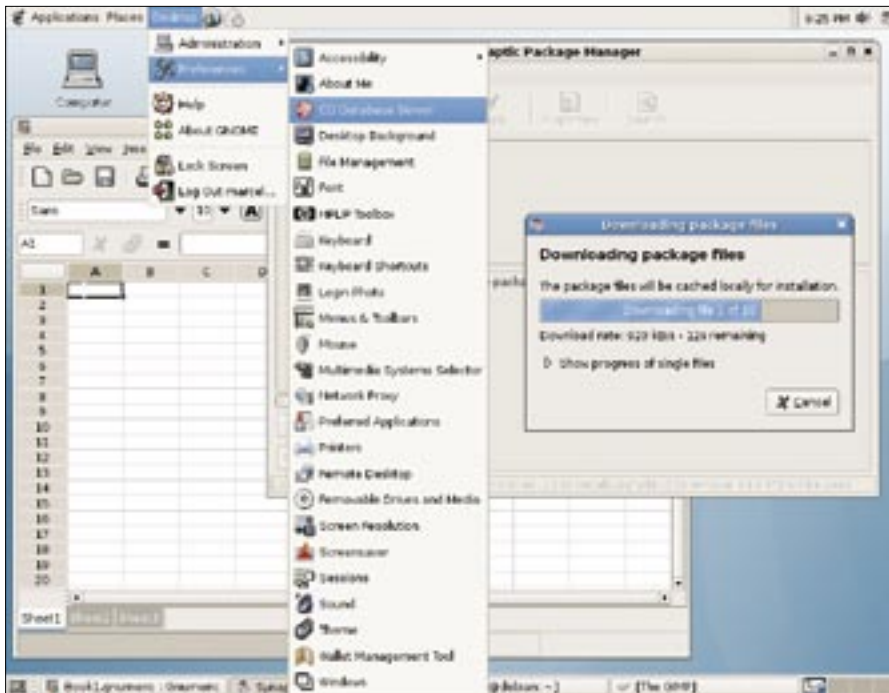


Figure 7: You can install Etch's GNOME desktop in just a few mouse clicks.

package. We aren't talking about items of national security here, but installing certain audio codecs and DVD player libraries without paying royalties to various parties may be a crime, most notably in the United States. Automatix warns you about this before you start.

While I'm on the subject of multimedia, I should point out that no video player is installed by default. A simple solution, and one that will give you the power to play just about anything, is to install VLC (*apt-get install vlc*).

I have already mentioned that Firefox 2.0 shows up as Icedweasel and the Mozilla Thunderbird email client is re-branded as Icedove. Etch also comes with the excellent Kontact groupware suite, which offers email, calendaring, contact management, and more. If you need to chat with your friends on MSN, Yahoo!, or Google Talk, click on Kopete. You'll be impressed with this great multiprotocol instant messaging client.

Throughout the menu, you'll also see a smattering of programs listed under the Debian menu. These applications aren't specifically KDE applications or mainstream offerings like OpenOffice.org and Icedweasel/Firefox, but open source applications that are common to most systems regardless of the desktop environment.

And of course, there are the games, many of which are educational.

After spending some time playing with Etch's KDE offering, I decided to install the GNOME meta-package (simple called *gnome*) to see what things looked like on the other side. Some 160 packages and a login to GNOME later, there were some interesting additions to the menu.

Happily, the GNOME desktop (Figure 7) has an excellent package manager with Synaptic, making software installation a breeze. In the Office menu, the GNOME desktop adds the Abiword word processor, which is smaller and faster than OpenOffice.org but not as flexible or as document compliant with Microsoft Word.

Another web browser made its appearance in the guise of Epiphany (version 1.6.5). Evolution, the Microsoft Outlook-like groupware suite is version 2.6.3.

Unlike Etch's KDE counterpart, the GNOME desktop does include a movie player, Totem. Sadly, its support for popular codecs is limited by its adherence to use only free codecs. The VLC player I mentioned earlier will take care of this for you. Fire up Synaptic and install it. Under the default KDE desktop, I said that you would be better served by Amarok than with Juk. That's still true here, but Rhythmbox is an able music media player, with Internet radio and podcast support, and is superior to Juk.

And it played my MP3 files without any fuss!

When you need a little downtime, a collection of GNOME games is included. If you add these to the KDE games collection, it makes for a nice set of excuses for not doing work.

Etched In Stone

Now that Debian Etch has been released, you might be asking yourself if this is the Linux for you. The answer depends on who you are and what your attitudes toward Linux or GNU/Linux are. If you are a hobbyist who enjoys taking new distros out for a spin, you're probably already thinking about trying out Debian Etch. Go ahead and try it. It's a great release and is wonderfully updated, and despite my complaints regarding default package choices, non-free software, and so on, Debian Etch certainly deserves its place in my list of recommended distributions. If you're a beginner wondering if this is a good system to try out in your effort to kick the Windows habit, skip this one. There are better beginner distributions out there. Try Kubuntu (or Ubuntu), Linspire, SUSE, or Xandros. Many of these distros offer live CDs that you can just pop into your Windows computer, boot, and run.

Some of the distributions I've just named also offer easy access to non-free applications and codecs you won't find in Debian, as well as fast and easy installation of plugins such as the Sun Java runtime or Shockwave Flash.

If you are a long time Debian user, the addition of the various bells and whistles, including the graphical installer, is certainly not going to change you in any way. You will simply upgrade your Debian Sarge system the same way you upgraded your previous system. The updated GNOME and KDE desktop may or may not excite you. This release is just another step in a long, proud tradition of great free software. ■

INFO

- [1] Debian Project: <http://www.debian.org/>
- [2] Debian Etch: <http://www.debian.org/releases/stable/>
- [3] Debian Manifesto: <http://ftp.debian.org/debian/doc/debian-manifesto>
- [4] Wikipedia on Icedweasel: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Icedweasel>
- [5] Automatix: <http://www.getautomatix.com/>