

Are we really devoted to our users?

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Abstract

The Debian Social Contract that any Debian Developer has to agree to during the New Maintainer process states that *Our priorities are our users and Free Software* and then says that *we will be guided by the needs of our users and the free-software community*. This talk intends to be an analysis on the ways in which Debian is failing to have users as a priority and also show some points where progress could be made.

1 What are the needs of our users

Saying that we want to take over the world is quite a normal statement among the Free Software community. Sometimes it's just a joke, but sometimes we actually mean that we want to change the world, and make it better through free software.

So, if we plan to take over the world, we have to consider that *our users* are not just developers, nor programmers. We have to take into account that our users might be office secretaries, small-town homemakers, 10-year-old children, 80-year-old grandmothers or maybe some third-world government officer.

So, when we say that we are going to be guided by the needs of our users, it's really a very broad spectrum of **needs** that we should be considering.

And not an easy task to fulfill.

2 How is Debian working on the users' needs

Debian has always been an awesome distribution for the average sysadmin. The **stable** concept has made Debian a very reliable option for those who need a zero-downtime server.

And also, Debian has become a pretty nice distribution for the *power-users*, those that like experimenting with hardware and software, those that enjoy spending time in front of the computer, learning how to make it work, and how to make it work better.

Now, many IT people would say that any person that does not intend to spend a bunch of hours in front of the computer until it works as expected, is not worth owning the box. But we know better, don't we?

Maybe we do, maybe we don't. The fact is that we are lacking in many user-related areas: hardware discovery, ease of use, internationalization, boot

time, general software speed, etc.

The effort made by the **debian-installer** team in getting a fully internationalized installer, really simple and intuitive is awesome, and yet not enough, since after installing, the whole system has to prove that it can be used and configured as easily, and usually it doesn't.

3 Why are we failing

I think that one of the main reasons in failing to meet the real user needs is that we don't use the same software that normal users do. We use **mutt** instead of **evolution** or **thunderbird**, we use **ion** or **window maker** instead of **GNOME** or **KDE**, we use **vi** instead of **OpenOffice.org**, etc.

Therefore, we don't really see what the users see. We don't care about those pieces of software that we don't use. During 2004, when we all thought that Sarge was about to be released at any moment, the only thing taken into account was the amount of RC bugs, but never the important/normal bugs, never the lack of a certain program that's really needed by the users.

Another of the reasons in failing is that to become a DD, one has to handle enough English to be able to pass the NM process. That's good, but it's leaving behind a lot of people that don't speak English.

We don't mind if a certain menu does not turn up in our own language, because we understand English, but a user that does not speak it will not understand the menus, and that is an important flaw.

So, the main reason of failing is that we don't put ourselves in the users' shoes. It's not like we should all go and start using evolution because of this, but at least it's important to acknowledge that those programs, no matter how ugly we find them, are a **must** for the normal users. And that **l10n** bugs are not to be discarded as unimportant.

4 What we could do to improve

We have a QA team that has to make sure that all of Debian stays at **Debian quality**, but there are too many packages and too few people in the QA team, so we -as developers, maintainers, users and human beings- have to work together, to assure that all the distribution (not only our packages) has the highest possible quality.

Here are some ideas of things that might be done to improve the overall quality of the distributions.

- Make more and more use of the popularity contest, so that we can categorize the more used programs and work in improving the quality of those. Right now, popcon is not installed in enough machines, the sample we have of the software installed is too developer-biased, we need to acquire better knowledge of what programs the users are really using.

- Make sure all the menus, docs, manpages, help, etc. are internationalized in as many languages as possible, in as many packages as possible. Make sure that all the basic programs correctly support the many encodings that are out there.
- Make /usr/share/doc more accessible to the public. Usually users are clueless, not because they won't read the documentation, but because they have no idea where it is.
- Improve the tasks in Tasksel, so that it can fulfill better the needs of the users.
- Make the programs run faster (prelink ?, preload ?, follow GNOME Optimization Team ?)
- Work in making the system boot and shutdown more quickly. This is very important if we are trying to reach the double-booting public.

Many more things can and should be done. The important part to keep in mind is that we want to make a better distribution for everyone. We want it to be good and usable, and the only way of doing it is by working together and helping each other achieve the best possible quality.