

Minimalist GNU/Linux

CHAPTER 1 - The Core

The One Thing

You put the most simple and important thing in the front of the book. So here it is.

When you are changing your life or learning Linux, you should write stuff down. The programs, tips and steps I wrote about in this book, conceptual or Linux-wise, are the most useful and reliable concepts in my brain.

Start a journal. Start a blog. Write this stuff down. Have thoughts and make them real. Have a discourse. It works.

Introduction

I want you to start out by trying to think about yourself.

As much as I can write, I will never give you every bit of advice that you can't already figure out for yourself. This isn't me giving up, but rather me being honest and saying, "look, at some point you've gotta grab the wheel yourself."

What should you examine? Well, here's what I do:

- What is it that makes me happy?
- What is pulling me away from my happiness?
- How can I remove these things?
- What do my actions reflect about what I think makes me happy?

The last one is my most important question, because it calls into question the other three answers.

I have flaws, as everyone does. I browse the internet too much. I spend too much time checking uninteresting websites. This time would be better served with reading or playing video games, both of which stimulate my mind more than a mundane website update. Not only would my internet time be more valuable if I lessened it due to more updates to read at once, but I could spend more time doing things that I really enjoy.

You're not going to read anything nearly as soul-inspiring and personal as that on any blog or website. You're going to have to figure it out for yourself.

Why Minimalism or Linux?

I'm sure you've heard this before:

"Consumers want computers that are appliances, or appliance like."

What does this particular phrase mean?

- 1) Little to no maintenance
- 2) Basic knowledge is required to manipulate its functions
- 3) Repairs are easy, fast and cheap...
- 4) ...unless the entire machine needs to be thrown out and replaced

It's easy to see why people would want an appliance for a computer. Have you ever heard a relative ask you for their refrigerator to be fixed? It actually sounds minimalist, to a degree, to want a machine like this.

What's the problem with an Xbox 360? It's the very definition of a computing appliance. It plays great games, broad media center applications, and it works without fuss or effort. Naturally, repair options are terrible; both spare parts and the knowledge required pale in comparison to desktops. But the biggest issue? Control.

The computer industry is run by people who want control; they've had it for years. You want a CD? You better get it from them. You want a game? You connect to their servers, on their time frame, and in their hands. Your OS has bugs? You had better hope that patching those bugs is worth company time.

I write this blog because I believe that control should be in the hands of the user. The idea of an appliance, but with user control. An ideal. GNU/Linux, huzzah. If anyone wants to read more about that, go read some Stallman essays; his intellectual monopoly on free software Kantian philosophy can barely be matched by someone with lacking facial hair.

What makes minimalism different in GNU/Linux is because you're trying to achieve the pinnacle of an appliance while keeping the control in your own hands. The very fact that you were able to install an operating system and understand how it works in the briefest of levels: this matters, now. You found it and stuck with it because it was open and free and it worked for you.

Minimalism in Linux is about getting the appliance focus and effort, without the lack of control or repair options. Hardware control? Any desktop from a rummage sale can run Debian, and if a part stops working, the internet has a new piece for ten dollars. Software control? That's where we get somewhere.

Linux allows us to delete at our whim. Suddenly, it's not a handheld device manufacturer saying "you can't do that on our phone." This is me saying "I won't run a word processor on my computer because it's inefficient."

If you don't see the difference between "You can't run Flash because we won't let you; it's too inefficient" and "I won't run Flash because I won't install it; it's too inefficient" you've lost a grasp on what makes minimalism powerful. It's the personalization. Minimalism is subjective and in many ways nebulous without personal interpretation. I've said it before: it's a collection of verbs that together create a focus that produces results.

Appliance-supported minimalism is a path, but it's not the only one. That's not my minimalism. A picture of a clean iPhone no more proves that a user "gets it" than a picture of a refrigerator proves that a user of such "gets" how to pick a pretty fridge. Hopefully that's what's right for them and the many that choose that path, and to be fair, of all of the logical fallacies, argumentum ad populum was always my favorite. But perfection is a subtle beast.

Minimalism in Linux is finding our tools and stripping them down in our own way to meet our own needs. It's about keeping that focus and keeping that mindset that appliances bring, but removing the control from

the hands of the companies and placing it back into the hands of consumers. Computers started with an open design and we've been tweaking ever since. To forgo the openness of the computer concept is to destroy the notion for a computer entirely.

Appliances are not evil. But a lack of control is not my path. And that's why this book exists.

The Focuses

1. Portability

This is the most important, and the easiest.

Don't be locked into anything. If you create important data, make sure it can be migrated. This can be done on any computer.

How? Avoid proprietary formats. Use plain text. Strive to use programs that leave their inner workings easy to understand.

2. Simplicity

Continue to remove until you can remove no more. This requires you to assess what you do on a computer, as opposed to thinking about programs as tasks, and confusing the two.

How? Use as little software as possible. Be judicious in your selection.

3. Understanding

If you have simplified your system, strive to understand its internals.

I like my MP3 player as a physical object. It is well made and beautiful. However, the result of the process (music) has far more beauty, and the process by which it works is even more beautiful. By comparison, I don't care for the physical manifestation at all.

How? Attempt to know how your computer works. Use transparency as the virtue is is championed to be! Ignorance is not a virtue.

Definition

Calling a physical object minimalist is erroneous, because things change. States are temporary. Just because it is minimalist now doesn't mean it will be in ten minutes, or a day, or two seconds. A clean desk is never a clean desk forever.

Minimalism is an action, a collection of verbs that describes how we do things and why. It says that we reject the prescribed notions of complexity and the burden of the rat race in search for a more personal, focused experience.

The verbs with which you choose to fill your minimalism bucket are your own, not mine, not some other blogger's, but your own.

Here's mine:

- Use Linux (surprise!)
- Eliminate for the sake of focus
- Rarely, if ever, buy new technology-related products
- Pride function over form, but realize that the two can be harmonious
- Create rather than consume
- Learn more, constantly and forever
- Help others around me learn more, constantly and forever (but only if they want it)

A good example of this principle is how the only thing I have plugged into sockets in my room is my alarm clock and a single power strip, which is stuck out at an easy-to-reach position in the floor. If I want to charge something or use my CD player, turn on the strip. It's all easy to access, easy to turn off, and saves electricity. Sure, it looks kind of ugly, having cables all over the place, unhidden, but it makes my life tremendously easier.

CHAPTER 2 - Minimalism

Exploration

Francis Bacon was a man who discussed, among many subjects, the idols that we keep in our mind that hold us back from thinking rationally and with reason.

Idol of the tribe: being "othered" and disliking someone or something because it's not like us (outside of the tribe)

Idols of the cave: the limitations of personal perspective, Plato's Cave

Idols of the marketplace: communication, peer pressure and sociology in general (inside of the tribe)

Idols of the theatre: the negative effects of the -ism and ideology

The two main topical ones are the cave and the theatre. The cave deals with how our own perspectives warp the mind into thinking irrationally. For example, liking something only because it's new, not because it's better. Conversely, liking something only because it's old is also irrational.

I admit to conservatism in technology - I'm predisposed to liking something more when it's older. I have rational examples: Older things are cheaper, often more reliable, and time tested. But I would be foolish to say this is a blanket rule for all things, and liking something merely because it hits these bullet points would be irrational.

The theatre deals with rigid ideology, and in a way it is very close to the cave. Any and all ideologies end up here. Communism and capitalism are the two easiest to pinpoint.

I don't think minimalism is an ideology, but a bundle of verbs - words that each person fills in themselves. For minimalism, there's a general idea that it requires something minimal (it's right there in the word!) but where and why that threshold stops is entirely loose and as such it's hard to call minimalism an ideology.

But does this idea that Bacon expresses have any bearing on minimalism as we live it today? Are we too rigid in our following of our self-made principle? Is it making us irrational? Or are we more noble in our

strength to follow what makes us happy?

Garbage Can

A really effective purge can be an empowering act. Suddenly what was once cluttered is now clean by design. What was once complex is now simple. It really feels great to be able to have that binary switch of, first, when that junk accumulates, and second, when that junk is removed judiciously.

However, I maintain that if you are continuously purging, day in and day out, and it never seems to stop the problem, maybe the issue is at the source of the junk, not the junk itself.

Just last year I cleaned out my video game collection, and I removed and sold most of my PC games (barring ones I couldn't technically remove - some DRM-inflicted games cannot be removed from my account). Yet, it seems that over time, I accumulate more and more, forgetting what is important to me and thus, I'm again faced with a shelf of games that I don't really need. Most of these games were \$3 or less, and games that legitimately sounded like fun, but in retrospect, the burden imposed on me by their mere existence was more of a cost than the enjoyment I got out of their function.

I'm letting the garbage can do my minimalism for me. But this ignores the fundamental truth of minimalism: just because it looks minimalist doesn't mean it really is. A clean shelf doesn't imply minimalism any more than a clean sink - both we can assume to be in a temporary state of aesthetic minimalism and as such we can never assume that what is clean will stay clean.

Minimalism as a life style is not synonymous with the art style. Throwing away everything every six months? That's confusion, not minimalism.

How to fix this? Admit there is a problem, naturally. Understand the reason why the problem is a recurring action. Think of ways to solve the problem at its source. Fix it.

Why do I continue to buy PC games? Well, the nature of the market allows me to grab some fancy games on clearance for \$5 or less. The drive to buy new games all the time is a habit borne from a saturation within the industry - you get so used to trying new things that, once you've found a handful of games you really like and don't need much else for entertainment, it's still hard to stop buying new games.

How can I solve this problem? Well, ignore the games entirely, and concentrate on a different hobby. Play more of the games I already own to remind myself that I already have enough. Concentrate on negative aspects of the purchase - physical burden, woes with the DRM, and so on. Blog about it (yes, this helps me quite a bit - it transforms my fluid thoughts into more solid words and arguments).

And thus, the only step left is to implement the fixes and walk away.

Simple

Simplicity, like many things in life, needs a motive behind it. A recursive definition doesn't work; simplicity is good because is simplistic is good? Nobody's going to listen to that.

Simplicity is good because it inspires focus. When an appliance deletes cumbersome menus and unimportant buttons, it's allowing the user to utilize the tool in a way that facilitates this.

If the tool is more important than the task the tool is being used for, then the tool has failed. eBook readers

should, in an ideal case, be completely transparent. You shouldn't even remember that you're reading something that isn't a book, because when you're reading a book you're not thinking, "Wow, THIS, this is the future of the world!" You're thinking about the plot and the characters and imagining the scene in your head. You're storing data on a new programming language or a historic battle in Waterloo.

The more features the eBook reader supports, the more the reader emphasizes itself, and this sets the reader up for failure. All anyone wants a reader to do is to display text in an efficient manner. I would side note and say that innovation in this department is good in moderation, and it's great that readers have cool features like RSS feeds and electronic voices that read to you, just because it's great when something becomes easier.

It's just important to remember why a tool exists in the first place. The reason why some new gadget was considered a backwards revision is because when it removes features, it didn't help focus the user into what they were doing. Some new menus and new size don't focus the user, and it removes genuinely useful tools the old versions had. The same goes for touch screen technology versus keyboard and mouse.

Software makes profit through features. While we know that most users don't use all of the options in a program, they all use a different subset of those features. What's important, I argue, is that these features never force themselves into a user's focus.

Sometimes deletion of a feature can increase focus. I'm pretty sure the majority of Word users would kill Clippy with a passionate vengeance if given the chance. But it is also true that features can increase focus as well, but only if they're implemented intelligently and with the virtue of simplicity. And not the recursive kind.

Most programmers will understand how important concentration really is; if you break that stream of consciousness, you might as well be throwing productivity out the window. If, say, Eclipse were to pop up with a dialog box every few minutes asking the user what kind of class they were making, and what kind of outline they needed, and how the variables should be organized, nobody would use it. The flow of productivity is so important that if you break it even once the user will be cursing you all the way down to the inky bottom of the sea floor. You'd have dozens of posts on the internet about how IDE's are awful and how only real programmers use text editors, and to be honest they would be right, at least in this nightmare scenario.

Features matter. Even from an advertising perspective, it seems that most users are moved by shiny new gadgets and gizmos; sure, someone like me doesn't really upgrade his hardware all that much, but I'm certainly not a majority. But I disagree that simplicity is a fool's hope. It's a matter of keeping in mind the ideology of focus.

Social

I'm not going to pretend that this book isn't on the social fringe. It's common to make fun of GNU/Linux users as bearded, socially-inept, khaki wearing weirdos, and their OS as a tin can and string, decorated with wooden sticks, as easy as it is to want to criticize a minimalist for their life choices. I've heard both. But I don't seem to be affected by either.

I've lived with minimalism and Linux for so long that it's not even broadcast and yet it still gets communicated. I whip out my dumbest dumbphone you can possibly imagine, and I wield it with nary a pause. I have gotten questions about it, but I explain that it costs me a grand total of \$20 every three months and people understand. My use of the Mac has stifled my love for Linux to be openly communicated, but

rest assured it's still there. (Finder does not have a merge function? What?!)

I've come to realize things about myself, the most important of which is that I'm naturally a person. My passions simply seep through the cracks and are communicated naturally. Either I'm respected for it or judged for it, and the latter just doesn't seem to matter. Yes, I have a terrible phone. Your pitying look does not phase me. I have no interest in upgrading to a phone that can do everything and more just because of the social ramifications. I'll upgrade when it's cheap enough and not as convoluted in endless contracts and options.

This is all internal, below conscious level stuff, which is why it's fascinating. I so quickly realize that my external self-expression is largely out of my hands. I dated a new friend and on the first date I popped in an orchestration arrangement of video game music without blinking an eye. In retrospect this may have been a little embarrassing, but at least it set her up to know what she was getting into.

Nothing about my personality is planned. I am not a meticulous craftsman. I'm just aiming for what makes me happy. I think this makes the difference. If you focus on making an outwardly focused persona, and it becomes judged, it's slightly your failure to not create your mask in the correct way. But me? I'm just a college student who loves ambient techno, minimalism, Linux, writing, video games from ten years ago, reading, and will extoll the virtues of Neal Stephenson for hours if you let him go on for too long. I've got a terrible phone, dedicated MP3 players, and a school-loaned MacBook Pro I loathe.

None of that is for the benefit of others. It's just what makes me happy to be.

CHAPTER 3 - Linux

Beginning

One of the many criticisms I hear of Linux is that there's so much choice that one needs to have a ton of knowledge to even parse simple things, like which text editor to use.

What I find most useful for dealing with this initial wave of confusion is to hold everything to ridiculously high standards, or just picking something important to me and running with it.

When it came to picking the Linux distribution itself, I picked the one I knew the best, which was Ubuntu (I spent a year before actually using Ubuntu as a desktop just playing with the LiveCD, as a minor hobby). I moved to Fedora to learn about Red Hat and RHEL, and when I'd learned my piece I moved back to Ubuntu, where I found myself in shallow water. So, Debian Testing was my new home.

These are not very large and huge reasons, but they're reasons enough for me to say, okay, time to hunker down and make a new OS home. The main thing here is that I don't take my choice too seriously. What's the use of clamming up and saying, "Oh, but what if I choose wrong?" Who cares! The more trivial it is, the more fun it is to cross the options off, one by one.

But far and away the best way I've found to deal with choice is to limit it. sort of like that Who Wants To Be a Millionaire show, where they eliminate two of the incorrect answers to help the player. Just start crossing off options on your list like there's no tomorrow.

I've found that switching to OGG Vorbis is not only easier than I expected, but actually has allowed me to lighten my music load by eliminating choice. Now, I can only listen to music that I own on CD or can find online in either lossless or OGG format. Not only does this emphasize quality (I only keep my very favorite

albums in disc format) but it also allows me to go exploring for things I never would have found while I was still using MP3.

The reasoning behind switching to OGG wasn't important. What really mattered was how it changed my choices, and even better, eliminated some that didn't really matter.

So how to approach a question, like, "Which text editor should I use?"

Well, I want something that can work in the terminal. I want something widespread and commonplace, so I can expect it on many computers. I want something that isn't too heavy or bloated, but works. I choice vi from this list. Though I will admit to using emacs from time to time, mostly for the glorious orgmode.

So, sure, we may not make the perfect choice, but the more we minimize it to something easy and simple, it's just a matter of using logic, eliminating options and not taking anything too seriously.

Change

I once discussed the concept of change with a fellow writer. I have a unique experience in that I've been forced over to the Mac due to my schooling and have been trying to force myself into this ecosystem. As such, I have some things to say.

Naturally the Apple fans will enjoy what comes their way. I see it largely as a brand loyalty of the utmost crucial to a company's survival, but as for why and now, I can't understand. But trust is a very key point. I think a lot of the reason why I would use Linux over OS X is because I don't trust OS X. But I don't particularly trust Linux either, either as a whole community or as individual projects, but I trust some of them more than OS X at least.

The reason why Ubuntu hit resistance in their recent Unity project (which revamped the entire desktop paradigm) is because they have no trust. They haven't earned it. Why would they? After years of creating endless issues mucking around with glibc and buggy Python apps, they're suddenly going to make their own desktop? This is a small project trying to accomplish big things. It's hard not to be pessimistic. If Apple had already released several iterations of the iPhone that were buggy and crashed and never worked, do you think users would upgrade to that?

Ubuntu comes off as a bleeding edge distro. You want to get the new release so you have the new Firefox, the new LibreOffice, etc. Every release is incremental, but you like seeing that progress. Why else have a six month release window? Otherwise risk becomes apparent, not only workflow but in system and desktop performance. This is in what used to be a relatively risk-free environment (Debian) king among all features. That forward motion can halt at any moment, and once we run out of road, what do we do?

In another example, I used OSX Lion for several days, I can't say I'm entirely pleased. It seems like there's more animation, more cruft, more glitz and less control. It shouldn't have cost \$30 for what it offers. But the real issue is why it was released at all. Change is nice, but where are we going with it? Why are we changing? For the sake of doing so? It's not useful change, or purpose-driven change. This is what OS X Lion, KDE4 and Gnome 3 felt like. They don't change in a direction that says, this is why and this is where. They just change because they are expected to, because they have to to get people to keep upgrading. It's up to consumers to figure out why.

KDE and Gnome spent years crafting very distinct, working desktops that looked great and operated smoothly. Then, two competing, inferior, buggier desktops with flashier graphics and little of the stability we once knew. OSX Lion? Suddenly my apps don't work, stability is lesser than Snow Leopard and my

wallet is \$30 lighter. Hell if change was worth it.

Change isn't always bad for Linux. I like incremental evolution. I like change I can see and understand, and plan for. I don't like change for the sake of change. There's no point to that.

DIY

I've complained enough about my iPod nano to make my lungs gasp in agony if I ever verbalized my digitized rambblings. However, what really bothers me about the device is how little I control, even on a physical level.

I've had dust in the little area between the screen and the glass for years. You would think the design would allow easy access, but no; purposely placed mechanisms make opening the device incompatible with future operation.

I'm fine with making things not obvious in how to open and fix. But outright making it impossible? What makes me think I should place my trust in Apple to fix issues for me? What about trivial issues such as dust in the screen? I am not a baby; I can do things for myself. Besides, my warranty expired years ago, so Apple's benefit is null as well as mine.

Control is longevity. This example is a physical version, but what of software?

Think about some e-reader that is locked down and can only read specific file formats. (The Kindle has the latter issue but its software is not locked down) Eventually the software lock will reduce usefulness, due to changing industry file formats. Look at how quickly the war between ePub and MOBI sprung up, from where we had barely any tussle at all.

From small fixes to the screen to large fixes in what file format a device supports, these are fundamentals in usefulness when problems occur. They do; even on a closed, locked ecosystem like the iPod, problems occur. Advertising will tell you differently. But I've already mentioned trust.

So we ask: how can this be fixed?

On the converse, how rewarding is it to open your computer case and clean it out, insuring proper care and maintenance is rewarded with many years of ceaseless operation? Or being able to clean a screen when it gets dirty? Or being able to install a new operating system on an old computer, so that what was once a useless security breach is suddenly a useful again?

We should not pretend our skills are not formidable. We enjoy computers. We want them to last. The ability to fix one's own device is simply an extension of this principle.

Organization

Folders are great because they hide hidden clutter or complexity.

Try sorting your current files so that you only use one level of folders. This requires you to be:

- More specific
- Less eager to make more folders
- Less apt to shove something in a "misc" folder when that misc folder would get cluttered very, very quickly

It's not a steadfast rule and not everything works with it (music collections for example) but it's a fun exercise that helps reorganize and delete the unwanted.

Defaults

A blog quote was floating around lately. Minimal Mac wrote:

"iPhoto works, iTunes works, iMovie works, iChat works, Safari works, Apple stuff works. Sure there might be a program that lets you organize photos better than iPhoto, or a faster music player than iTunes. But my Mac was handed to me preloaded with 98.3% of what I want my computer to do. You can't put a price on that."

In my brief time in Mac OS X, I found that iTunes did not work for my needs. I found that Safari did not work for my needs. Finder. Spotlight. iPhoto. Quicktime. Sure, there's the angle where saying "there might be a faster music player than iTunes" is an understatement in the way that calling the act of blowing up the world a simple gesture of ill will. But it also smacks, to me, of settling for something of lesser quality just because we're too apathetic and lazy to bother downloading something better.

Don't think I'm picking on only OS X here - I'm just as irritated with Linux. I have to say, when reinstalling Windows XP for the first time in years, I was pleasantly surprised when I loaded up my desktop and found a clean, empty slate that I could add, expand, and make my own. There wasn't a dock full of apps or a dozen internet apps that connect to twitter and email and an entire office suite.

We have become so focused on this delusion of an objectively best user interface that we've become convinced that not customizing and making our user experience tailored to our needs has become a virtue in and of itself. Not only this, but one of the very successes of Linux - perhaps one of the greatest advantages it has over other OS', even - is its well integrated package management system. Why ignore its possibilities? And it puts a damper on things when I have to remove a gigabyte of meaningless libraries and applications before I get Ubuntu to where it's a canvas for my needs.

Don't get me wrong - sometimes I just want a temporary desktop system that I can use for a few days. But it's nowhere near close to what I would call "top of the class" for me. I can't stand most default desktops and I love to endlessly customize and make changes. It's a constant procedure. My needs change forever. I cannot say with a straight face that any one desktop can do 98.3% of what I want to do; it changes daily. I find new programs that do things better and better, faster and quicker, with lighter resources and less clutter.

I miss the days when we had a working, well configured desktop that we made our own. I want to stop using computers entirely when I see customization looked down upon as some sort of geeky, unachievable thing. When did the nobility of individualism suddenly transform into a virtue of conformity?

Maybe I'm reading too much into this, but I think we're giving too much credit to default applications. Is it too much to ask to just want a well configured Gnome, a Terminal, and nothing else?

CHAPTER 4 - Technology

Digitalizing

We have pre-existing bias that comes with digital media. We inherently distrust digital items culturally, through increased complexity and less control over the product itself. This is shown through both consumer

resistance as well as corporate resistance to such evolutions. This is perceived and is partially my perception of society and culture. Does reality actually reflect what we think?

So let's talk about how we have migrated from physical to digital in our lives. Is it always better? This is in terms of my experience because I feel trying to generalize a thesis from the topic would end poorly. My sources of entertainment are books, music and video games.

My book situation is a mess, though this could be book production's current digital revolution. I enjoy book reading over other media, so this might be why it's so random at the moment. My physical books are usually used and cheaper than \$5, while digital books (read on a Kindle Keyboard) are whatever strikes my fancy and price point. The quantity at which I buy either depends on how much I'm reading, and whether or not the public library has it. For Kindle purchases I use Calibre and additional plugin tools to remove DRM from Kindle formats and archive them locally and remotely. My book reading is as scattered as my purchasing and owning, so it's all over the map appropriately.

So are books better digitally or physically? Personally, I don't see too much of a difference - I focus on the content, not the container. But there are minor notes to be made. eBook readers are proliferating, and while they have been pretty nice devices, I wonder how long they might last. Will we have to continuously buy new devices to enjoy our libraries? Plus, it's nice to buy a cheap paperback and be able to throw it into my backpack without having to worry about a case or cables. On the other side of the fence, websites like Baen and Project Gutenberg allow users to download free copies of pretty great books, in the latter case some fantastic classics. In an industry view, it's allowing more independent voices to get a platform outside of the publishers, which is a good step.

For music, I used to buy music from various MP3 stores online, but I have since converted to OGG and FLAC and now try to get either a CD or lossless audio for format shifting. The disc is typically stored at my parents' house, mainly because I don't have enough storage for lossless copies of every CD I would like. However, I do loan out CD's or give them away as gifts. I also use netlabels extensively, mostly for my ambient or downtempo electronic music, which is all lossy anyway.

Is music better digitally or physically? I rip to formats in ways that make sure I cannot tell the difference between the CD and the resulting file, so sound quality does not matter. And in terms of netlabels and internet radio, it's hard to argue that it hasn't allowed for more experimentation, stepping outside of the big name labels and into a better connection between art, artist, and consumer.

My games situation is getting better, but is also a mess. I'm deciding which platform I prefer so I can eliminate the cruft, which is emotional and complicated. I'm entirely digital in all platforms - I'm finally getting around to gathering the pieces so I can play PlayStation 2 games off of a hard drive, and the capacity to do the same with a Wii is already in my grasp. This allows me to buy a game, rip it, and then give it away. I've been doing this less and less lately, though it's hard to pass up a few cheap PlayStation 2 games now and then, thus proving that while I enjoy minimalism conceptually, it's always difficult to implement.

Are games better digitally or physically? Digitally, without a doubt. They load faster, they're easier to handle (assuming there's no Digital Rights Management, or DRM, involved), and reduce clutter.

Sustainability

The minimalist philosophy I've assumed since last time is a simple one. It's basically come down to this: if it doesn't improve my standard of living in a quantifiable and predictable way, I don't let it into my life.

However, I've also started to morph this concept into something incorporating sustainability - both personal and social. How long will this last? It's a profound question that gets ignored a lot in our fast, self-enclosed tech industry, where the tech press isn't necessarily holding the tech industry accountable any more and largely is the industry's way of boosting its own ego and relevance.

Had I not bought the Kindle yet, I probably wouldn't buy it remembering the sustainability theory. For digital books - once you rip the DRM - the sustainability is long, but for hardware, used books not only are useful longer, but are generally better for everyone. Sure, the obvious angle is that technology contains poisonous toxins, released everywhere on production and destruction. I bought the Kindle thinking that plain text won't be obsolete, but the device itself will not last forever: batteries and corporate support will die, and meanwhile paper books still remain untouched. It's less sustainable as a platform in my life. It may increase my standard of living in quantifiable ways, but it also comes with a price and an expiration date.

I've often praised "used" purchases as a more noble and effective way to move forward, and it's going to be a large part of how I live. When the tech industry is more interested in creating disposable, short lifespan devices that lack repair capabilities (see the appliances conversation we had last year) I find it more rewarding to save a few forgotten tools of yesterday from the trashcan and the eWaste dump. I usually can assume that if it has lasted this long and can still be sold, it will probably continue to do so.

Linux helps here by making old computers useful again, which we've already discussed, so I won't reiterate.

Grandma Lens

You're at the computer store. You're looking at laptops. On one end they have a row of Macs, all shiny and pretty. On the other end there's a few rows of Windows 7 machines, all in various states of usability. You also have a couple of Linux LiveCD's in your hand for testing.

You go over to the Windows machines and find one that looks somewhat Linux compatible and pop in an Ubuntu disc. It boot without a hitch.

Then you see, to your left, a grandmother, wandering about the computer area, confused as a duck in the Sahara. And you think to yourself, "Now, if I were a grandmother, what computer would I use?"

You look at the Macs and suddenly they look easier, and faster, and better. You look at the iPad and it looks simpler and more capable of meeting your needs.

And here the narrative stops.

There are two main points:

- 1) The perspective of the grandmother is entirely based off of your stereotypes of elderly people. As such, trying to say, "this is what grandma would use" is next to useless, because by and large that perspective doesn't really exist. These people all have unique perspectives that you cannot assume in your mind without making some logical errors along the way, most of which would probably trigger a modified version of Occam's Razor to parse.

Any time anyone ever says "Joe User" and uses it as an argument for or against a certain type of computer has not realized that the definition of Joe User is entirely subjective, and by and large, void of any meaning.

My mother could definitely learn to use Ubuntu. My grandmother could learn to use Ubuntu. Some of my customers at the retail store I work at, maybe not. The lady I spent about twenty minutes explaining the

concept of an iPod to, perhaps, if I had more information. Simply put, generalizing all computer users as a mass that could never use a specific piece of technology is a poorly misguided fallacy. We've been shown time and time again that societies can absorb and understand technologies to a degree, when necessary, and users within that framework are capable of learning something new.

2) This made-up perspective of grandma is entirely irrelevant to whether or not a computer is right for you, because you are not grandma. Shopping for a computer is hard enough as it is; trying to do it with multiple personalities is even harder.

"But what if I was a (blank)," is a mistake because you're not. If I said to myself, "but what if I was a high-end PC Gamer" then I would fail at my purchasing because I'm not a PC Gamer, and I don't have the same needs. I'd end up spending far more than I ever wanted to before, because in this fantasy where I'm consumed by my made up perspective, I'd need to buy a more powerful processor, a Windows license and an expensive graphics card, when in reality neither of those things are important to me.

If I were to shop as Grandma, I would be turning down a computer that works great with Ubuntu just because I think that my personal subjective perspective of Grandma couldn't handle the learning curve that I already went through several times and can now run circles around. I'm dumbing myself and my own skills down because people around me are not nearly as good at using Linux as I am.

Moochimalism

You own only 15 things. That's cool. How much of that is dependent on relying on others around you?

The classic joke: A gaggle of minimalists walk into a bar. The bartender asks for their orders. "I'm fine with nothing," they all say to the person next to them, "I'll just have a sip of yours."

Therefore, I want to add to my "bundle of verbs and adjectives" that minimalism encompasses to include "self sufficient," because there's no nobility in the constant couch surf.

Spending for Less

I want to come up with a new name for The Spending Minimalist.

The person who spends, all for the virtue of minimalism. The person who throws away a dozen shirts just to buy six more. The person who, for their technological minimalism, throws away their existing computers, goes to the Apple store, buys several thousand dollars worth of products, and sighs, satisfied in a new minimalist lifestyle. The person who not only uses a garbage can as their minimalism, but also their wallet.

I'm not going to say that's wrong, or that it's not worth spending a little for a larger benefit. But I do think that it's a drastically different approach than what I've been trying to discuss here. Minimalism in the Linux realm tends to take what we have and tweak it - without having to go to the store and pursue minimalism on the terms of a corporation. We're busy making our existing machines more useful to us through focus and elimination.

But letting our dollars do the minimalism for us? What is really gained from having an apartment that folds apart like origami? It lets you smirk and lower that little number in your head of the items you have or the floor space you take up, but it doesn't seem any more useful.

So one more amendment to the bundle of verbs and adjectives: "utilitarian."

Going to an Apple store might satiate your need for less ugly computers, but it won't always improve usefulness. Unless you are heavily conditioned to the user interface of OSX, I'm hard pressed to think of a reason why that would improve your lifestyle. The actions that you perform on the machine that's what matters. This blog attempts to discussing Minimalism through the GNU/Linux lens, to find compatibility between the two, not to necessarily promote the OS.

Less is more only when it actually helps you live your life more capably.

I understand that I've made this mistake before. I bought a Kindle, thinking I would replace physical books with digital ones. Thankfully I've found uses for the Kindle beyond that (largely email and scholarly in nature) but my folly was thinking that I could buy my way into minimalism by throwing away one thing and replacing it with another. It never works out quite that easily.

Parting Comments

What would we say Minimalism is, through the lens of GNU/Linux?

It's a list. And it's a minimal list.

-less

-portable

-custom

-self-sufficient

-utilitarian

I can add things to this list to better fit my needs, and I have in the past. But for once, I'm not going to do that here. I'm turning the page over to you.

Take a piece of paper out of your ebook and write these four words down. Then think about each. Think about how I've discussed them, and think about how they've worked with your life. Cross one or two out if they don't work for you. But add your own.

And then, in a column on the side, consider verbs. Actions. Ways in which these concepts become something that shapes the way you do things, because none of this matters if you don't act on it.

Implement. Reiterate. Revisit. Toss what doesn't work. Circle what does. Face life and come to terms with change.

Thank you for reading. It's been a pleasure.

-aberinkulas, from minimalist gnu/linux, on January 19th, 2012.

