

Tuesday, February 26. 2008

Hmm. Upgrades.

If something seems different at The Plucked Chicken, I'd be surprised. But if it does, it's because I've upgraded and rearranged some things on the old home network.

It began when I wanted to install something on the server that hosts the PC. (I don't even remember what it was at this point!) For those who don't use a Debian-based flavor of Linux, I have to explain how most software installs and upgrades work. It's pretty easy. Software is split into packages by task, functionality, mutual compatibility, and versions. So the first step is to find the package you want to upgrade or install, and there are package-management tools that make this fairly easy. (Understand that there are somewhere over 6,000 Debian packages.) After that, you use one of several package-management tools to do the upgrade or install. The computer handles the rest: figuring out dependencies, downloading packages and installing them. It even checks cryptographic signatures when possible to make sure nothing insidious has happened.

So I tried installing something remotely on the server machine, but it had been a long time since I'd performed a major upgrade, and years more since I'd upgraded the Linux kernel. I just didn't want to mess with it, because it sits there, happily running connected only to 115v AC and 10Mb ethernet. Then, I messed with it. The installed system was quite outdated compared to current Debian systems, and it needed a new kernel.

Time past, I'd compile a new kernel without blinking. It was standard operating procedure for a long time while using Linux 2.2 and 2.4 kernels, and pretty easy. (I fondly remember a presentation Joe Abrahamson made to the LUG in Mankato on configuring a kernel for compiling.) This machine was still running 2.4, and Debian is now shipping with something like 2.6.20. I didn't like the prospect of a full kernel compile on that 333 Mhz machine, not really remembering exactly what hardware it contained. So tried a few short cuts and rebooted it remotely, fingers figuratively crossed. It didn't come back up. That was Friday morning.

Fast forward past a late night/early morning, one-man emergency computer rebuilding party, involving a GRUB emergency boot disk, a spare hard drive, a CD-ROM drive borrowed from the kids' room, a newly-burned Debian net-install disk, and an uncooperative DSL modem. As you can see, the PC is up again. Now it has more hard drive space than ever before, sporting its own CD-ROM drive (invaluable for emergency boot/install situations), and a brand-new hostname in honor of a fictional young man whose brief experience as a dragon changed his life for the better. It still has only two wires: 115v AC and now 100Mb ethernet (swapped with kids' computer).

I remember spending many late hours trying to get Windows or its programs to work. That was many years ago. It's inevitable, because computers are just complex machines. Even appliances go berserk from time to time. The frustrating thing for me was that I paid good money for the privilege of that sleepless (and often fruitless) wrestling to get things working properly. It was about that time that I tried some alternatives in the hope of finding a Better Way. That included OS2/Warp, and would have included MacOS too, if I could have afforded it. (MacOS 7 was current at the time.) Then, I learned about Linux. I reasoned: "Why pay for my problems, when I can have them all for free?" The surprising thing was that my problems and frustration were also dramatically reduced, while my productivity and satisfaction were dramatically increased. See? You get what you pay for.

Linux is still free, and my problems are still few. Now, though, you can buy low-cost computers running Linux from Wal-Mart and many other places. Also, many (most?) of the embedded devices you use without even realizing it are running Linux.

Just think: my recent upgrade adventure, which wasn't even so bad overall, used to be so commonplace that it was hardly worth writing about. Now, it's rare enough -- for me, anyway -- that I mentioned it on the Plucked Chicken. So thank you, all who contribute to Free Software!

Posted by Jesse Jacobsen in Technology at 12:00