

Building a better ubuntu

Gutsy Gibbon is almost here – but how does the Ubuntu team make sure it's still the world's most popular distro? **Mike Saunders** investigates...

Distros come and go like the seasons. WinLinux, AlphaNet, Xpresso and so many others have appeared under our radar, boasting new features and innovations that promised to etch their vendors's name into the slate of Linux history. Yet where are they today? What happened? Why is all the talk now about Fedora, OpenSUSE, Ubuntu and co.?

The answer is simple: community. Bleating about so-called

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revolutionary features may generate a few weeks of hype, but it's not going to establish a distro for the long run. So many of the ostensibly promising distros we've seen over the years have ultimately disappeared into nothingness, eliminated by their lack of developer support and community involvement.

But the Ubuntu team gets this. They took the well-established Debian base, added canisters of polish to make it user-friendly, and backed it up with a supremely helpful and lively community. Ubuntu's strength lies in the fact that it rarely attempts to pioneer a world-changing Linux feature – it uses the standard Gnome config utilities and has lagged behind when it comes to drool-inducing eye-candy such as Compiz. And yet, it's still the most popular distribution in the world.

Popularity brings its own set of problems, though, most notably a high expectation level from users. The Ubuntu team has to juggle a vast array of demands from users, working out which features deserve inclusion in a new release and fixing as many bugs as it humanly possible. Tough decisions need to be made, arguments break out – and the

occasional basket of dirty washing is aired due to the open development process.

So, how does the Ubuntu team – and father company Canonical – bring together all these elements and produce a new distro release? Over the next seven pages, we're going to delve into the Ubuntu development process, looking at the upcoming Gutsy Gibbon (7.10) release and seeing how it progresses from feature ideas into usable code. With the help of some key Ubuntu hackers, we'll see what it takes to make a successful Ubuntu release – even if you don't use the distro, you'll get an insight into the processes and people involved in building a new Linux flavour.

Note that on our cover DVD we have the latest development snapshot of Gutsy (a 'Tribe' release), so you can see for yourself how the new features are coming along – it boots straight from the disc in Live mode. If you fancy building your own customised version of Ubuntu, we have a guide later on in this feature. But first off, let's look at the embryonic stages of a new Ubuntu release...

