

Get slack!

Words by Richard Hillesley

Linux users have been getting Slack for nearly ten years, says Richard Hillesley, but Slackware Linux is still far from being a sloppy choice

Slackware is the most venerable of Linux distributions, loved and trusted by hordes of users, sysadmins and programmers around the world for its solidity and closeness to the ground. Slackware comes from an earlier time when Linux users were almost exclusively hackers who walked the command line without fear or prejudice, scorned the world of point and click, and never went out overdressed.

Not that Slack is behind the times – a Slack user can sit behind the same ‘K’ Desktop Environment or GNOME front end as any Mandrake, SuSE or Red Hat Linux user. Just that Slack comes from a different tradition where the virtues are simplicity, straightforwardness, and lack of bloat. The asset most valued by the Slack user, and most often claimed for Slackware Linux, is system stability. Slackware is often perceived to be behind the times, because it doesn’t come with the latest and greatest version of every piece of software, which is a deliberate policy of Patrick Volkerding, the one and only maintainer of Slackware Linux, who prefers to include only software that is proven to be mature and stable. In contrast, most other distributions adhere to the

release early, release often ‘bleeding edge’ philosophy that has been a feature of many Linux and other free software projects since the earliest days.

The stripped-down cleanliness of Slackware Linux may

explain why there is still a vast user base of loyal and trusting Slack users, despite its lack of apparent commercial appeal. Other distributions may come with a greater range of options – three different database servers, four different music players, five different browsers – but Slackware

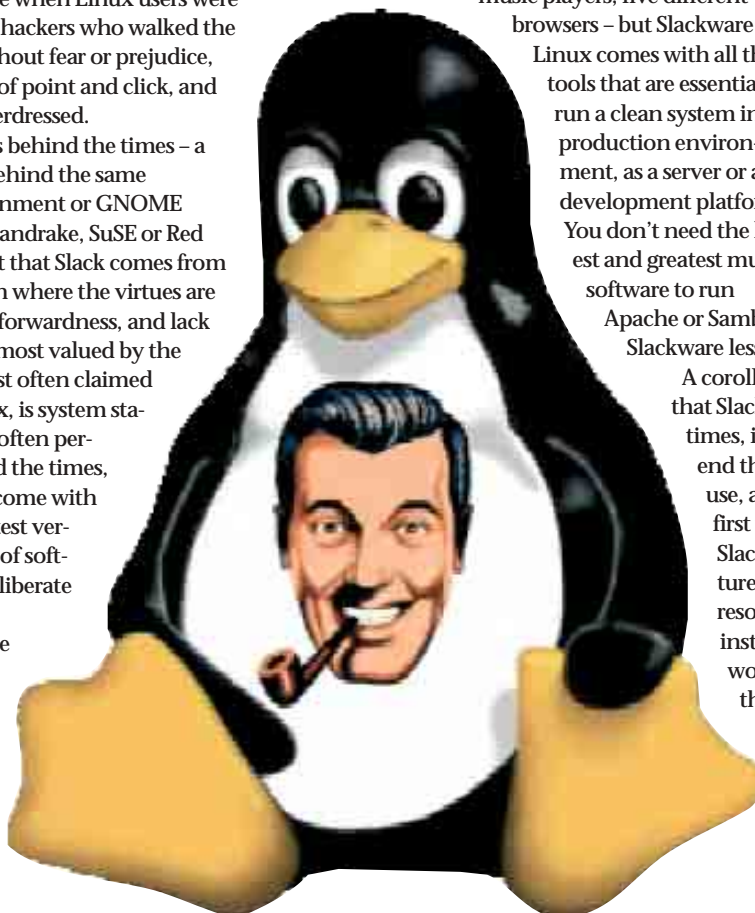
Linux comes with all the tools that are essential to run a clean system in a production environment, as a server or as a development platform. You don’t need the latest and greatest music software to run

Apache or Samba. In the world of Slackware less is often more.

A corollary of the perception that Slackware is behind the times, is the much travelled legend that Slackware is hard to use, and not to be touched by first time users. True, Slackware doesn’t have a picturesque, simple-choice, resource-hogging GUI installer, but many people would argue that, for all that, Slackware is just as easy to install, that the installer has more clarity than most, is more flexible, and that it is easier to customise a Slackware installation for the precise requirements of more advanced users and system administrators.

The Slackware user would claim that other distributions will install superfluous packages and tools that have to be removed after the installation is complete.

What is more, Slackware, more than most other Linux



Tux meets JR ‘Bob’ Dobbs of the Church of the Subgenius and becomes Slackware

In the world of Slackware less is often more

Key links

Slackware Linux
www.slackware.com

Slackware FAQ
www.slackware.com/faq/

Slackware Advocacy
www.slackware-advocacy.org

Church of the subgenius
www.subgenius.com

distributions, has a feel that is similar to a commercial Unix, and feels like home to the experienced Unix user. Slackware was the first of the Linux distributions to be employed on a regular basis as an illicit backroom server, as Linux often was, sneaked into the server space under the noses of the management. From this perspective it is possible to claim that Slackware was the first commercial Linux, and for some years, was by far the most popular.

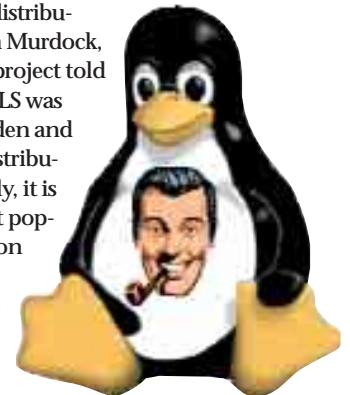
Linux for the subgenius

So why is Slackware called Slackware? Slackware, after all, is not the most obvious moniker to take Linux into the business world, however fetching it might have sounded to the odd mix of rebellious youth, technofreaks, and frustrated hackers who, as legend has it, contrived to bring Linux into the world.

At the time that Slackware first emerged as the logical replacement for the Software Landing Systems (SLS) Linux

Dobbs, 'The Master of Slack', and as an assertion that Slackware was part of the zeitgeist of the youth of America. On the other hand, Volkerding may just have liked the sound and feel of his unlikely choice of name, which is as good a reason as any for choosing a name that both catches the eye and is not easily forgotten.

Prior to Slackware's emergence in 1993, SLS was the most established of Linux distributions. SLS had its critics. Ian Murdock, the founder of the Debian project told *Linux Journal* in 1994 that SLS was "possibly the most bug-ridden and badly maintained Linux distribution available; unfortunately, it is also quite possibly the most popular." A similar dissatisfaction with SLS was the spur for Volkerding to begin his dis-



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distribution, the satirical Church of the Subgenius, with its slogan "get slack", was still a popular source of humour on the college campuses of the US. Slackware can be taken as a tongue-in-cheek reference to the Church of the Subgenius, and its mythical charismatic leader, JR 'Bob'

tribution, which was very different in character to Debian, with its thousands of contributors, who worked on a co-operative development model. Slackware, in contrast, was and is maintained by the efforts of one singular individual, Volkerding himself and, like FreeBSD, was sold on CD by Walnut Creek, and mirrored on FTP sites around the globe.

In an interview in the June 1994 issue of *Linux Journal*, Volkerding said: "It would be nice to make money from [Slackware], but not from selling the actual package", which can be taken as a declaration that Slackware was seen as a community project, rather than as a commercial enterprise. During the mid-'90s Slackware gained some notoriety that was accompanied by rumours on Usenet that the distribution, at that time the most popular of all the Linux distributions, was the work of "witches and devil-worshippers. Jokes alluding to 'RFC 666', demonic daemons, and speculation that Slackware author Pat Volkerding was actually L Ron Hubbard in disguise were rampant in the threads that followed." At this time Linux and Slackware were the ultimate in 'cool', and in some circles this is still true.

As late as 1996, the majority of Linux servers were running Slackware, and it wasn't until the end of the decade that Slackware's profile as the best known and most popular of Linux distributions was eclipsed by the success of Red Hat, Mandrake, SuSE and other commercial distributions, some of which, notably Red Hat and SuSE, had originally evolved from Slackware distributions.

Slackware lives

Without the commercial sponsorship and marketing hype available to its rivals, or the community involvement of Debian, Slackware has disappeared off the radar of most Linux users, but the distribution is still alive and vibrant and, the afficianados will tell you, is the most stable and dependable of Linux distributions for server applications, with an enviable reputation for being secure and reliable, easier to configure on older and smaller computers, and with an independence and character all of its own. And all you have to do is get slack...

