

Article, written by wobo in early October 2010, published in print in Linux User, issue # 11/2010 (in German)

(translated to English for Mageia by wobo)

Introduction

Numerous economical problems in the French company Mandriva SA have finally been answered by the community: former employees and free developers have decided to build a platform to continue the development of the distribution as a free and open community project.

Article

The 19th September marked a turning point in the history of the Distribution currently known as Mandriva Linux: Several former employees of Mandriva SA announced the intention to found a nonprofit organization that wishes to continue the distribution Mandriva Linux in a fork as a community project [1].

The reasons for this step go back to the year 2005: at that time the newcomer Ubuntu appeared on the scene simultaneously with the restructuring of the ailing Mandriva SA (see box of MandrakeSoft to Mandriva on the next spread). While this newcomer gained more and more popularity Mandriva failed to start a positive trend in its business and critical voices in the community arose about the Mandriva management.

Mandriva's business and communication policy met a rising reluctance of users and free developers. A key moment in this crisis was certainly the lay-off of company co-founder Gael Duval, along with popular community leaders (like Adam Williamson) and well known freelancers [2].

Downward trend

Despite numerous cuts in various business areas the decline of Mandriva SA continued unabated. In spring 2010 the company was on the brink of bankruptcy and started initial negotiations with interested buyers. The most promising prospect Linagora had a choice to take over the entire company or to wait for the bankruptcy and then to acquire the parts of interest to her. Linagora chose the latter.

Shortly before the inevitable bankruptcy of the company Mandriva SA, the longtime main investor Occam Capitals pulled an ace from his sleeve: a new investor promised new money. This money was to come from a fund launched in Cyprus, backed by Russian capital. The main owner of this capital is the Russian investor NCI who already acquired PenguinSoft and is also interested in the Russian distribution Alt Linux.

The red-pen victim of this deal was Mandriva's daughter Edge-IT which employed most of the important developers of Mandriva Linux - with serious consequences: although Mandriva offered some of those employees a new contract (which they denied) most of them lost their jobs. Over the past few months a dissonance between the management

and the majority of the developers had built up to an extent that left no room for a friendly solution. Enter the fork as last option to continue the distribution as a free organisation.

New Hope

In 2000, 2003 and 2007 there were repeated efforts started by the community to make a split, following the example of Red Hat and Fedora. The staff and free developers associated with the distribution could care for the free distribution while the company should focus on products for the corporate sector. Unfortunately without success.

In this current situation the developers, supported by former ex-employees and some user organisations decided (after many preliminary discussions with all parties involved) to start a fork into a non-commercial project: Mageia was born.

This was announced worldwide on September 19, 2010. On the day after Mandriva published a blog entry promising to continue and expand the distribution [4]. Many observers took this as a reaction to the Mageia announcement.

The decision to use a fork was not an easy one for the people in charge. However, this decision triggered an overwhelming response from developers and user communities as well as from the media.

Plans for the Future

A fork always offers the opportunity to cut off old habits and obsolete software. Accordingly the mailing lists of Mageia soon bubbled like a "Cauldron" (new name for the development version) with lively discussions about all areas of development, including the general direction of the distribution which was so far one of the leading entry-level distributions. Since many people regarded this as stigmatizing the users it was proposed to enlarge the target for Mageia without forgetting the old claim. A first impression of the new philosophy is in the official blog [5].

The independence and the success of the new project stands or falls with the willingness of the community to work together at all levels, transparency for the individual, and the individual commitment of developers and contributors. A first impression of this willingness to engage delivers the donations system [6]: up to the time of writing more than 5000 € were donated in favor of the Mageia Association.

To get things going a temporary wiki was installed to provide a common platform for task groups like base system developers, packagers, and groups to manage the internal structures, but also groups socially founded to work on Mageia's image to the outside. Especially here the community wants to be regarded as open as possible, quite the contrary to the somewhat taciturn commercial enterprise Mandriva SA. Important helpers in this area will be existing user organizations such as the French AUFML, Spanish Blogdrake and German MandrivaUser.de [3].

In user groups and organisations the question of the organisation logo and visual identity of the new distribution fanned a tremendous variety of submissions, ideas and

discussions. Currently, the Founder Group, the marketing experts and some other parties are looking at those submissions and are to come to a conclusion in the first half of December.

First release 2011

A date for the first release of the distribution is not fixed yet. But as the development of Mageia is closely related to the already very advanced development branch ("Cooker") of Mandriva Linux 2011.0 and the majority of Mageia developers was involved in this, we can expect a first release in the first or early second quarter of 2011. A first Alpha should be out in late December (see "Interview with Anne Nicolas-Velu").

Who does it?

Common sense and the French legal system demand a formal leading structure for projects of this magnitude if you want to register as an association. This leading structure (the "Board") is currently composed of members of the founding group (former Mandriva employees, external developers, and community managers). Once a year a new board will be elected by the community. Below this leading group there are different teams for different tasks. These working groups shall appoint a manager who coordinates the work of the team and maintains contact with the leaders. There are also other links between the teams and user organizations.

There's a lot going on right now in this young project. Whether it will become a success story as a pure community distribution or whether it will - after a reasonable waiting period - start a cooperation with Mandriva or any other partner, this is still in the stars. The current CEO of Mandriva, Arnaud Laprevote, answered rather avasively to the question about a cooperation with Mageia: "As for our own community we need to work on the relationship. I do not know what the future holds, the only thing I can say is that we must work on this."

One thing we can be sure about: the future of the popular French distribution remains exciting.

"From Mandrakesoft to Mandriva"

The story of Mandriva SA started in 1998 with the idea of Gael Duval, a french student of informatics, to merge the leading Linux distribution of that time with the new desktop environment KDE. He called the resulting Linux Mandrake after the comics character "Mandrake the Magician". Accordingly the first logo of the distribution featured the little magician, today you can still see the star in the logo of Mandriva Linux and Mandriva SA. In the same year he and two friends founded the company Mandrakesoft.

Right from the start Mandrakesoft became a success story. It parted from the mother distribution Red Hat and found its distinctive feature with the famous DrakTools and the Mandrake Control Center. Awards from magazines and at events brought Mandrakesoft to the attention of the big US investors, Mandrakesoft received money but also had to accept external managers to its board.

With the money Mandrakesoft expanded into different business areas, mainly in the USA. Several bad decisions and the explosion of the dot.com bubble brought Mandrakesoft to the brink of bankruptcy: in 2003 Mandrakesoft went under Chapter #11. A very hard restructure of the company as well as the massive support of the user community (Mandrake Club) resulted in a resurrection of the company and allowed to exit Chapter #11 in early 2004 under the condition to pay back debts within 9 years.

Under the lead of Francois Bancelhon the company prospered and acquired other companies: first Edge-IT, then in 2005 the most important one: Conectiva. Mandrakesoft changed its name and became "Mandriva", a combination of Mandrakesoft and Conectiva. A side benefit of this name change was setting an end to a long law suit by the Hearst Group on the use of the comics character "Mandrake". So, starting May 2005 the distribution was named "Mandriva Linux".

Links

Some linked pages are in German! See press wiki (Germany) for Google translations

[1] News about Mageia's creation

<http://www.linux-community.de/Internal/Nachrichten/Mageia-eine-neue-Linux-Distribution-auf-Mandriva-Basis>

[2] Cuts in personnel at Mandriva

<http://www.linux-community.de/Internal/Nachrichten/Personalabbau-bei-Mandriva-Deutsche-Community-betroffen>

[3] German user organisation (this article was published in Germany, hence the link)

<http://www.mandrivauser.de>

[4] Mandriva's answer to the Mageia creation

<http://www.linux-community.de/Internal/Nachrichten/Mandriva-will-beste-KDE-Distribution-der-Welt-werden>

[5] Mageia Blog

<http://blog.mageia.org>

[6] Donation page

<http://donate.mageia.org>

Interview with Anne Nicolas-Velu

LU: When will the productive stage of Mageia start?

Anne: As we are building something new for the project each day you can safely say that we have already begun. The official creation of the organisation, the creation of the board,

building teams, infrastructure and management should show first results by the end of October.

LU: When do you expect a first beta of Mageia?

Anne: We should be able to achieve this as early as possible, end of this year, if possible. For a first release we will have to remove all references to Mandriva from the existing packages, hopefully the community is able to help us here. Our goal is to deliver a first version as soon as possible, which will allow users to migrate easily from Mandriva Linux Spring 2010 to Mageia.

LU: Where do you plan Mageia's first public appearance?

Anne: We are planning a first meeting during Fosdem 2011 in Brussels, Belgium. We will talk to other projects and developers and hope for many new contacts. The topics of the meeting will cover many areas, from roadmap to development to improvement of communication habits. You can expect more detailed information in time.

LU: Thank you very much for this interview.

(This interview was held via mail by wobo)

About the author

Wolfgang Bornath (wobo) leads the German community site MandrivaUser.de and is participating regularly on German Linux events. In future his site will also support users of Mageia and the Mageia Association.