

Mageia: the magic isn't turned off

Mageia is born, a Linux distribution derived from Mandriva, initiated from their ex – employees and supported by their communities and enthusiasts. The Mandriva declining financial and dismissals don't achieved to turn off the magic that one day shined, inspired and fallen in love to millions of users around the world.

It was in France, in July of 1998, when Mandrakelinux was born, a distribution based on Red Hat Desktop 5.1 with KDE desktop, from which it also took its name. Mandrakelinux was created by Gaël Duval, an ex – employee and cofounder of RedHat, founding the Mandrakesoft company.

FROM MANDRAKE TO MAGEIA

With Mandrakelinux came the installation, the configuration and the use facilities for Linux in server systems and workstations, thanks to the incorporation of assistants, which it made easy these tasks, and this was adequate for beginners and experts. Its name was taken from a famous comic personage, a super-hero named Mandrake the magician who faced the evil thanks to the use of its powerful magic. The allusion to this personage evoked the magic which you can feel with the power in order to make great things in a very easy way, like by art of magic.

At 2003, Hearst Corporation, the owner of the Mandrake the magician copyrights, interposed a lawsuit demand against Mandrakesoft for the use of its name. The lawsuit finished at 2004, and at the beginning of 2005, the appeal expired. In a match up way, at 2005, Mandrakesoft acquired Conectiva, a Brazilian Linux distribution, merging both names to Mandriva, and calling its distribution as Mandriva Linux.

In the course of its history, Mandriva bought and merged several companies: Edge IT (France, October of 2004, delivery services, support and development), the above mentioned Mandriva (Brazil, February of 2005, Linux distribution), Lycoris (EEUU, June of 2005, Linux distribution formally known as Redmon Linux Corporation) and Linbox (France, October of 2005, owner of Linbox Rescue Server and Linbox Directory Server products).

Successes harvests

Twelve years seems an ephemeral breathe in the time, but in the technological world, the time seems sobre-dimensionate, as the innovation and market dynamism is vertiginous and outstanding. Twelve years in technology are twelve frenetic and intense years. And like that was lived by Mandriva.

In a world level, Mandriva Linux is a reference. It's oriented to companies and home, it is translated to more than 70 languages, it has more than three millions of users and a passionate and a very consolidated international community. The company has offices in

France, Brazil and EEUU, employing more than 80 people –up to now- and selling its products and its services in more than 140 countries.

Every year, one or two releases are out for each of its distributions: complete version for desktop (including some proprietary package), LiveCD desktop, Free version (100% free software), Enterprise version (for companies and servers), Flash version, etc. Each distribution includes the last versions of the Linux core, desktops, thirds applications, and the assistants that Mandriva incorporates in order to facilitate the tasks about configuration, control and administration of hardware, servers, networks, security, dektop, etc. The distributions are free, and yo can download it from its website, or you can buy the phisical product with box, documentation and support.

Also, Madriva develops another products, like Pulse (IT networks management), or Mandriva Directory Server (LDAP server).

The company has harvested recognitions and awards from the most prestigious organizations and media press, like PC Answers, CHIP Magazine, CNET's Editor Choice, The Duke or URL, Open Choice, etc.

Among its technological partners, you can find companies of the magnitude of Bull, Nec, LaCie, ATI, Dell, Epson, IBM, NTT System, HP, Gigabyte, nVidia, Skype, VMWare, Xerox, Ricoch, Steria, MSI, etc.

Financial troubles

Mandrakesoft began with a very good profitability. With the dotcom fever (at the beginning of 2000's), the financial strategy of the company was replanted in order to earn more benefits. For this reason, the sharefolders decided replace the headships (director's offices) by a financial experts team. The new headship bet all to the eLearning (remote training via web), which results were a categorical failure: they squandered the company 's money, and they generated vast debts which almost ruined the company.

Mandrakesoft was protected by the bankruptcy protection from the 27th January of 2003 (in this year, Mandrakesoft declared pay suspensions) up to the 30th March of 2004. The company faced to its creditors until it recovered its financial stability, and achieved money in order to settle pays.

After lay off the financial team that bet for eLearning, Mandriva sold subscriptions to the Mandriva Club. This subscriptions lightened part of the debts thanks to the increment of deposits. You can be partnert of this exclusive club, with the pay of a yearly membership fees, which it can be different according to the partner category: Bronze, Silver, Gold or Platinum. This club offered to its partners advantages , such as the Access to non free products included in the released versions, access to additional services, access to the ISOs ot the new distribution before its official publication, etc. At 2008, after release Mandriva Linux 2008, the club liberated to all its members of the membership fees.

In the last years, the financial situation of the company was degraded considerably. At the first quarter of 2010, the rumors pointed to its sale to a third company, avoiding with this measurement a new pay suspensions, even though the company denied these rumors. Along two years, the company have seen marching to four CEOs in its headship. Finally, before the summer of 2010, some investor groups have invested money in order to save Mandriva from its own twilight.

The future of Mandriva

The Mandriva's creditors are supporting the recapitalization of the company, from the part of investor groups, such as Wallix, TownArea Ltd, Occam, Russian Technologies and the Russian investment foundation NGI. These two last investors have bought some Mandriva shares, which you can think about Mandriva goes to the Russian Government plans (although in a partial way), in order to create a state operating system based on Linux.

With this recapitalization, you can think about a change of rudder with a course more oriented to business (in order to generate benefits and to recover the investment (ROI)) than to community (in order to create and share product and knowledge), although, if the Russian distribution is confirmed, it could be possible to also think in a distribution created by the community.

The first effect crash in this restructuring has been the clearance (liquidation) of Edge IT (which its work were oriented to the support and development of the distribution), firing to many employees, and causing that other employees (members of the cooker, the Mandriva in development) resign due to its distrust about the future of the company. The next step in the restructuring is uncertain, and the reduction politics surely cuts any other important appendix of the company. For the time being, the investors are concentrating its interests in the Pulse and MDS (Mandriva Directory Server) products.

From the administration of Mandriva, they announce that its difficult situation are finishing, and for this reason, they are restructuring the company organization, simplifying its organization chart, reducing drastically its costs and creating new strategies. Also, they have confirmed that the community will be alive and present in the future of Mandriva Linux and the company, and also its intention in order to work on new solutions and distributions oriented to new technologies, like tablets or cloud computing; or the sale of OEM distributions for the education and mobility, the sale of products and services via online, or the sale of solutions based on Pulse, MDS and MIS. Also, they have communicated its intention in order to extend its market to Russia and to all the Euro zone, and also create a new partners program with an indirect sales model, oriented to computer distributors, resellers and integrators.

THE BIRTH OF MAGEIA

Several Mandriva ex – employees and collaborators have fulfilled great doses of courage, and they have decided don't sink into oblivion, creating a new distribution, named Mageia (a Greek word), which it means magic. This initiative is supported by Mandriva and Cooker community users and contributors.

Thanks to the Mandriva founders, all developments were protected under GPL license. For this reason, Mageia will be a Mandriva Linux fork, exclusively from/for the community, without the influence of any company. Mageia will be administered by a organization with no profit motive in mind, governed by a committee of community members. Mageia is led by the main creators of the original distribution, who are in contact with the main Mandriva communities in order to this project is managed by the community.

The birth of Mageia was well accepted and followed by the Linux enthusiasts. The history behind this new distribution, and the recent events happened to OpenSolaris and OpenOffice, waked up the bravery, the strength and the union of the free communities, and the consensus and the reaffirmation of the Open Source philosophy as the freedom universal way. The Mageia history is an inspiring example that demonstrate Open Source is not only an alternative, but also is a solution, and when a free product is threaten and can succumb by the falling of an organization or company, the communities and the users will continue perpetuating its spirit.

INTERVIEW TO MICHAEL SCHERER, FOUNDER OF MAGEIA

Todo Linux was fortunate enough to interview to Michael Scherer, 29 years old, one of Mageia founders. He was a Mandriva contributor, one of the distribution packagers, and at current coordinate several parts of the Mageia infrastructure, helping also in different areas.

TODOLINUX: The news about the possibly Mandriva bankrupt startled to the Linux enthusiasts. Mandriva Linux is one of the most veterans and influential distributions, used by millions of users and organizations around the world. It's inevitable and obvious to ask you how a leading company like Mandriva, with a leading product, could to reach such a point.

Michael Scherer: Having a free software product do not prevent you from bankrupting, unfortunately. As a outsider of the company, I guess I do not have enough information to make a comment on it, and I would prefer avoid making uninformed guess.

TL: The Mandriva case, could be a referent (reference) repeatable in other companies with its same model and philosophy of business?

MS: What happened at Mandriva, be it success or failure, could happen anywhere. For example Sun Microsystem was quite a huge contributor to free software ecosystem that succeeded to free StarOffice, and yet, they also managed to have financial problems before Oracle bought the company. The same story of success and failure could be said of Apple

after Steve Jobs departure in 1986. So business around free software are still business. The only difference is that even if the company disappear or decide to stop maintaining the product, most of the time, community will be there. For recent example, see QTopia, who became QTMoko, or Etherpad whose source code is on github now.

TL: The news about Megaia birth was a surprise for everybody. A new > distribution in a garden, in which hundreds of distributions strives for each inch of ground, is a really complicated challenge. Megaia inherits powerful genes from the Mandriva engineers: experience, knowledge and enthusiasm. What more things are necessary in order to Megaia gains ground against its rivals?

MS: Engineers are not sufficient, we could not have made it without the support of the community on all levels, like others packagers, translators or the various users community around the world. And there is also a whole world of challenges waiting for us, like having community based marketing and communication, but thanks the work of others community like Fedora and Ubuntu, we know this can be done and the most basic pitfalls to avoid.

For our rivals, it depend of what you mean. If you are speaking of proprietary system, like Windows or OS X, the journal will not be enough to expose all my ideas on this subject unfortunately.

If you speak of others distributions, I do not consider them as rivals. Choice is a a wealth, it allows us to protect the community in case of problem like the one that Google is facing with Oracle, Java, and Android. It also allows to test different solutions at the same time, thus helping to find the best one and then share it to make better software for all.

TL: Megaia is an initiative created by Mandriva ex-employees, with the support of some communities and volunteers in order to perpetuate the legacy of community Mandriva Linux. The product will be a fork of the original project. However, Mandriva has announced the continuity of the community Mandriva version. Also, rumors is going around about other russian fork promoted by the russian government. Do you think there will be conflicts or confusions or similarities between these distributions?

MS: I think similarities are unavoidable since all distributions share lots of software and code, so that wouldn't be a new situation, be it with Mandriva or others. That's the same regarding conflicts or confusion, even if we will try to avoid this as much as possible. And in my own experience, the relations between contributors of most projects are very cordial and friendly, so I have no doubt that we will be fine on this point. After all, sharing is the heart of free software.

TL: It'll be inevitable to associate or to relate Megaia with Mandriva. What are the identity signs of Megaia? How do you'll make the difference? How do you'll make your product more charming than its ancestor?

MS: We didn't decide yet, and I must confess that I didn't followed much. I guess this will be the job of the volunteers working on communication and marketing, based on input from the whole community. There is currently lots of activities about the logo and visual identities so I

really think something great will be produced.

TL: KDE was the desktop par excellence in Mandrake and Mandriva. RedHat > prevented this desktop in order to avoid the people to relate or > associate both distributions. Will Megaia continue using KDE, or will > innovate with other desktops?

MS: KDE will likely still be offered as a default desktop for the first versions, as there is IMHO enough place for another solid distribution with it by default. But as a GNOME user, I also know that Mandriva always proposed a good GNOME experience and I hope that things will not change in this matter. Mandriva always tried to equally support all windows managers, for example by using debian menu, and later freedesktop norm, and I see no reason to change this.

TL: Megaia was created by and for the community. In the case of professional solutions for enterprises, will the community support the services? Or, maybe, will a company linked to the community be formed?

MS: We will do like Debian or others community projects. If all goes well, some people will create companies around the distribution, some companies will switch and start to support us, and the association will simply list the professional services on a page. The confusion between the company, the distribution and the community caused lots of problems with Mandriva, and we are all trying to avoid doing the same mistake twice. So the association will be distinct from any companies, and we are working quite hard on the statuts to ensure its independency.

TL: How many distributions are planned? Is there an schedule? Some date for release?

MS: We do not have a precise schedule yet as we are still in the infancy of the project at the moment theses lines are written (end of september 2010). But we want to do a release before the end of the year so everybody will see the project is not a vaporware, and so various teams will be able to start working on something concrete.

TL: Have you got any preview or step forward about Megaia technical specifications?

MS: For the moment, the plan is to set up everything and ensure we have a rock solid infrastructure, and then do a first release based on Mandriva packages. Basically, we want to first do a release without much deep changes from our origin in order to ensure the robustness of our organisation. After that point, real changes will be proposed, discussed and will happens if needed and if someone does the work. The future is not written yet, so I cannot really predict anything. Given the current pace of innovation in free software world, we should likely see the first big changes in 1 or 2 years, not sooner. I do not count changes that will happen upstream, like GNOME 3.0 or new kernel, just change on our level.

TL: Mandriva was criticized by purists because Mandriva did include non 100% free drivers and third part products. Will Megaia continue with this practice?

MS: I guess they didn't check all editions since we always tried to offer the choice by offering 2 versions of the distribution. As a free software advocate, I prefer to avoid using binary drivers or proprietary plugins based on very pragmatic reasons of lack of security and lack of

perenity. But I also understand that people may do different choices and would prefer to have those installed by default. We didn't discuss out theses issues yet, but I think we will not disrupt too much the current model of 2 distribution as it has been working well.

There was some discussion about using a kernel without binary blobs, but the kernel packagers told that it was not worth the change since the cleaning is already pushed in upstream kernel and therefore will appear gradually when we upgrade.

IMHO, a bigger issue regarding this kind of problem is the bundling of various fonts and medias in tarballs and softwares.

TL: Will you make a business line dedicated to independent products similar to Pulse and MDS?

MS: No, Mageia structure is a non for profit french association. If such products appears, this will be made by another entity fully distinct from the association, or this would not be a business line, just another community project.

TL: At current, the Netbooks and the Tablets are at its very peak. Are you thinking to create products for these devices?

MS: Personally, I won't directly as that's not my current interest, but that's the beauty of open source group, others people who are interested (and there is lots of people who do in the community) will surely do.

I know for example that some ex-mandriva engineers are quite fond of ARM and all innovations regarding netbooks and tablets, so they will surely do some work in this area. Meego was available in Mandriva, and the engineer in charge of this (Olivier Blin) is now in the Mageia community. But I cannot speak for others regarding their plans.

TL: The main Linux distributions are offering solutions for cloud computing. Are you taking these technologies into account for the future?

MS: Well, it depends on what you call "cloud technologies", since the word is used in a lot of contexts. My own sysadmin view on "cloud" is that just some kind of flexible clustering solution, sometimes hosted elsewhere, and Mandriva was already quite good in this area some years ago with Mandrake Clic. Like most distributions, we also have advanced sysadmins features (auto installation, etc) and packages to ease cluster managements (puppet, cfengine, urpmi-parallel, etc). There is no group yet dedicated to target specifically Amazon EC2 cluster and the like, but we have already people expressing their interest regarding server parts of the distribution, so maybe a team dedicated to this more specific part will appear.

Now, for those using cloud as a synonym of hosted services like GMail and others, this is in not in the short term or mid term plan to offer theses services to the community, besides hosting the infrastructure for the project. That would be a whole different direction for us.

TL: The magic doesn't turn off. What's the new magic of Megaia in order to remove its legacy?

MS: I am afraid that the magic will just be openness, transparency, and independence. Transparency is not so easy to achieve, and building consensus can be quite long to do. Independence also mean that we are on our own and if we want something, we have to do it because no one will be paid to do it for us.

TL: The work of Mageia community is frenetic, illusioning and motivating. We hope Mageia is an important referent (reference) in the world of Linux, contributing with new and fresh ideas. Have you got any message for the Linux enthusiasts?

MS: That's a pretty good question. I guess that I would remind them that Free Software always need people to share them and work on it, and that we should not forget from where we come, and our core values as free software users.