"Made in Linux" — The Next Step

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Abstract

It's been over half a decade since the Linux audio began to shape into a mature platform capable of impressing even the most genuine cynic. Although its progress remains unquestionable, the increasing bleed-over of the GNU software onto other platforms, fragmentation of the audio software market, as well as wavering hardware support, pose as a significant threat to its long-term prosperity. "Made in Linux" is a newly proposed incentive to create a non-profit foundation that will bridge the gap between the Linux audio community and the commercial audio market in order to ensure its long-term success.

Keywords

Foundation, Initiative, Exposure, Commercial, Incentives

1   Introduction

While no single event is necessarily responsible for the sudden proliferation of the Linux audio software, it is undeniable that the maturing of the ALSA and JACK frameworks were indispensable catalysts in this process. Yet, what really made this turning point an impressive feat was the way in which the Linux audio community, amidst the seemingly "standardless anarchy," was able to not only acknowledge their quality, but also wholeheartedly embrace them. Although some users are still standing in denial of the obvious advantages heralded by these important milestones, nowadays they are but a minority. Since, we've had a number of software tools harness the power of the new framework, complementing each other and slowly shaping

Linux into a complete Digital Audio Workstation (DAW) solution.

2   The Momentum

Today, while we still enjoy the momentum generated by these important events, increasing worldwide economic problems, bleed-over of the GNU software to closed dominant platforms, as well as the cascading side-effects, such as the questionable pro-audio hardware support, now stand as formidable stepping stones to the long-term success of this platform.

Even though the economic hardship would suggest greater likelihood of Linux adoption for the purpose of cutting costs, this model only works in the cases where Linux has already proven its worth, such as the server market. And while I do not mean to imply that Linux as a DAW has not proven its worth in my eyes (or should I say ears?), it is unquestionable that its value is still a great unknown among the common users who are, after all, the backbone of the consumer market and whose numbers are the most important incentive for the commercial vendors. In addition, Linux audio and multimedia users as well as potential newcomers still face some significant obstacles, such as the impressive but unfortunately unreliable support of the ubiquitous VST standard via the WINE layer, or the lack of a truly complete all-in-one DAW software.

The aforementioned platform transparency of the GNU model is a blessing and a curse. While it may stimulate the user of a closed platform to delve further into the offering of the open-source community, contribute to, and perhaps even switch to an open-source platform, generally such a behavior is still largely an exception. Let us for a moment consider the potential contributors from

the two dominant platforms: Microsoft and Apple. The dominant Microsoft platform is architecturally too different, so the contributions from the users of this platform will likely be mostly porting-related and as such will do little for the betterment of the software's core functionalities (as a matter of fact, they may even cause increase in the software maintenance overhead). Similarly, the Apple users as adoring followers of their own platform usually yield similar contributions. Naturally, the exceptions to either trend are noteworthy, yet they remain to be exactly that: exceptions. While it is not my intention to trivialize such contributions nor to question the premise upon which the GNU doctrine has been built, it is quite obvious that the cross-platform model of attracting new users to the GNU/Linux platform currently does not work as expected and therefore should not be counted on as a recipe for the long-term success.

What is unfortunate in this climate of dubious cross-platform contributions and dwindling economic prospects through fragmentation of the audio software industry, is the fact that it generates a cascading set of side-effects. One of such effects is the recently disclosed lack of RME's interest, a long-term supporter of the Linux audio efforts, to provide ALSA developers with the specifications for its firewire audio hardware due to IP concerns. Even though such a decision raises some interesting questions, delving any further into the issue is certainly outside the scope of this paper. Yet, the fact remains that without the proper support for the pro-audio interfaces of tomorrow, no matter how good the software, Linux audio has no future. The situation is certainly not as grim as it seems as there are many other audio devices that are, and will continue to be supported. Nonetheless, this may become one of the most important stepping stones in the years to come and therefore should be used as a warning that may very well require a preemptive (re)action from the Linux audio community before it becomes too late.

3 Counter-Initiatives

Amidst these developments, our community has certainly not been dormant. There were numerous initiatives that were usually spawned by individuals or small groups of like-minded enthusiasts in order to foster greater cooperation among the community members and attract attention from the outsiders, such as the *Linux Audio Consortium* of libre software and companies whose primary purpose is to help steer further developments as well as serve as a liaison between the commercial audio world and the Linux audio community. Another example is the "Made with Linux" CD which is to include a compilation of works made with Linux and whose dissemination would be used as a form of publicity as well as for the fund-raising purposes. Other examples include numerous articles and publications in reputable magazines that expose the true power of Linux as well as recently increased traffic on the Linux-Audio-User and Linux-Audio-Developer mailing lists concerning works made using Linux.

These are by no means the only gems of such efforts. Nonetheless, their cumulative effect has to this day made but a small dent in exposing the true power of Linux as a DAW. To put this statement into perspective, even the tech-savvy and generally pro-Linux audience of the *Slashdot* technology news site is largely still ignorant of Linux's true multimedia content creation and production potential.

All this points to the fact that Linux audio community has reached the point of critical mass at which all involved need to take the next step in organizing efforts towards expanding the audio software market exposure, whether for the reasons of own gratification, financial gain, or simply for the benefit of the overall community. After all, if the Linux audio supporters do not take these steps then it should certainly not be expected from others to follow or even less likely take the steps in their stead.

4 "Made in Linux" to the Rescue

"Made in Linux" is an initiative carrying a deliberate syntactic pun in its title to separate itself from other similar programs and/or initiatives that may have already taken place and/or are associated with the more generalized form of evangelizing Linux. The title obviously plays a pun on the labels commonly found on commercial products in order to identify their country of assembly, less commonly the country of their origin. Such ubiquitous practice nowadays makes it nearly impossible to find a commercial product without such a label. Considering that the initiative I am proposing should be as vigilant and as all-

encompassing as the aforementioned labels, I felt that the title certainly fit the bill.

The initiative calls for formation of a non-profit foundation whose primary concern will be to oversee the proliferation of Linux as a DAW through widespread publicity of any marketable multimedia work that has utilized Linux, monetary incentives, awards, and perhaps most importantly through establishing of reliable communication channels between the commercial pro-audio market and the Linux audio developers, artists, and contributors. With such an agenda there are superficial but nonetheless pronounced similarities with the function and purpose behind the *Linux Audio Consortium*. However, as we will soon find out, there are some distinguishing differences as well.

One of the most important long-term goals of "Made in Linux" foundation will be to accumulate operating budget through fund-rising. Such budget would enable the foundation to provide incentives towards the development of most sought audio-related software features and/or tools, sponsoring competitions and awards for the recognition of the most important contributions to the community, media exposure, music-oriented incentives (i.e. composition competitions), and beyond.

Depending upon the success of the initial deployment, the foundation's programs could easily expand to encompass other possibilities, such as the yearly publications of works in a form of a CD compilation similar to the aforementioned "Made with Linux" collection, as well as other incentives that may help the foundation become more self-dependent while at the same time allowing it to further expand its operations.

While the proposal of creating an entity that would foster Linux as a DAW proliferation certainly sounds very enticing, please let us not be deceived. Linux audio market is currently a niche within a niche, and as such does not suggest that such foundation would boast a formidable operating budget. Nonetheless, it is my belief that in time it may grow into a strong liaison between the commercial world and our, whether we like it or not, still widely questioned "GNU underground."

5   Streamlining Exposure

In order to expedite and streamline the aforementioned efforts, the "Made in Linux" program also calls for an establishment of a clearly distinguishable logo which is to be embedded into any audio software that has been conceived on a Linux platform and is voluntarily endorsing this particular initiative.

The idea to encourage all contributors, developers and artists alike, to seal their work with a clearly identifying logo is a powerful advertising mechanism that should not be taken lightly, especially considering that it suggest their devotion if not indebtedness to the GNU/Linux audio community, whether by developing software tools primarily for this platform, or by using those tools in their artistic work. More importantly, if a software application were to ported to another platform, the logo's required persistence would clearly and unquestionably reveal its origins likely elevating curiosity among users oblivious to the Linux audio scene. Although we already have several logos for the various Linux audio-related groups and/or communities, most of them are denominational and as such may not prove to be the best convergent solution. Therefore, I would like to propose the a creation of a new logo that would be preferably used by anyone who utilizes Linux for multimedia purposes. The following example being a mere suggestion, a starting point if you like, is distributed under the GNU/GPL license (larger version is freely available and downloadable from the author's website — please see references for more info):

It is of utmost importance once the logo's appearance has been finalized and ratified, that it remains constant and its use consistent in order to enable end-users to familiarize themselves with it and grasp the immensity and versatility of Linux audio offering. Naturally, the software applications that do not offer graphical user interface could

simply resort to incorporating the title of the incentive. With these simple, yet important steps, the Linux multimedia software would, to the benefit of the entire community, attain greater amount of exposure and publicity.

Contrary to the aforementioned foundation, this measure is neither hard to implement nor does should it generate a significant impact from the developer's standpoint, yet it does pose as a powerful statement to the GNU/Linux cause. Just like the Linux's "Tux" mascot, which now dominates the Internet, this too can become a persistent image associated with the Linux audio software. However, in order to be able to attain this seemingly simple goal, it is imperative that the Linux audio community extends a widespread (if not unanimous) support and cooperation towards this initiative. Only then will this idea yield constructive results. Needless to mention that this prerequisite will not only test the appeal of the initiative, but also through its fruition assess the community's interest (or lack thereof) in instituting the aforementioned foundation. Once the foundation would assume its normal day-to-day operations, this measure would become integral part of the foundation's agenda in its efforts to widen the exposure of the rich Linux audio software offering.

6 Linux Audio Consortium Concerns

By now it is certainly apparent that the aforementioned initiative bears resemblance to the *Linux Audio Consortium* agenda which has been in existence for over a year now. After all, both initiatives share the same goal: proliferation of Linux audio scene by offering means of communication as well as representation. However, there are some key differences between the two initiatives.

In its current state the *Linux Audio Consortium* could conceivably sponsor or at least serve as the host for the "Made in Linux" initiative. Yet, in order for the consortium to be capable of furnishing full spectrum of programs covered by this initiative, including the creation of the aforementioned foundation, there is an unquestionable need for a source of funding. Currently, the consortium does not have the facilities that would enable such steady source of income. As such, the additional programs

proposed as part of this initiative, should they be implemented under the patronage of the consortium, they would require a reasonably substantial alterations to its bylaws and day-to-day operations.

Naturally, it would be unfortunate if the two initiatives were to remain separate as such situation would introduce unnecessary fragmentation of an already humbly-sized community. Nonetheless, provided that the "Made in Linux" program creates an adequately-sized following, it may become necessary at least in initial stages for the two programs to remain separate until the logistical and other concerns of their merging are ironed out.

7 Conclusion

It is undeniable that the Linux audio community is facing some tough decisions in the imminent future. These decisions will not only test the community's integrity, but will likely determine the very future of the Linux as a software DAW. Introducing new and improving existing software, while a quintessential factor for the success in the commercial market, unfortunately may not help solve some of the fundamental issues, such as the dubious state of the pro-audio hardware support. As such, this sole incentive will not ensure the long-term success of the Linux platform. Furthermore, whether one harbors interest in a joint effort towards promoting Linux also may not matter much in this case. After all, if Linux fails to attract professional audio hardware vendors, no matter how good the software offering becomes, it will be useless without the proper hardware support. Therefore, it is the formation of the foundation (or restructuring of the existing *Linux Audio Consortium*) and its relentless promotion of the Linux audio efforts that may very well be community's only chance to push Linux into the mainstream audio market where once again it will have a relatively secure future as a professional and competitive DAW solution.

8 Acknowledgements

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