

Readers Respond:

Another Mailbag

This month, we'll take a look at some column mail that's accumulated since the July issue. While a variety has come in, most of it has been on the Linux column. Boy, is the Linux community ever a vocal one! Tons of mail, as below.

Aug. 3, 1998: "What's Best For Your PC?": Mail really came in on the subject of Linux, more than anything else I've discussed thus far. The comments received broke down into three general areas:

1. Many offered suggestions to try Staroffice (www.stardivison.com). A 4.03 version of the office suite had been previously available. Now, this has apparently been replaced by version 5.0, which is promised "within the next days" (as per the web site on Oct. 5, 1998). The beauty of this office suite is reported to be the read/write compatibility with Microsoft applications. When it does appear, it could well offer good utility in that regard.

2. Many also sent in suggestions to try the KDE desktop (www.kde.org). This is a replacement desktop environment for Linux which, at this writing, I have not had a chance to try. But, from the numerous enthusiastic comments received, it's worth the time to investigate if you're serious about using Linux.

3. Suggestions of what to do about "Plug-n-Play" (PnP) devices and "Winmodems" running under Linux came in from various readers.

I'll confess to some oversight here on the optimum modem configuration originally reported. The situation described in the Aug. 3 column reflected what actually transpired with the modem. But, as life would have it, a bit more time working with that original modem would actually have revealed it wasn't really any great mystery to Linux. (That's what happens when you face deadlines.) Here's what's happened since then...it's much more encouraging to potential Linux tire-kickers.

Some time after the original article, I caught a note on the Micron USENET newsgroup about the availability of free V.90 modem upgrades

for recent buyers. I checked this out, and found that indeed there was an EXE file available to flash the internal USR 56k X2 modem that came with the machine. I downloaded it, installed the upgrade per the instructions, and all went OK.

Since this PnP modem device didn't originally work under Linux, I then set out to explore what happened when the card's jumpers were reset for a Windows 95 non-PnP mode, on COM2. After some false starts and non-recognition problems, I shortly had the modem with the V.90 upgrade running OK under Windows 95, and was able for the first time to get ~50 kbits/s downloads—life in a (relatively speaking) faster lane.

Overall, I was very fortunate in one sense. This particular modem had jumpers available for setting COM ports and interrupts, making the above reconfiguration under Windows 95 a rather simple one. More importantly, the modem's ability to work in either PnP mode, or as a standard modem, meant Linux life became much simpler. Had the modem been a Winmodem, as many readers indicated, it may not have been salvageable under Linux.

On the Linux side of the machine, I also was now able to talk to the USR V.90 modem after a simple Linux software reconfiguration, redefining the "/dev/modem" link as serial device "cua1" (equivalent to COM2). Things went fine dialing out under Red Hat's networking tool from within X-windows. Two COM ports are now reported under the Linux boot sequence, as they should.

I also have to confess to a mis-statement in the original column. I actually *don't* have the Micron XKU PnP sound "card" (part of the Intel 440LX MB) working under Linux. I was quite pleased to receive a lengthy and thorough analysis of the way to approach this from Mat Butler. Mat recommended using Pnpdump, a Linux util-

ity which reports PnP device details. From this, the correct PnP device settings can be edited into a configuration file, which is then saved and subsequently read by Isapnp at boot up, configuring the PnP device appropriately. Thanks for the help on this, Mat!

Nelson Goewey of ESPN sent in some nice comments, and offered a tip on the Red Hat 5.1 CD's availability for \$29.95 at MEI/Micro Center. This package is a complete REDHAT distribution, including boot diskette, installation manual, and three CDs. MEI/Micro Center can be reached at (800) 634-3478, or www.mei-microcenter.com.

Since this seemed to be too good to pass up and I was doing this follow up, I ordered the Red Hat 5.1 package and upgraded my original 5.0 installation. Everything went smoothly. I was soon running under Red Hat's 5.1 Linux with an updated kernel and no loss of prior settings. As it evolves, I'll try to continue reporting on Linux progress here.

Sept. 1, 1998: "Op Amp Audio (Part 1)": I got a variety of mail on this first audio-oriented column. And, as I'm writing this (early October), the second part is just out. More than a few readers have written to simply express their general appreciation on seeing columns discussing audio topics, as opposed to any specific points. In fact, a

couple requested advance copies of future installments! While this interest is appreciated, advance copies are unfortunately not possible.

What makes sense to me is to collect reader mail on this series until some later point in time when reactions have jelled, and then reply to the overall context. The installment for this month's *ELECTRONIC DESIGN* Special Analog Issue should stir up some interest.

Acknowledgements: My thanks to all of those Linux users for offering various points, as well as their willingness to share technical knowledge. This spirit of helpfulness is greatly appreciated, and is certainly one of the Linux community's more remarkable traits!

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