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DebianGIS: how to make GIS life easier

Silke Reimer, Paolo Cavallini, Francesco Lovergine

Abstract

GRASS, and more generally GIS free software, are now ready for a more general use. Enlarging the user base is crucial to:

- have a smoother development, relatively free from contingency
- obtain institutional support.

To reach this target, it is crucial to have easy-to-install packages. We therefore chose, among GNU/Linux distributions, Debian, because:

- it is one of the few major distributions that remained completely free
- packages, thanks to the apt system, are particularly easy to install reliably
- has a large, collaborative developers base.

GIS software is composed by various elements, increasingly integrated (e. g. GRASS and QGIS). It is therefore important to coordinate developers' efforts, and organize feedback from the (small) user base, to obtain a coherent suite of programs ready to install.

The structure of DebianGIS is composed essentially of a wiki page (<http://pkg-grass.alioth.debian.org/cgi-bin/wiki.pl>), two mailing lists, one general (<http://lists.alioth.debian.org/mailman/listinfo/pkg-grass-general>) and one for developers, a “semi-official” packages repository (<http://pkg-grass.alioth.debian.org/debian-gis>) and a CVS repository, plus a bug reporting system.

The project was born in september 2004, and after 4 months has obtained some interesting results:

- the solution of a cross-dependency problem between gdal and grass
- the packaging (until now missing) of some of the most important GIS programs (GRASS, mapserver, postGIS) and their integration with existing packages (QGIS, GDAL).

As a consequence, it is now possible to easily install these programs by any user.

What future for DebianGIS? The alternative is between a specialized, GIS-oriented, Debian distribution, and integrating the packages into the main distribution. This will ultimately depend on the fundamental choices within Debian community.