Debian New Maintainer Process: History and Aims

bubbles, moray and daf

(Hanna Wallach, Moray Allan, Dafydd Harries)

Overview

- History of the New Maintainer (NM) process
- How the process works today
- Aims of the process
- Could we do better?

Once upon a time...

- Ian Murdock controlled upload access
- Two ways of uploading:
  - Directly, using an FTP account
  - To a staging area checked by Ian
- Process for becoming a New Maintainer (NM) was extremely informal

I read IanM's Debian Manifesto, resonated with it, and dove in. Within a couple days I was asking Bruce Perens how to contribute. I offered up a package, and he emailed IanM to tell him who I was and what I'd done. I got a nice email back from IanM thanking me for my contribution, and welcoming me to the Debian Project. ;-)

—Bdale

… until this stopped working.

Formalisation

- As Debian grew, needed to be more formal
- … so people emailed `new-maintainer@debian.org` to ask for an account
- Bruce Perens created the accounts

… until this stopped working.

Bruce delegates NM

- Bruce delegated NM approval to the security team (Christian Hudon and Klee Dienes)

- Applicants needed to say:
  - who they were
  - what they planned to do

... until this stopped working.

Elmo and Joey to the rescue!

- The NM process had ground to a halt
- James Troup (Elmo) and Martin "Joey" Schulze hatched a plan

Let's take over NM!

YEAH, dude!!1!

We instituted minimal procedures. We had to have a trust path to you. We didn't have the whole novella question/answer thing, and you merely had to say what you were going to be working on, not be able to prove you could/had already. We did however phone every applicant.

—James

... until this stopped working.

James and Joey resign

- People complained about the speed of processing applicants

- James felt Debian was growing too fast

- The workload was too great for James and Joey to effectively handle

Flamewar

- Lots of flames^Wdiscussion
- The outcome was a four stage process:
    - Initial contact
    - Identification check
    - Internship period
    - Review by NM committee

James loves NM really!

- A group led by Dale Scheetz worked out the details of the new process

- nm.debian.org was created

- James agreed to remain on the NM team

 ♥ NM

… the NM process is still much the same today.
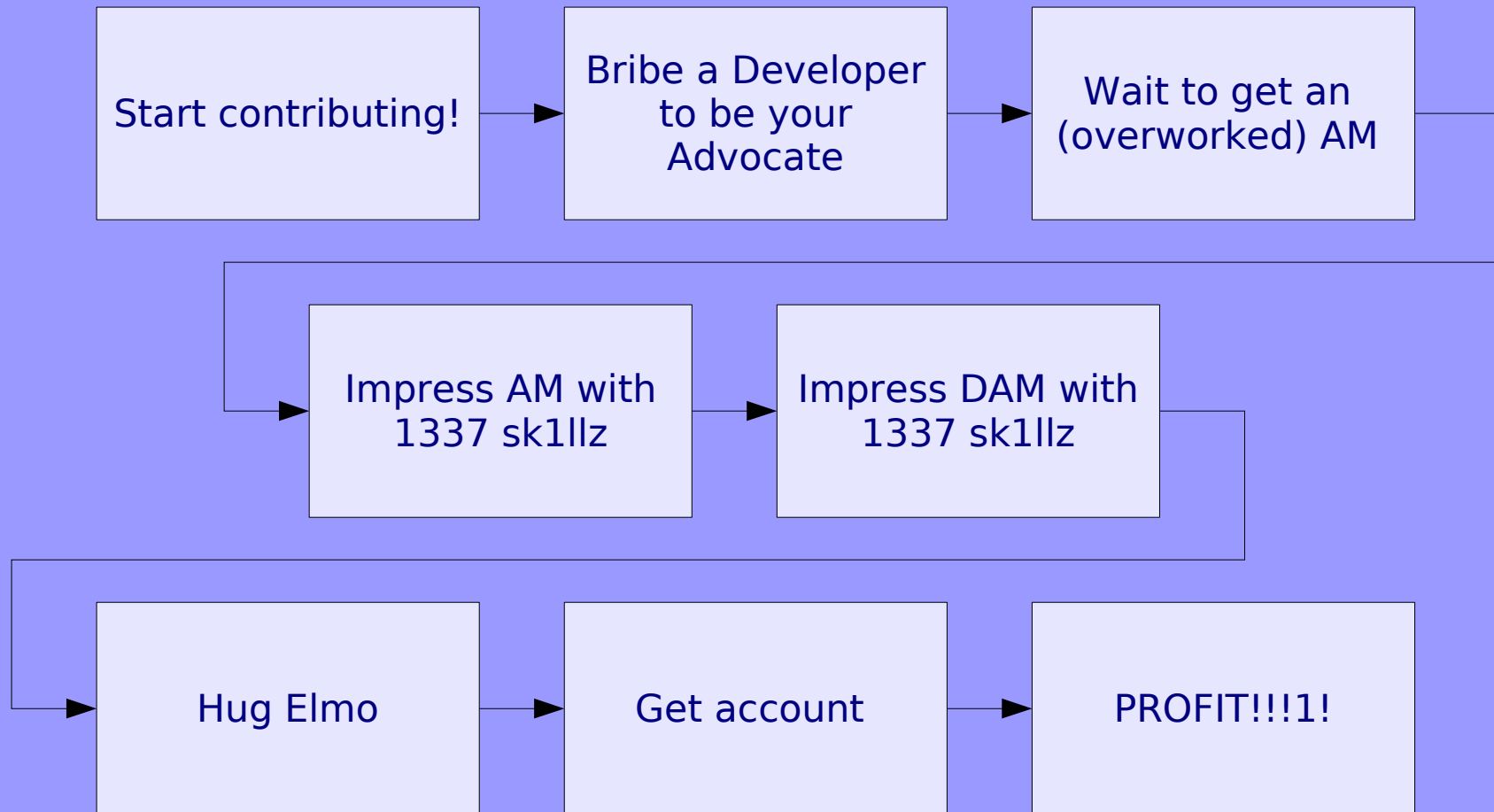
The NM process today

- Application Managers (AMs) communicate with New Maintainer applicants

- Debian Account Managers (DAMs) read reports from the AMs and create accounts for successful New Maintainers

- Front Desk members coordinate the process

Martin Michlmayr's changes

- People are encouraged to contribute to Debian before applying to NM

  - Applicants who want to maintain packages are expected to have a package in the archive before applying

- Applicants need to have an existing Developer to advocate them

NM in 8 easy steps

Start contributing! → Bribe a Developer to be your Advocate → Wait to get an (overworked) AM → Impress AM with 1337 sk1llz → Impress DAM with 1337 sk1llz → Hug Elmo → Get account → PROFIT!!!1!

NM templates

- Jörg Jaspert produced a set of template questions for applicants

- The questions cover:
  - "Philosophy and Procedures"
  - "Tasks and Skills"

- Many AMs follow the template questions when assessing applicants

Teamwork!

- In 2005 Jörg was appointed as a new DAM
- Jörg checks over applications
- James Troup creates Developer accounts

Success?

715 people in 5 years
=
45% of Debian Developers ever!

Could we do better?

- Most frequent criticism: process length
- People get bogged down in the process
  - Reject earlier?
  - Misunderstanding of what AMs need to see from applicants and why they need to see it
- Wait times for AM assignment: 904 active DDs but only 34 active AMs (3.8%)

What should we be aiming for?

- Goal: produce suitable new Developers
- What matters?
  - Appropriate outlook: free software
  - Sufficient skills
- Testing vs. teaching:
  - Relationship between AM and Sponsor

Theory vs. practice

- New Maintainer templates make the NM process more consistent for applicants and less time-consuming for AMs

- Template questions are very theoretical:
  - Theoretical answers don't benefit Debian
  - Where possible, use practical tasks instead

Testing collaboration

- Large community
- Most tasks in Debian require collaboration
  - Working with other Developers
  - Dealing with users
- Should we therefore be testing for communication and collaboration skills?

NM as a citizenship process

- Clear route to becoming a full member

- NM could focus on bringing people into Debian, rather than keeping them out

- Building a feeling of responsibility and commitment to the Debian project as a whole, and to the community

Questions?