Debian New Maintainer Process: History and Aims

bubbles, moray and daf

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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 ^W discussion
• 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
... 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

1. Start contributing!
2. Bribe a Developer to be your Advocate
3. Wait to get an (overworked) AM
4. Impress AM with 1337 sk1llz
5. Impress DAM with 1337 sk1llz
6. Hug Elmo
7. Get account
8. 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!
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?