

Writing Samples – TheManual.ca Blog 2006-8

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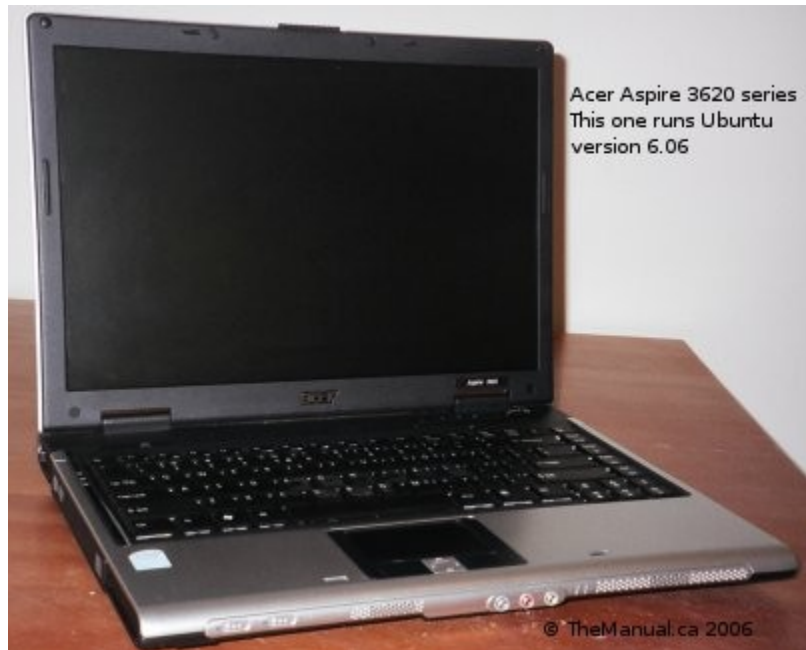
Hard lessons from hardware

August 30th, 2008

Tragically, some computers die young.

Less than two years after I bought a shiny new Acer Aspire notebook, I found myself buying a replacement. Not to use new software or keep up with the neighbours — I use GNU/Linux — but to keep going at all.

It isn't exclusively an Acer problem, but it is a common complaint with some of their low cost notebooks. Judging by the nearly identical cracks that I saw on another Aspire 3620, the sad tales of others and my tour inside my laptop, it's a design flaw. The structure that connects the hinge to the top panel is small, meaning that the forces involved in repeatedly opening and closing the lid cause warping of the cover, eventually stressing the material beyond it's capacity to resist. While you can be careful and close the lid by applying pressure close to the hinges, this is awkward and not something anyone should have to do. Better materials and design would have extended the hinge mechanism toward the top of the display or reinforced the lid with stronger material, so that someone could safely use the sides of the top cover or the top corners to open/close the notebook lid without overly stressing the hardware.



The Acer Aspire 3620 in better times.

The top cover on thin notebooks has other minor problems, including the tendency to flex inward in the center so that the surface of the LCD screen touches the keyboard, resulting in oil marks and other unwanted material on the display, meanwhile placing even more stress on the structure of the top cover.

During the winter, the minor cracks that had appeared in the top cover started to spread rapidly. By spring, I had duct tape, plastic and adhesive covering the area around the left hinge. By June, both hinges were taped, and I was looking for a replacement. Personally, I could live with tape, but I'm not sure I like the impression it was giving during meetings with business executives. The Liquid Crystal Display (LCD) was intact, but with less protection I was very concerned that it would fail. Time was running out.

Soon enough, the display went dead the day before a big meeting in Ottawa, only to start working again a bit later. More tape and much irritation later, I had something that I could jokingly dismiss as an 'anti-theft measure', but it was far from an ideal image.

Shortly after, the display developed intermittent vertical lines, a sign of loose connections or other issues with the LCD. I could tolerate that, to a degree, just for work, but I got tired of always facing a wall or using something to prop up the display so I could work on it.

As I type this, the old notebook display has died again, probably due to the same wire that cause the problem before. I'll have to open it up and fix that, unless I can get it to work with an external monitor.

The Dell Inspiron with Ubuntu that I thought I had ordered would have been a nice solution, if the order had ever occurred. However, it was not processed, so I eventually found myself at a STAPLES/Business Depot store. There I smooth talked a sales rep into letting me test a few computers with an Ubuntu live CD before buying. I found two that both fit my budget and booted successfully from the CD. This time, although I bought Acer again, I deliberately chose a different design. The new laptop, an Acer Aspire 5315, has a much thicker and more rigid lid that does not flex inward, and the axis of the hinge mechanism is inside the main body of the computer, where there is more space for supporting structures.

There is a downside: the new machine is significantly heavier and larger, except for the left shift key, which is much smaller than the 3620's. That last difference takes a bit of getting used to when typing.

The Aspire 5315 came with 2 GB of RAM and Windows Vista Home Premium. Wanting more software and no malware problems, I installed the latest Ubuntu release, turned on the interface eye candy and installed dozens of other programs that the new equipment would let me handle. With a 120 GB hard disk, I had the room.

Ubuntu ran well on the new computer, for the most part, but I did have to use the proprietary Windows drivers to get the wifi working



Just one of the cracks on my old Acer Aspire 3620 notebook computer.



Aspire 5315 (Note the more robust hinge.)

(madwifi is great!), and I had to do some tweaking to get the audio input working. Now it's relatively awesome, for the price that I paid for it.

Booting in Windows again can be frustrating, as there is little to distinguish the two Windows options in the Grub boot menu. One starts Vista normally, the other starts Acer's recovery software instead. There will be some editing of my Grub menu in the near future, I expect.

My advice for prospective laptop buyers: if you mostly use your laptop at home and don't stress the lid too often, a machine with a thin lid is probably fine. If you're a road warrior like me, stick with a more robust design, one with a strong hinge and cover that provides good protection for the screen. Cracks can lead to other problems, including issues with the display itself, so jump on those problems quickly. Metaphorically, that is. Avoiding that problem is the best solution.

Posted in [Mobile Computing](#), [Tools & Toys](#)

Phoney jobs

August 30th, 2008

Beware any job postings on Craigslist that do not have a recognized corporate e-mail address and company or agency name. Those of you tempted by seemingly lucrative, interesting job offerings from an unnamed company on Craigslist will be very disappointed when an automated script sends a pitch for a work-from-home scam from what appears to be a Hotmail address.

Before sending your resume, ask for a company name and proper e-mail address. Giving a summary of qualifications might be helpful, to show that you are worth responding to, but don't give too much personal information. To check, use a dedicated junk mail address or one with a very good spam filter, in case the address gets sold.

The fakes that I have noticed involve technical writing jobs in the Kitchener-Waterloo and Ottawa regions, but I am sure that it has been tried in other areas too, and with different lures.

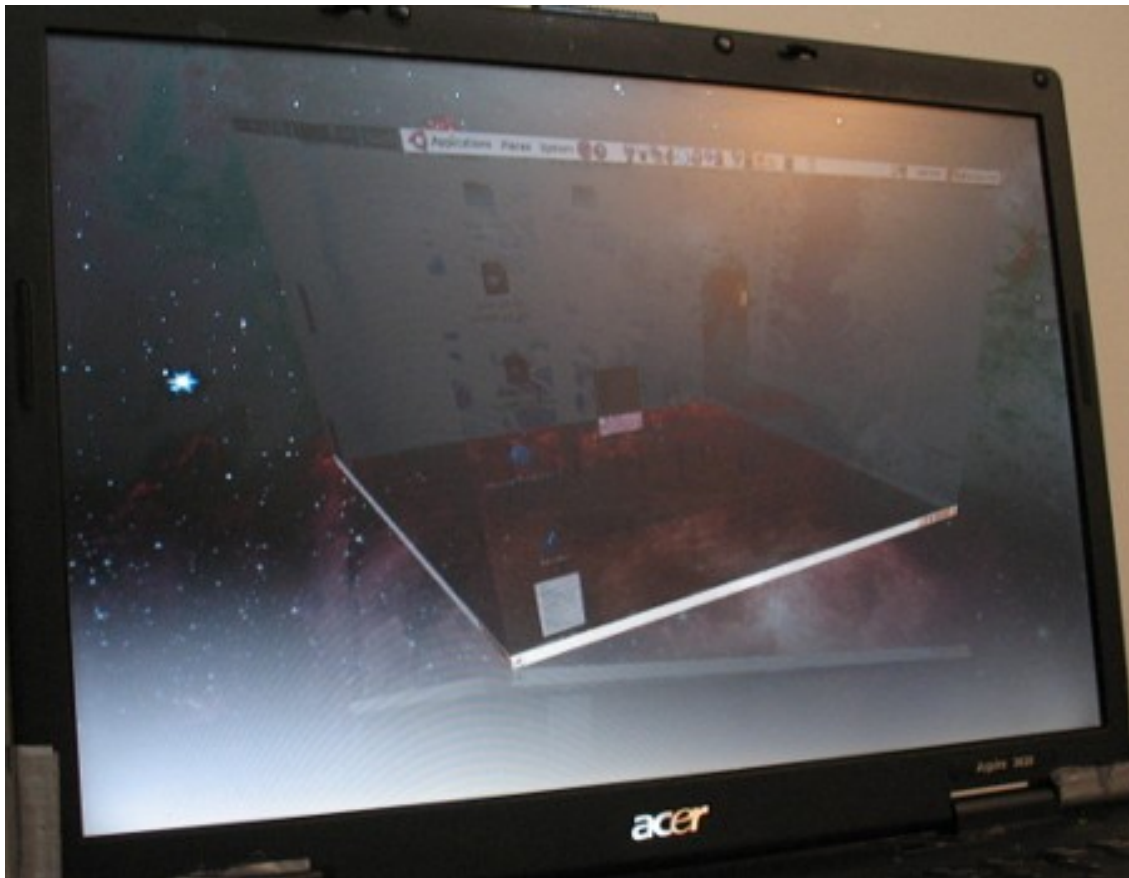
To borrow a phrase, "Be careful out there."

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The 3D House of GNU/Linux Desktops

June 24th, 2008

I always thought my Acer notebook was too underpowered to run the fancy eye candy that you can add to your Ubuntu or other GNU/Linux computer system these days. I'd toyed with trying it a year ago, but the word in the forums was that it was a bit unstable and I had other priorities. Hearing better things lately, and having upgraded my system to the latest release of Ubuntu, I determined to give it a try.



Above: The desktop cube with 4 virtual desktops and transparency enabled.

Surprisingly, Compiz Fusion and the Emerald theme manager work well on my system, an older budget notebook that couldn't run even the watered-down version of Windows Vista, let alone the variants that include the fancy Aeroglass effects that are one of the much-touted features of that new OS. Sure, it's possible to lock up the system if you overburden your video hardware, but most of the time the visual enhancements work just fine.

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Bright ideas in solar power

June 3rd, 2008

Last week, while meeting entrepreneurs in a networking session at my old business program in Ottawa, I met someone who sold solar powered products. I wasn't really in the market, until I saw a bicycle light that was charged by sunlight. I needed a light for my recently repaired bike in Toronto. But how much would such a device cost? Less than \$30? -- SOLD!

I played with it a bit, but never really used it much until I got back after a long overnight bus ride. I had an appointment that morning, but a power outage almost got in the way of my preparation. Fortunately, the device functions quite nicely as an emergency flashlight. I was able to shower and shave in a windowless washroom, no problems. Not the best lighting, but it was adequate for the task.

On the road, the main unit attaches to the handlebar of most bikes, and it can be detached by tilting the light slightly toward the front and sliding it forward. The on/off switch is underneath the main housing. It controls only the front light, not the red flasher at the rear. There is no way to turn that off without unplugging the wire from the main part of the device. Don't leave it flashing if you don't need it on.

In the evening, after my appointment, I charged the headlight battery under a desk lamp and then tried it on my bike. It was certainly visible as I road the unlit bike trails near the Beach area in Toronto.

For now, these are only available in retail shops in the Ottawa area, but you can get them online and Toronto retailers may soon be stocking these as well. Mountain Equipment Coop does list a couple of different solar lights, one for front, one for the rear.

The company web site: <http://www.luminousolarenergy.com>



LEFT: main bike light and tail light (minus the handlebar mounting mechanism. ABOVE: the underside of the main lamp, showing the mounting mechanism and switch.

How Not to Ride a Bike

June 2nd, 2008

While testing some camera settings at a coffee shop west of downtown Toronto on Saturday, I noticed a cyclist carrying what clearly appears to be unsecured lumber on his left shoulder. No helmet, no rope tying the boards together, and probably no sense. While I have seen worse, this guy appeared old enough to know better than do something so obviously dangerous.

Need I say it? Don't try this at home. Or in your home town. Or anywhere...

Posted in [Humor](#), [Safety](#)



Looney lad with loose lumber on bike, Toronto.

Easy Wifi with Ubuntu 8.04 and Wicd Manager

May 22nd, 2008

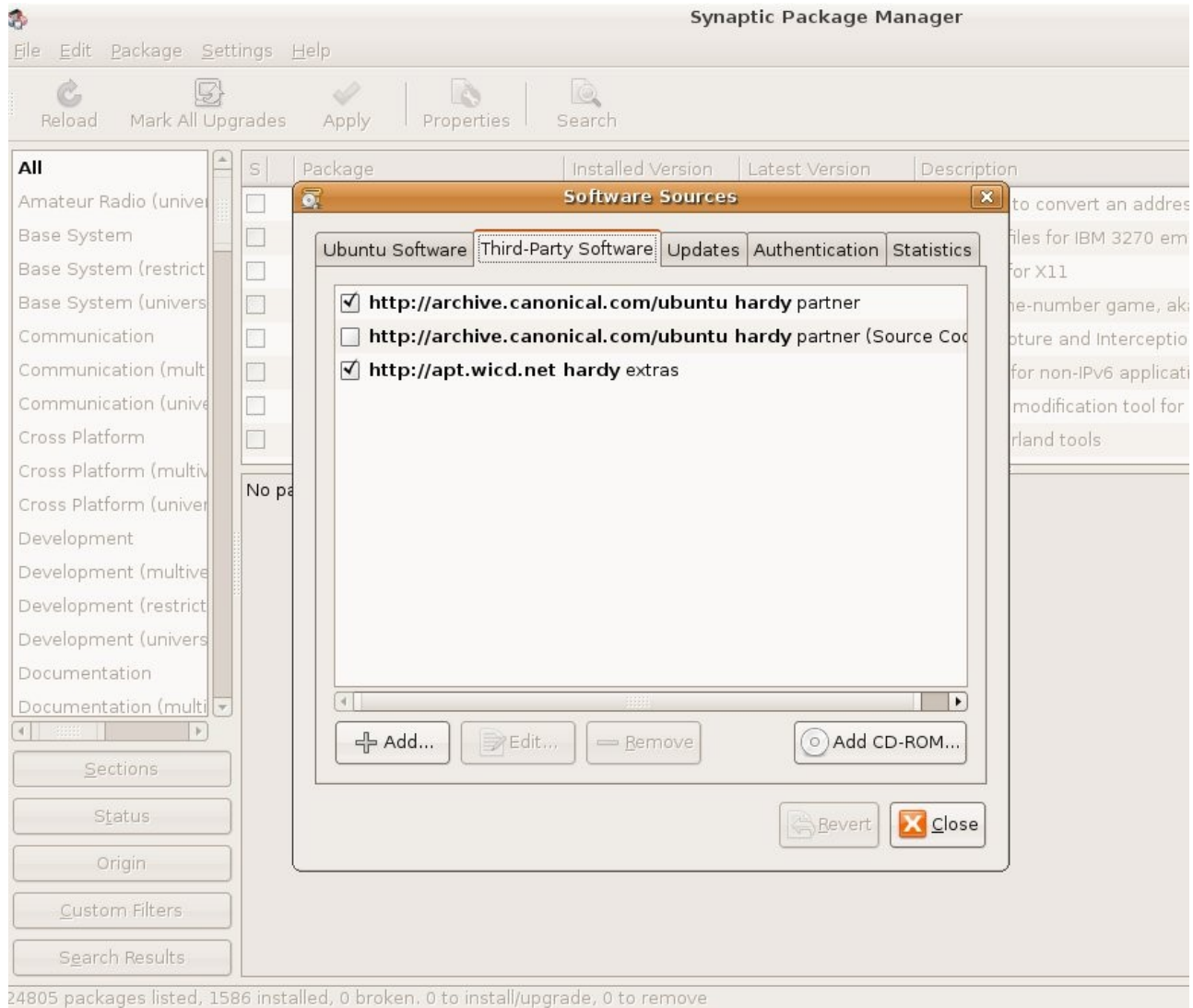
I have been using the Ubuntu distribution of GNU/Linux since the 6.06 Long Term Service ('Dapper Drake') release in 2006. While I've kept it up to date, I've recently had problems with connection to some wifi networks, and I was blocked from connecting to my own household hotspot because Dapper doesn't support WPA encryption, which I had selected for the network because of its security improvements over the older WEP standard. After the big upgrade, managing connections seems to be more difficult in the latest Ubuntu release, and I found myself typing my sudo password far more than I should, rebooting, wrestling with profiles, keys and configurations in the network admin GUI, creating launchers for common wifi commands and otherwise acquainting myself with the concept of extreme irritation instead of doing what I wanted to do. The wifi management applications that I had used before (*Wifi Radar* and *wlanassist*) did not solve the problems.

Much research eventually led to the solution that I am currently using and plan on keeping around: the third-party *wicd* package. While the prospect of removing a few installed GNOME packages and trying something completely new was disconcerting, the existing situation was intolerable, and I was determined to try all possibilities.



Main interface for Wicd wifi connection management. (IP addresses, etc., are obscured.)

A link from a forum post led me to the *wicd* project site, where I intended to download the required package(s) for installation. There I learned that the software was available from a third-party repository (<http://apt.wicd.net>), which I would have to add to my list of package sources.



The third-party repository added to your software sources, using the Synaptic package manager.

Once installed, and my network settings were cleared of any lingering connection information, I was able to connect by wireless much more reliably than I had in weeks. No typing my sudo password either, which was a major relief after so many hassles.

The default settings worked well with my Acer notebook's Atheros device, but you may want or need to change settings. The Preferences dialogue provides a easy interface for necessary manipulations. The WPA Supplicant Driver drop down includes helpful options like *Broadcom*, *ndiswrapper* and *madwifi* that may help with more problematic hardware.



I have experienced the occasional need to disconnect from an automatically-selected hotspot that I don't want to or cannot use, or even reboot, but not often. It helps that I have developed the habit of using the disconnect & refresh buttons before trying to connect. You may have problems if you have a configured connection in your Network Settings dialogue (System > Network), or your system remembers the last ESSID it connected to, but that should be rare.

If you have to restart the Wicd application, try this command "sudo /etc/init.d/wicd start". Now you can start Wicd from the menu or panel launcher.

If you are having issues with mobile Internet access, or just want a way to manage your wifi without typing your password again and again, give Wicd a try. I'm glad that I did.

Posted in [Mobile Computing](#), [Tools & Toys](#)

Photos from the Inorganic Market

March 9th, 2008

If you are reading this, you almost certainly have older computer or electronic equipment lying around, or you know somebody who does. Perhaps you think you might use it some day, but the odds are that you just haven't 'gotten around to it' or don't know when/where/how to dispose of it properly. You are not alone. Electronic waste (e-waste) is a huge and growing problem that is only starting to receive major attention.

In Toronto, local volunteers have joined with community-minded businesses to make it easier to get rid of old electronics safely and to find a new life for items that can still function. On the 24 of February, an 'Inorganic Market' was open for business at the No Frills store in Bloor West Village. Over several hours, more than a truckload of old computers, printers, monitors, phones, batteries and other gadgetry was collected, and more people were arriving even as it closed. Visitors also had a chance to vote on designs for a regular e-waste recycling bin.



A landmark (No Frills) in a wealthy area and good parking boosted attendance and the quantity of materials gathered.



Volunteers helped with moving items & answering questions.



A steady flow of people at the recycling event.



Printers and fax machines: a tiny part of the whole pile.