Steam and Ubuntu clash over 32-bit libs

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Scott Gilbertson

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It has been a tumultuous week for gaming on Linux. Last Tuesday afternoon, Canonical's Steve Langasek announced that 32-bit libs would be frozen (kept as-is, with no new builds or updates) as of this October's interim 19.10 release, codenamed "Eoan Ermine." Langasek was pretty clear that this did not mean abandoning support for running 32-bit applications, however.

> *While this means we will not provide 32-bit builds of new upstream versions of libraries, there are a number of ways that 32-bit applications can continue to be made available to users of later Ubuntu releases, as detailed in [4]. We will be working to polish the 32-bit support story over the course of the 19.10 development cycle. To follow the evolution of this support, you can participate in the discourse thread at [5].*

Unfortunately, that part of the announcement may not have been entirely clear to all who read it. This group may include Steam lead Pierre-Loup Griffais, who responded by breaking up with Ubuntu in a tweet.

> *Ubuntu 19.10 and future releases will not be officially supported by Steam or recommended to our users. We will*

> *evaluate ways to minimize breakage for existing users, but will also switch our focus to a different distribution, currently TBD.*
>
> *— Pierre-Loup Griffais (@Plagman2) June 22, 2019*

Two days later, Canonical issued another public statement making it very explicit that support for commonly used 32-bit libs would be continued. That statement has been widely reported as an "about-face" from Canonical, but it appears to be more of a clarification of the original statement. The heart of the issue is that 32-bit computing represents an incredibly wide attack surface, with lessening amounts of active maintenance to discover, analyze, and patch flaws and exploits. Canonical, like any company, needs to apply its developer resources intelligently, so it looks for ways to remove unnecessary cruft where possible. The vast majority of 32-bit code is cruft.

"We will put in place a community process to determine which 32-bit packages are needed to support legacy software, and can add to that list post-release if we miss something that is needed… We do think it's reasonable to expect the community to participate and to find the right balance between enabling the next wave of capabilities and maintaining the long tail," Canonical said in a statement. "Nevertheless, in this case it's relatively easy for us to change plan and enable natively in Ubuntu 20.04 LTS the applications for which there is a specific need."

Canonical also promised it would work with "the WINE, Ubuntu Studio and gaming communities to use container technology to address the ultimate end of life of 32-bit libraries; it should stay possible to run old applications on newer versions of Ubuntu. Snaps and LXD enable us both to have complete 32-bit environments, and bundled libraries, to solve these issues in the long term."

Should Valve decide to continue moving away from Ubuntu, one possible landing place might be lesser-known distributor Solus, which has done a tremendous amount of work integrating Steam directly into its main repositories. As Forbes' Jason Evanghelo noted in a review earlier this year, Solus is an exceptionally easy choice for Linux newbies who just want to start playing their games. Such a move wouldn't necessarily be the end for Steam support on Ubuntu, either; former Solus lead developer Ikey Doherty speculated at one point on the Late Night Linux podcast that it would be possible to build a snap package based on Solus Steam, which could then be easily installed on any Linux distribution, including Ubuntu.

Ars reached out to Valve directly for comment on this situation but has received no response yet.

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