Tools for Keeping Multiple (Debian) Systems Up to Date

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The Issue

Keeping one apt-based system up to date is easy. But this does not scale to dozens of servers, or a lab of computers.

apticron Be notified when updates are available.

apt-cacher-ng Save precious usage-billed bandwidth.

apt-dater Launch updates on many machines in one place.

apticron

Setup: easy! (if your system can send mail)

In `/etc/apticron/apticron.conf`

- Specify the e-mail address to use
- Set `DIFF_ONLY="1"` so you don't get spammed daily

Install apticron once per machine class so you don't get spammed with duplicate notifications.

apt-cacher-ng

There are lots of proxy packages. This is easy enough and performance is good enough.

Setup: easy!

Client config: in `/etc/apt/sources.list` change lines like

```
deb http://ftp.debian.org/debian/ lenny main
```

to

```
deb http://myhost:3142/ftp.debian.org/debian/ lenny
main
```

apt-dater

Idea: manage many hosts in one console.

Hosts can be grouped (e.g. for labs of machines)

You can see the status of updates, install packages, update package lists, connect to machines, and run upgrades.

Surprise! Despite the name you can also manage hosts using `yum` (CentOS), `rug` (OpenSUSE) and other package management systems.

The software is new and has quirks.

See `http://www.ibh.de/apt-dater/`

How it works

- An update host runs the `apt-dater` package.
- The update host has an update account (“patchy”) which can SSH into each client using SSH keys. This account has the config files.
- Each client has an `apt-dater-host` script for its distro.
- Each client uses `sudo` to let the update account access its package manager.

Tips

- Don't `su` onto the update account. SSH into it instead or you get weird errors.
- Put an SSH passphrase on the update account's SSH key! Then use the `SpawnAgent=true` option in `apt-dater.conf`
- Anything with the string "error" will make the software warn you about package installation errors.
- `apt-listchanges` is stupid and annoying.
- You need backports for Debian Lenny or Ubuntu Hardy.
- For non-Debian distros, get the `apt-dater-host` scripts from the upstream source.
- In CentOS, update statuses fail unless you disable `requiretty` in `/etc/sudoers`
- Supposedly you can put config files elsewhere but it does not work well (for me).

Other Approaches

You can use Puppet/Chef to complement these tools, or replace them.

In Ubuntu you can allow security updates to take place automatically (eek!)

The End