

x11docker: Run GUI applications in Docker containers

Martin Viereck¹

¹ No affiliations.

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Software

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Summary

`x11docker` allows to run graphical applications in a [GNU/Linux container](#) using [Docker](#).

About containers in general

Containerisation in general has proven as a useful technology for packaging applications and their dependencies for deployment in cloud-based infrastructures. Containers need much less resources than [virtual machines](#) for similar tasks. The technical concept, however, is different.

The properties of containers such as portability, isolation, and version management of complete application stacks make it a promising candidate to increase computational reproducibility and reusability of research analyses (Boettiger, 2015). Their use has been demonstrated in various disciplines, such as software engineering research (Cito & Gall, 2016), bioinformatics (Hosny, Vera-Licona, Laubenbacher, & Favre, 2016), and archeology (Marwick, 2017), and their preservation is an active field of research (Emsley & De Roure, 2018; Rechert et al., 2017).

Software and required libraries can be installed in a Docker image to run software that is difficult to install otherwise. It is possible to run outdated versions, specific versions, or latest development code side by side.

About x11docker

The most popular Linux container frontend, Docker, does not provide a [display server](#) that would allow running applications with a [graphical user interface](#) (GUI), because Docker is originally built for server software. `x11docker` fills this gap.

`x11docker` allows to execute [Desktop](#) GUI applications in an isolated environment by running an [X display server](#) on the host system and providing it to applications in Docker containers.

`x11docker` simplifies container setup and access to host resources like shared files, GPU acceleration, audio, webcam and printer. Non-GUI applications can benefit from this, too.

Additionally, `x11docker` does some [security setup](#) to enhance container isolation from host system. It follows the [principle of least privilege](#).

`x11docker` thereby facilitates quick creation, distribution, and evaluation of research prototypes without compromising on a researcher's skills (not imposing browser-based

GUI nor requiring command-line proficiency), domain (having e.g. established and widely-acknowledged GUI-based tools), security, computational reproducibility, or a scholarly review process.

The target audience of `x11docker` in general are users who want to run GUI applications in containers. Another target audience are developers of GUI applications who need an isolated environment. In scientific and academic context the target audience are researchers in the field of reproducible science.

`x11docker` is developed on GNU/Linux and was tested on several distributions. With a few limitations it can run natively on MS Windows, too, but is not guaranteed to be as reliable as on GNU/Linux. Running in a Virtual Linux Machine on MS Windows and macOS is fully supported. `x11docker` has an optional graphical frontend, `x11docker-gui`.

Alternatives to `x11docker`

A common way to allow GUI applications in containers is by providing a web server within the container and rendering an HTML-based GUI in a web browser, e.g. as Jupyter notebooks (Jupyter et al., 2018). Further possibilities are an xrdp server, VNC server, SSH server or xpra server within the container.

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