The future of the Linux DeskTop

By Jem Miller

I have been a Linux user and developer since 1994. I started out with Slackware, but I have tried and used many distros along the way. Those include Slack, Mandrake, Redhat/Fedora, Caldera, Corel, Suse, Debian, Mint, and Ubuntu. That is not a complete list, but those are the highlights.

I am not a systems integrator, or any other fancy title. In fact, I am a lowly mechanical engineer that decided back in 1978 that at some point some engineer was going to stick one of these new fangled computers into a car, so I'd better know something about how they work. So while I was still in college, I got a bachelors degree in software engineering. I figured that the software route would have a much more stable market life than trying to keep up with the hardware side.

Yes I was in the automotive industry. My specialty was forced induction and fuel delivery systems, so, turboharging and fuel injection, basically. None of that has anything to do with Linux or software, except old microcode, but it does demonstrate that I have some experience in predicting market changes, and knowing what customers want from the experience of owning my own engineering services business (Performance Technologies).

All of that is just to introduce you to me, an old fart with a passion for technology and change. The ramblings that follow are strictly my opinions based on the current state of the Linux community and the computer user community.

Where are we going, and how do we get there?

Linux has come a long way since 1992. Unfortunately, the developer community's attitude has not changed, even in the face of overwhelming evidence that we are (still) headed in the wrong direction. How can you expect an operating system to grow in market share enough to be a competitive force and still alienate the majority of commercial software businesses? Granted, it is marginally better than it used to be. In the old days you had to release source code, period. Now it depends on what modules, libraries, etc that your software might use. It's still insane to expect any software business to release *any* part of its source code under *any* circumstances.

Many companies that were very enthusiastic about Linux and its potential fled as soon as the Free Software Foundation started filing law suits. A business has to make a profit or it is not a business, it is a hobby. Hewlet Packard, Corel, Borland, Adobe, and many others simply said: "well fuck this", and dropped all further interaction with Linux.

If you ever want Linux to be anything more than a 4% player in the OS market, you, *WE*, have to change the way we think about the rules. Do you know why windows is so successful? Have you even bothered to wonder? It's because they give you, the developer, all of the tools that you need to create killer software without any licensing or idiotic source code restrictions. You can create and sell whatever software you think is marketable without having to pay Microsoft a dime, and without worrying about getting sued by some fundamentalist organization that believes all software must be free and open source. Sorry, but I think the FSF and the GPL are the most destructive forces ever created to kill what is very likely the best OS that the world has ever seen.

Next is the "I'm special" attitude that many if not most Linux users and especially developers have. We're better than everyone else because we have been dragged through a 6 foot deep pit of shit just to learn how to do the simplest task with our beloved operating system. You realize that no windows

user is going to put up with the cryptic nature of Linux software, the lack of documentation, no help files or help system in most apps, etc. The ones that might tolerate some of that are or have already used Linux. The typical Mac or Windows user needs to be held by the hand and shown how to do the things that they want. Even power users need a way to find out how to do something new without having to waste a couple hours online digging through forums and google searches.

Developers make terrible documentation writers for the most part. That's because we tend to think that if we know something then the user must surely know it too. More likely, the user has no clue what you are trying to tell them. Remember, the desktop user market consists of people with an attention span of something in the neighborhood of 18 seconds, and memory retention of roughly 4 minutes if you can't keep them amused or interested. Many have to be shown how to do things. That means multimedia services and well written documentation that not only clearly explains the system at a 5th grade level, but also shows them how to do common things so they don't have to think about it very hard.

We can no longer aim at just the educated public if we really want Linux to compete with Windows some day. You have to target the barefoot 6th grade graduates that live in a rented trailer house and drive a beat to shit Chevy pickup. They will still not understand the help system, but others with slightly higher intelligence will.

Finally, someone has to put together a truly polished distro that caters to those groups and fixes the things mentioned above. Package it all in an easy to use and automatic installer (like Windows), that doesn't require the user to know anything about their computer. Then they need to commit the unforgivable sin of advertising that distro heavily, showing housewives and 8 year olds doing fun and useful stuff on it. Rave about being able to use it on a 10 year old computer with complete reliability and not having to meet any stupid hardware requirements and still offer industry trusted privacy and security. You can even sell it for a reasonable fee. Say $35 US dollars, or whatever is fair market value. You don't have to be afraid to make money in some way other than support contracts.

The first big Linux distro that does that will not only be a household name quickly, but will also become very, very, rich. I can't build a distro. I tried back in the late 90's and I'm just not good enough to do it myself, so it's up to the existing and developing distro maintainers to do. I'm looking at you Redhat, Ubuntu, Mint, Arch...

The end game

OK, there it is. My take on how to get Linux into the mainstream. To recap :
- Stop suing companies for stupid GPL violations that shouldn't exist in the first place.
- Stop treating newbies like they are dumb shits because they haven't been using Linux as long as you have. If you can't do that then at least stay out of the forums.
- Get someone that knows how to write well to do real how-to documentation for your apps.
- Stop being afraid to sell your apps. It's not a sin to get paid for your hard work regardless of what zealots might tell you.

Money drives advancement. You can't have a free OS and free software and call it a market. The distro maintainers make money by selling contracts. They know there is no future in giving everything away. You can't have free labor and call them employees. At some point a company has to make a profit or they cease to exist as a company and go back to being a hobby. You can't tell software companies that they have to offer the software version for your OS for free, oh and by the way, they might have to release source code to some or all of their most proprietary routines.

Come on guys, this is horse shit. Everyone wants what Linux offers, but most just aren't willing to put up with the princess like complexes and ridiculous licensing requirements that still exist. Not to mention these zealots that seem to have control over the entire community. Enough control at least to demand… Yes, demand that you never dare ask to be paid for your work, that everything should be free. These are the same people that make a good living from Linux.

I am not naive. I understand that what I have suggested is a massive change and would require merging most of the current distros into one unified brand that offers incredible amount of options and control. The Linux market would probably shrink to just a few "brands" based on package management types. Others would go on as free distros or maybe something like the old beggar-ware model. I think that's a good thing. It gives people the chance to do a true "try before you buy". Speaking of try before you buy, you can still offer the downloadable ISO's just ask for a credit card purchase before they can do the install.

We can do this. Windows can be dethroned. Especially now, with the spyware release of Windows 11. If the Linux distro community can just understand that spying on users and selling their information is a lousy business model, then we can avoid being in the same boat as Windows, IOS, and Mac. Sick of getting spam calls on your cell phone? Then stop doing business with anyone that sells you out. Want to be a zealot about something? Be a zealot about that.

Insane right?

--- Jem