

INTRO

COMMENT

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# SCRATCH MY ITCH



Linux is already one of the leading contenders among server operating systems. It's becoming a popular choice for embedded systems too. But the main battle for world domination - or at least global recognition - will be fought on the desktop. There may be few who truly believe that Linux will knock Windows off the top perch but it could certainly become a significant presence in the desktop market. Whether or not it does, though, will depend largely on the quantity and quality of the applications that are available. Can the free software movement deliver what's needed?

Most readers of this magazine will need no convincing of the benefits of free software. But much of the time getting these benefits means using software that's still in development. As a programmer I can identify with, as Richard Stallman put it, the desire to "scratch an itch" (write a program that meets one's personal needs.) It provides the motivation to spend hours of spare time writing software for no monetary reward. But programmers write what programmers want. The result is that Linux has some excellent development tools but few complete applications. Every developer uses email, so there are dozens of mail clients (though no really good one.) Few developers need powerful word processors or spreadsheets so rather less effort has been spent on this area. Although, thanks to Sun, we now have a free, full-featured open source office suite, there are still many gaps in the free software portfolio.

As Linux becomes more popular among end users, commercial software developers will take the opportunity to exploit these gaps and make some money. Whether or not this will be a good thing depends on your point of view. If your desire is simply to see people use something other than Microsoft products, perhaps it is. But if Linux becomes just a platform on which people run commercial (and most likely closed source) applications they will lose the benefits that motivated people to develop it (and other GNU projects) in the first place. Linux will be perceived as just another operating system, which isn't a good idea at all.

To prevent this, free software developers must start developing what Linux users need, not what they themselves want. And they should pool resources to create one finished, world-class application of a given type not several incomplete alternatives. In other words, they ought to think about scratching someone else's itch, not just theirs.

Julian Moss

**GUARANTEE**

We pride ourselves on the origins of our magazine which come from the very start of the Linux revolution. We have been involved with Linux market for six years now through our sister European-based titles Linux Magazine (aimed at professionals) and Linux User (for hobbyists), and through seminars, conferences and events. By purchasing this magazine you are joining an information network that enjoys the benefit of all the knowledge and technical expertise of all the major Linux professionals and enthusiasts. No other UK Linux magazine can offer that pedigree or such close links with the Linux Community. We're not simply reporting on the Linux and open source movement - we're part of it.