

TINY SHOES

Dear Linux Magazine Reader,



Joe Casad, Editor in Chief

At this year's LinuxWorld San Francisco, I felt like I was sitting at the edge of my chair in eager anticipation, waiting for many tiny little shoes to drop. These shoes were all the little netbook computers that were almost ready for the market. The word was that all the big vendors – HP and Dell in particular – had plans, but no one was saying much on the record.

As I wrote in my report for our website, the Desktop Linux panel discussion even had some awkward moments when reps from Lenovo, Dell, and HP couldn't affirm, but certainly wouldn't deny, that their companies were working on netbook initiatives. Since then, the announcements have started. Dell's Inspiron Mini 9, for instance, rolled out recently on its way to retail outlets around the world, where it will meet the Asus EeePC and other tinies that are already on the shelves.

A new era is dawning. The future looks bright for these little netbooks, except I'm not sure about one of them: the petite pioneer that stirred all this up: the OLPC XO mini laptop. The ground-breaking One Laptop Per Child project had its own booth at LinuxWorld, and I got to see some of their systems up close.

In case you've just tuned in, the One Laptop Per Child (OLPC) project is a non-profit group with the dream of distributing laptop computers to kids in developing countries around the world. I've always thought highly of this initiative, and I have even written lyrical paeans about it in this very space (http://www.linux-magazine.com/issues/2006/67/laptop_lullabye/). I was all ready to be excited about getting to try one for the first time, but I must admit I was a little underwhelmed.

The OLPC system is definitely packed with some innovative features, such as extremely low power consumption and built-in mesh networking, to help it operate in a low-tech environment. The computer itself certainly seems more rugged and durable than the average PC. But as for the user experience, I would have to say that the system was pretty slow. I couldn't really read the screen so well, and the interface wasn't so intuitive. Of course, I understand that this specialized device can't be compared directly with a full-featured PC, but as a father of three, I must admit that I did have some questions about whether the average child would adapt to such a system as a learning tool. I looked for someone to answer those questions,

but the guy at the booth who supposedly knew all the answers was busy talking to somebody about Central American politics. I didn't really mind that he was busy with someone else – that happens all the time in the pavilions of crowded trade shows – but the fact that there seemed no separation between the tech talk and the political talk made me wonder whether they really know what they are up against.

The landscape is very different now from how it was a couple years ago when the project was founded. Intel has rolled out a competing device (called the Classmate), and Microsoft has even arrived with a special version of XP for the XO. Lots of big vendors with marketing savvy are getting into the game, and if OLPC really wants to succeed, they'll need to stay flexible and self-critical enough to adapt to the changing market.

It is worth noting that the other netbook systems rolling out for this year are considerably more expensive than the OLPC systems. Although OLPC hasn't yet reached the goal of US\$ 100 per unit, the lightweight system does run somewhere between US\$ 168 and US\$ 200, depending on who's buying and where they are selling. The netbooks, on the other hand, go for more like US\$ 300 to US\$ 600, which makes them a distinctly different product. Still, the wolves are getting closer. Anyone who believes the corporate giants will surrender a market of a billion customers to a non-profit had better tune into the mesh.

Joe

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