

DAVID AND GOLIATH

Dear Linux Magazine Reader,

Humans are storytellers. One could argue that journalists are even more like storytellers than other forms of humans, but then, you could also make the case that we just echo what is out there in the world.

The English professors inform us that there are no new plots – only the same few stories recycling through our literature (and all too often, through our news). One of the stories that pops up a lot in our culture is the David and Goliath narrative, a classic biblical story in which a poorly armed but self-assured little guy takes down a gigantic warrior. John Henry against the steam hammer and Luke Skywalker against the Galactic Empire are notable examples of this myth in our culture.

I am amazed at how many news stories take this form. Of course, big companies are well aware of this tendency to divide the debates of the day into David versus Goliath, and they often spend millions just to nail down that David spot. I have written in the past about Apple's attempts to portray itself as some kind of spindly underdog when it is actually a colossus with an unprecedented vision for control [1] [2].

Sometimes it is not the companies but the customers who create the need to choose sides, just because having a side feels much safer than moral uncertainty. The Linux community is accustomed to viewing itself as David going up against a succession of Goliaths, and truly, the David narrative is a remarkably accurate analogy for the full history of the FOSS movement, with a rag-tag band of smart, community-minded geeks getting the better of big companies that everyone thought were invincible. I must admit, however, that over the past couple years, it has sometimes gotten a little more difficult to sort out who is David and who is Goliath.

Ten years ago, when Sun sued Microsoft for attempting to co-opt Java, everyone was pretty sure that Sun was David and Microsoft was Goliath, and the prospect of "fragmenting Java" was thought to be a most undesirable outcome. Now that Google is getting sued for co-opting Java, and perennial bad-guy mastermind Oracle controls the Java framework, I hear some of the same arguments recycled in a totally opposite direction, along with an invitation to believe that now Google is somehow in the David role. Not that I have any particular interest in cheering for Oracle, but for the record, Oracle is not the one that makes a business out of "mining" people's personal email messages for marketing information. Google does deserve some thanks for giving some of their changes back to the Linux kernel in the 3.3 release, but they have also taken their

own sweet time about it, considering the big head start they received by basing their Android mobile OS around Linux. Despite the hype from both sides, I'm not really seeing any kind of David in this skirmish – it looks to me like two Goliaths.

Those who attended the 2010 movie *The Social Network* were treated to an impressive Goliath story as an awkward yet brainy middle-class computer geek outsmarts a pair of physically imposing, upper-crust entrepreneurs called the Winklevoss brothers to found the empire we know today as Facebook. That geek was Mark Zuckerberg. Many have observed that Zuckerberg is now the youngest self-made billionaire in history; however, the honor actually goes to his former roommate Dustin Moskovitz, another Facebook co-founder, who is eight days younger. When asked what he thought about the film's interpretation of those early Facebook years, Moskovitz is quoted as saying that the film "... emphasizes things that didn't matter (like the Winklevoss brothers, who [sic] I've still never even met and had no part in the work we did to create the site over the past 6 years) and leaves out things that really did (like the many other people in our lives at the time, who supported us in innumerable ways)" [3].

In other words, the Winklevoss brothers actually did exist, but they weren't really such a big part of the saga. Their importance was artificially elevated because the story just had to have a Goliath. The need for every movie to have a villain is no big news for anyone who lives in our culture, but maybe the more important and less studied point is that, by creating a Goliath, you also create a David. By shoehorning this story to make it fit into the David and Goliath template, one creates the impression that Facebook is a friendly and familiar underdog when it is actually a 100 billion dollar multinational corporation that markets the details of your private life as a commodity.

We humans must have some special little place in our brains that lights up pleasingly whenever it hears the David and Goliath story, but the beholding of reality can also yield a measure of primordial satisfaction. So I hope this parting thought gives you a lift: sometimes there is no David – and no Goliath either – just a bunch of gigantic companies squabbling over huge troves of money.



Joe

Joe Casad,
Editor in Chief

INFO

- [1] "Freedom Stew": <http://www.linuxpromagazine.com/Issues/2011/133/Comment/>
- [2] "Smoke and Magic": <http://www.linuxpromagazine.com/Issues/2010/115/Comment/>
- [3] Wikipedia on Dustin Moskovitz: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dustin_Moskovitz