

FEATURES

Dear Linux Magazine Reader,

What is the Raspberry Pi really? A trinket? An educational tool? A very inexpensive computer? Of course, it is all these things, but what is the meaning of Raspberry Pi? I'm not the first journalist to ask.

Our culture and our economy is based on competing products with a similar purpose. The products all have features. We shop for the products by looking at the bulleted list of features on the label. The more features, the more people choose the product. Vendors race to develop new technologies so they can add more features, but at a certain point, some consumers just get bewildered and start to shop for fewer features – or at least for a product that brings enough clarity to the sea of features to restore the original purpose.

It happens all the time, especially in high tech. When my oldest child was just old enough to sit at a computer, he received a computer game called Reader Rabbit that allowed him to choose the letters to complete words. He loved the game, which lived on a simple floppy disk, and played it all the time on an early IBM 286 system. When my youngest was getting interested in computer games, the world of personal computing had advanced considerably. I got her the latest version of Reader Rabbit, which, by then had moved up to a CD and ran on a magnificent Pentium II system. The game started with an expansive cartoon video that told some story about the rabbit – basically, it was like watching a TV show. Somewhere inside was a place to click the mouse that would lead to some kind of benefit for acquiring reading skills, but she never waited around to find out. I couldn't get the old version to run on the new system, so she went back to playing her reading games out of a book.

Reader Rabbit is probably better now than it was in the Pentium II era, but the point is still the same: We add adornments to a product until it bloats and wobbles with overdesign, then we get bored. Some of us move on to still bolder and newer technologies, which are better able to accommodate the complexity, but a significant portion of the population doesn't want all the noise and makes the conscious choice for something simpler.

I hope Raspberry Pi succeeds, and I applaud the concept of creating a fun, easy system to let students of all ages get their first taste of the hacker's life. But maybe part of the lesson is that too many of the Linux distros are spending too much time trying to look like Windows or Mac OS, and what some users really want is a place to play. In terms of the software platform, anything you can do on the Pi you could do on any Linux system, but for most Linux systems, the design of the

user interface, and the tone of the marketing materials increasingly mimics the Macintosh ethos: just sit back and watch, and we'll do everything for you. Adults with the hacker gene know how to get past the first layer of adornments, to get to a command line and summon up the GCC compiler, configure networks, write scripts. But children or other beginners with the hacker gene have no clear entry point for how to get started. Raspberry Pi provides that entry point.

Of course, the world is host to many minimalist Linux systems, but Rasp Pi and the distros that run on it are rare in that they constitute a minimal system that is designed to inspire beginners – an interesting space that will never be right for everybody but will always appeal to a significant portion of the population. Maybe it is time for a few other Linux projects to enter this same space: be minimal and evoke the hacker sensibility, yet still invite and inspire beginners.

And as for the tablet revolution: The next time you hear about a school board in your area buying 50 iPads, think about showing up at the next meeting and saying, "How about 40 iPads and 100 Raspberry Pis for the same price?"

Joe

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