THE HOT SEAT

Dear Linux Magazine Reader,

What's the top distro on the famous Distrowatch page hit ranking list? Not Ubuntu, OpenSUSE, or Fedora. According to Distrowatch, the hottest Linux is none other than Linux Mint – an Ubuntu-based, community-driven desktop system that is known for easy of use and efficient out-of-the-box multimedia functionality. Mint has been around since 2006, and many Linux users are familiar with it. We've put Mint discs on several issues of this magazine (the latest being the issue that you are holding now). But Mint has found new appreciation recently. Some are calling it the new Ubuntu, which seems a little bit of an overstatement, since Mint is based on Ubuntu (kind of like calling CentOS "the new Red Hat"). Nevertheless, Mint has been on something of a roll recently. Commentators have lauded the simplicity and elegance of the latest release, including Adrian Kingsley-Hughes of ZDNet, who writes, "…after just a few hours of using Mint, I think that I might be a convert."

What happened with Ubuntu? Why isn't Ubuntu the new Ubuntu? For one thing, it is important to remember that the Linux community, despite its anti-commercial tendencies, is always on a quest for the latest, hottest thing. Ubuntu has actually had quite a long run in the "hottest thing" chair and has propelled itself decisively onto the world stage through its status as a global phenomenon. But such things don't last forever.

Another factor in the Ubuntu story that is receiving much attention around the web is the underwhelming global response to Ubuntu's new Unity desktop. Customer testimonials speak to problems with Unity and a loss of that special feeling of awe people used to get when they started up Ubuntu and everything fit together in such a smooth and seamless way. I agree that Unity isn't the same as the old Ubuntu desktop, but I'm still wondering whether the Unity backlash might be a bit overplayed. Unity isn't the only new-age desktop that is taking some hits in the arena of world opinion – Gnome 3 actually seems to be faring even worse right now in the public vote. Also, most of the people who are complaining are high-tech enough to know it only takes a few mouse clicks to switch to a different desktop if you have a problem with Unity. For that matter, if you don't even want to click those few mouse clicks, Ubuntu maintains alternative distros that support several other leading desktops.

Don't get me wrong: Ubuntu is still doing well with the desktop crowd. If you look at the total install base, Ubuntu is more popular than Mint or any other Linux. But I'm talking about something else – that special edge that makes a product into the "news" that everyone is talking about at LUG meetings and trade shows. To understand why Ubuntu might have lost some of that "hottest thing" buzz to Mint, it is important to view this question in light of Canonical's long-term vision. Actually, it has been quite fascinating to watch Canonical's plan unfolding.

They are staying pretty close to the script that everyone guessed they were in since the beginning. To recap those early assessments: When Ubuntu showed up as a value-added desktop operating system back in 2004 – quickly putting a fork in Xandros and Lindows/Linspire because it was free rather selling for the $30-$40 going rate of the fledgling commercial desktop distros – industry experts guessed the real goal was to build a large market share and establish brand loyalty, then move into the server and corporate IT space, where they could make some real money with tech support and other surrounding services.

The first part of their plan went really well – it is hard to imagine they could have even dreamed of spreading around the world and winning the hearts of so many in such a short time. Over the past year or two, it seems they have moved on to Phase II. Despite the fanfare about rolling out a new desktop, the company's primary focus is cloud and server integration, and they have been having some significant victories, including recent success with cloud services, as well as partnership agreements with Dell and HP.

Canonical will continue to invest in Unity because they don't want to put themselves at the mercy of someone else's desktop, and Unity will continue to improve as long as they keep working it, but the end-user desktop is only one corner of the Ubuntu space, so don't expect them to drop everything and play musical chairs with Mint over the "hot" seat.

Joe

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