Sojourn in Prague

By Jon "maddog" Hall

One of the nice things about Free Software is that it can take you to some very nice places. Recently, it took me to Prague, Czech Republic, where I attended several Linux Foundation events (the Kernel Summit, Embedded Linux Conference, and LinuxCon Europe).

Although I have been to more than 100 countries in my travels with both Unix and Linux during the past 30 years, Prague has somehow eluded me until now. But, with three events in the same city and the possibility of attending an event without having to present at it, I used some frequent flier miles and performed some unique hotel juggling to attend the conferences at a reasonable price. Of course, the call of a city well known for beer and beer history helped, too.

Another nice feature of this trip was getting to see Linus Torvalds again and to listen to some interesting thoughts he had on the Linux community.

One of the big themes this past year has been the 20th birthday of Linux, and one of the main themes of the panel session was along the lines of how the kernel developers had "matured."

Linus took this issue head on and said, "We used to be a really young crowd … ridiculously young." He talked about how, in the beginning, many of the kernel developers were college and even high school students who had decided "they could do a kernel right," and although some of these people have left the project, many are still there and have moved up the ranks to become the "mature" people in their early 40s. Linus pointed out that "40 is not old" (thank you, Linus).

The kernel has become decidedly more complex than it was in the early days, which means people have to take time to learn the complexities before they can really "manage" parts of the kernel. Many new people start by writing a device driver and making small patches. From there, they may rise through the ranks, or they might choose to work on the kernel only that one time and not develop the skill level needed to be a kernel maintainer – or to gain Linus's trust.

A lot of the kernel work is based on trust gained by meritocracy. Linus made this clear when he said that he "trusts the person, not the company," meaning that even large and powerful companies have less influence about what patches go into the kernel than someone who has been doing great work for a long time.

Linus also mentioned that a lot of the "younger people" are involved in Free Software at levels above the kernel and in low-level libraries because this is where the exciting work is being done.

I can vouch for the "younger people" because, throughout the course of Free Software, I have talked to and reported here on many who have done amazing things building on what others have done before them.

Of course, the occasion of the 20th anniversary of Linux also brought out some "infamous sayings" of the past, with Jim Zemlin pointing out how many times he had declared one time or another "the year of the Linux desktop" and how Linus had first viewed symmetrical multiprocessing with a jaundiced eye when Alan Cox started the work in version 1.3 of the kernel. Some people, said Linus, even questioned the use of demand paged virtual memory because it "only slows things down."

Some issues are ongoing, however, and other quotes I enjoyed from Linus were "If you think security is absolute … you are insecure" and that one of the kernel's goals is not to break the end user's experience.

Linus admitted he is not perfect in "not breaking the end-user experience," but he did point out that the kernel developers do it very seldom, and every time someone does, it causes him pain.

Speaking of pain (or lack of it), the LinuxCon in Prague was great. They had a reception in the oldest brewery in the city (which opened just seven years after Christopher Columbus sailed for the New World), and the beer was "gratis." It was rumored that maddog brought a 2-liter beer stein to the event, was dressed like a monk some of the time, and stayed an additional two days in the city trying out several more breweries, but these were just rumors .… ▪▪▪