

PROGNOSTICATION

Dear Linux Magazine Reader,



Joe Casad, Editor in Chief

Our new, smaller economy is bound to hold surprises for all of us. One of the best parts about a surprise is speculating on what that surprise will be. Because we know we don't know anything, we can all just guess, and then we can all debate about whose guesses are the most insightful.

An optimistic thread running through the open source community is that the downturn of the world economy might actually be good for Linux. This viewpoint

holds that, because Linux is less expensive (actually free) and because it is more efficient to administer and support – despite all the infomercials to the contrary, IT departments will turn to Linux to make up for budget shortfalls.

Although some of the enterprise-ready Linux distros such as Red Hat Enterprise Linux and SUSE Linux Enterprise Desktop aren't as inexpensive as the rest of the Linux variants, when it comes to an overall package of efficiency, reliability, and security, you have to like the chances of Linux.

You have probably already heard this speculation, or perhaps you have thought it up on your own. (It isn't exactly rocket science.) To me, the more interesting question is, if this process starts to happen, what will happen next? Don't assume your adversaries will just stand still while you sweep around them. The people running all the businesses that compete with open source are very smart, and if they see themselves losing market share, they aren't just going to stand around drinking cognac. We see this phenomenon often in the rapid evolution of high tech. For instance, when it looked like Linux would score a great victory in the netbook market, Microsoft quickly shifted its tactics, preserving the life of XP – and even adapting it for the netbook market.

What will happen if Linux gets a bigger share of the corporate enterprise market? The most obvious possibility is that Microsoft will have to cut its prices, which would take some of the shine off its incredibly high profit margins. But Microsoft has always been more interested in maintaining control than in maximizing the profit. They actually drop their prices all the time if they face a competitive situation. And the reality is, cutting the price might not be enough once the buyer sits down for a serious comparison of Windows and Linux.

So *what else* will they do? Of course, there is always the weapon of US patent law. The tradition of forcing a "business partnership" through patent threats has a long tradi-

tion in the US, and Microsoft has had the strategy on display recently with the TomTom suit. Will this gambit keep the crows away? Maybe not. I don't want to sound too optimistic, but since we are all just speculating, I will note that we have had some recent indications the software patent party might be heading into its last dance – or at least, into some kind of interlude to a more rational dance down on the ground instead of up in thin air.

The next tactic would be to start cutting more deals. Microsoft has always been prodigious at dreaming up agreements. The 2006 pact with Novell was a grand, sweeping chess move, but that was just the beginning. If there is business to gain from it, you can expect more of these hatchet-burying ceremonies with companies that once were adversaries. Now that they have Novell locked down, the big prize would be a huge, market-shifting, friendship-clenching rapprochement with IBM.

The final option, if none of these other alternatives turn the tide? Start installing Linux. I know that sounds bold and brash, but this whole column is a virtual machine for the hypothetical, so why leave the option unmentioned? It is true that we have traveled many miles down the speculation canal to this step, but the point is, if Windows is no longer in the position to be profitable, Redmond isn't going to lose any sleep over it. If you think it would be the end of the world for Microsoft to put Linux on a few servers – or even a few desktops – think again. The Windows logo might be the brand out in front of the public, but the company is fighting on lots of other fronts – office software, browser software, development frameworks, online infrastructure – and they aren't going to watch the whole game go down over one doddering operating system.

So if this actually happened, would it really be a victory for Linux? Actually, yes, I think it would be – but then, I'm just guessing.

Joe

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