A view from Brainshare 2008

DATA CENTERS AND FOSSAS

Novell vendors, developers, and users exchanged

metaphors and business cards in Salt Lake City.

BY JAMES STANGER

About 5,500 people from 60 countries arrived in Salt Lake City, Utah the week of March 17 for Brainshare 2008, Novell's signature partner and marketing event. The show rolled out a fairly typical trade show floor, and the guests kept busy with a well-attended series of breakout sessions. One of the more entertaining elements of Brainshare this year was the "World of Warcraft" theme; quite a few attendees and trade show booths enthusiastically embraced this theme; a number of booths also played up the "Guitar Hero" theme – proving that Novell is still making room for the young and geeky.

Breakout

The best element of Brainshare was the breakout sessions, which involved more than just the latest tech talk. Vendors made an effort to go the extra mile: At these breakout sessions, Novell's customers and developers can mix and mingle together. Several times, I saw a presenter casually request a feature in a product (e.g., ZenWorks or GroupWise), only to have one of the actual developers stand up and say something like, "Let me know what you're looking for, and we'll see what we can do."

In the DNA

Last year, Brainshare was all about how Novell's SLES and SLED Linux distros worked, played, and thrived in everyone's ecosystem. The talk then was about virtualization, identity management, and interoperability – the underlying point being that the Microsoft deal was good for Novell and good for Linux

(and also good for Microsoft).

This year, Novell's still on message, but they've refined it quite a bit: "Novell has the data center in its DNA," according to Jeff Jaffe, Novell's Chief Technical Officer (CTO).

So, while Novell remains centered on virtualization, identity management, and interoperability, its message was that SUSE Linux is the ultimate data center operating system.

SAP

It's clear that Novell has realized that being too open, too functional, and too flexible in the back room might result in having no real identity at all. To address this problem in perception, Novell has decided it needs to tie itself to a real data center name – and while they continue to develop the Microsoft relationship, that's yesterday's news. This time, Novell has tapped SAP, a truly big player in the data center business.

While Novell has always worked fairly closely with SAP, this year they have announced that they have "deepened" their SAP relationship. SUSE Linux Enterprise is now certified to run SAP. Plus, SAP has committed to support open source applications in a deeper way than ever before. Not only has Novell been able to identify with SAP, but it has also gotten SAP to recognize open source; neither of these achievements is trivial.

Figure 1: The author (right) works the show floor at Brainshare 2008.

Once again, Novell has tapped SUSE's German roots by working with the largest player. The message in this move is relatively simple: Not only does SUSE do everything, it now actually does something: SAP.

FOSSA Reflections

Novell's Free (FOSSA) project describes an overarching vision for using Novell's services and software to manage the data center. I find it interesting that Novell once again capitalizes on open source terminology and methods – "FOSS" literally lies at the center of Novell's acronym. A fossa is also a small, agile cat-like carnivore; Novell consciously gave FOSSA this name because it, too, sees itself as a smart, agile animal in the data center space. But ironically, the fossa is also an endangered animal that lives by killing other animals, which might lead some to see parallels with Novell's market position and its use of open source.

Is Novell the fossa of the open source space? It is a smaller, sleek, and rare animal in the data center jungle. Of course, the fossa is also known to reach maturity slowly, and the same can be said of Novell's position in the marketplace. ∎