

# LAPTOP LULLABYE

Dear Linux Magazine Reader,



Joe Casad, Editor in Chief

I must admit I'm getting to the point where I don't like to make it easy for people to guess my age. But since this column comes with a high resolution image, I'll find no salvation in obfuscation, so maybe I should just plunge right into my memories.

I spent my early childhood watching US space flights. In fact, my own development maps pretty directly to the saga of Americans in space,

with the first US manned flights occurring around the time of my first memories and the legendary moon landing happening around when I was heading for middle school.

We were all very certain back then that there was something heroic about the space program. Of course, the astronauts themselves were heroes for their willingness to put their lives at risk, but I'm talking about the program itself. Our society was simply certain that the goal of flying to the moon was not only vitally important and necessary, but was actually virtuous. We were all in the act of self-sacrifice for some bigger cause.

It wasn't until much later that I learned of the counter-balancing opinion, that going to the moon and bringing back moon rocks – although it was most certainly an intriguing and cool way to spend a decade – was not so much a reverent thing but more like a colossal game of capture the flag, a communion with technology that brought us to a different state of consciousness, but nevertheless put the dream of new worlds before the needs of that one world we already had.

Some have speculated that this money might have been better spent on pressing problems here at the home planet. And we certainly did spend money here at home – billions and possibly trillions on various humanitarian projects, with varying indications of success. All these great quests were well intentioned, and some were quite successful, but nothing ever really caught the imagination of the world in the way the space program did. No battle with the frontiers of knowledge has ever captured the poetry, the creativity, and the pure technological audacity of our mission to the moon.

I'm starting to think, however, that we are witnessing the emergence of just such a quest. Like many of us, when I first heard about the plan of an organization called One Laptop Per Child (OLPC) to create laptops

for US\$ 100 and distribute them for free to millions of schoolchildren in developing nations, I thought the topic had filtered from some brainstorming session for non-profit power marketers – philanthropy with a hook, in the grand style of the Hands Across America.

But the more I learn about this curious project, the more I can see they are very serious, and if they are successful, they will indeed remake the world. As I listened to the presentation by OLPC founder Nicholas Negroponte at the Boston LinuxWorld, I realized that this truly is a call to action for the developed world to gather its best minds and muster its technological resources in the name of some higher purpose – only this time the purpose is down here on the Earth.

Sure you can create a disaster-proof, 24/7, fault-tolerant data center for US\$ 3.6 million, but can you make a portable computer for US\$ 100 that is so energy efficient you can charge it with a mechanical crank? If we're going to boldly go somewhere, I like this task of turning the full power of our technology to making something humble for a need that could easily have been ignored. In fact, it seems like a bright patch of daylight compared to our usual swirl of complexity leading to more complexity leading to wealth. If we need a theme to occupy us for a decade, why not just do this instead of going to Mars?

Check out the One Laptop Per Child project at <http://laptop.org/>.

Joe

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