SYSTEMS AND STORES

Dear Linux Magazine Reader,

If you like variety, the story of personal computer operating systems is probably not a place to look for thrills. There was diversity in the early years, when every system basically had its own OS, but in those days, only the computer scientists even knew what an operating system was. You know the rest of the story: Unix gained a footing in the corporate, big-iron space, with Apple and Microsoft nailing down the end-user desktop, and Linux slipping indefatigably into the mix despite the best efforts of the competition.

Even now, a great many commentators still believe there are only two choices for a personal computer operating system: Mac OS and Windows. We in the Linux sphere are proud to take a larger view, with Linux, BSD, and a few other Unix variants, but we're still not talking about a myriad of choices.

For a while, it looked like the mobile device market would end up the same way as the desktop space, with a nearly identical gang of suspects: Apple as the early leader, Android (Linux) coming on strong, and Microsoft jumping in to provide what Nokia and Microsoft have already dubbed the "third ecosystem."

According to business analysts, markets like to think in threes, with a top dog, a major contender, and a pesky third alternative that won't go away. This pattern gets echoed everywhere, perhaps with minor variations, like an occasional fourth option, or sometimes a missing major contender (leaving only a monopolistic top dog and a couple of pesky Pekingese).

Is this where we have landed yet again? Will this new "big three" of the mobile device market (that is actually the old "big three" of the personal computer market) slide right into the old niche and continue to dominate?

Actually, it is looking like the story might be a little more complicated. Rather than the old desktop operating systems flooding the smartphone field, it appears that some of the indigenous mobile systems are not only standing their ground but are actually pushing back into the land of the giants.

HP's recent announcement that it will start putting webOS (the mobile system it inherited when it bought Palm) into tablets and desktop systems is a clear sign that things are getting different. With the exception of Apple, personal computer hardware vendors haven't made a serious attempt to control the operating system since the OS/2 era. There was simply no pressure point for extracting revenue from such as strategy, as long as PCs ran on Intel-like chips that supported Windows.

Why the change? Why are these alternative systems like webOS suddenly competitive enough to warrant the effort of loading them onto all HP computers?

The answer is in the apps – or, that is, in the stores that sell the apps. With HP's announcement, and other recent initiatives such as Intel's AppUp program, the smartphone model of selling applications through an iTunes-like interface is actually backporting itself into the personal computer realm. And the long discussed but newly popular tablet PC – a beast with characteristics of both smartphone and computer – offers a bridge for other mobile vendors who have never been anywhere near the PC space (such as Samsung and RIM) to push their apps out closer to conventional computer users.

Will this new technique actually change the market? Lots of powerful people think it will and are investing millions in it, but I wonder how many of them will actually strike gold. The iTune-ization of the application market might shake things up – for a while at least – but ultimately, the high-rolling vendors who bet on this profit model might find that it requires Apple-like control and an Apple-like closed system that even Apple can't sustain in the long run.

Joe

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