SMOKE AND MAGIC

Joe Casad, Editor in Chief

Dear Linux Magazine Reader,
The news this month was all about Apple's new iPad device. I must admit that Apple got me going with their pitch line: "… a magical and revolutionary device at an unbelievable price." This nine-word tag includes some pretty bold claims. As a dispassionate member of the fourth estate, I feel called to analyze such things. After all, if I went to the trouble of claiming that an issue of this magazine contains "a magical, revolutionary, and unbelievable" article on network monitoring, I would expect a full investigation.

Of all the adjectives Apple applies to the new device, "revolutionary" probably has the highest probability of being correct … maybe. It is indeed possible that the iPad will launch some kind of revolution. Apple's products certainly are appealing and elegant, and many industry watchers have been predicting the rise of the tablet for some time, so maybe this latest launch from Cupertino will unleash the tide. Of course, one person's revolution is someone else's palace coup. The iPad and its surrounding technologies exhibit some properties that many would consider quite counter-revolutionary – a throwback to the inglorious past, with IBM-like leveraging of the hardware to control the software and a brazen willingness to withhold choice to maximize the seller's power and profit.

The "unbelievable price" part definitely seems overextended. Even if you argue that the US$ 499 price of this new iPad is a "good deal," that doesn't make it unbelievable. HP's Slate tablet, which Steve Ballmer announced at the recent Consumer Electronics show, is also expected to start at around US$ 500. Among Apple's own offerings, the iPhone, which provides superior communication features but a smaller screen area, debuted in the US$ 400 range; the iPod Touch currently starts at US$ 199. All in all, the pricing for the iPad looks fairly predictable given the state of the market.

The "magic" claim yearns for yet more analysis. I've always wondered about the usefulness of ascribing mythical properties to manufactured products – be they soft drinks, facial tissues, or electronic tools. The Apple website provides a clue for this choice with the official iPad video, which begins: "You know it's true that when something exceeds your ability to understand how it works, it sort of becomes magical." I actually differ with them on this point. If there is no way to understand how a manufactured product works, a more likely cause is either bad engineering or a deliberate attempt to gloss, but I'm certainly not accusing Apple of the former.

Ultimately, however, all this study of Apple's sales talk doesn't truly explain what is really going on. This kind of language is not really supposed to inform, but to enchant, which, as with any form of hypnosis, only happens if the subject allows it to happen. Commercial hyperbole, like political hyperbole, is not intended to persuade or convince, but to create a cozy, uncomplicated little space for the listener to inhabit without having to think.

If you are looking for magic, I recommend the Kirby Van-Burch magic show in Branson Missouri, USA (*http://www.kirbyvanburch.com/*), where you will see disappearing Bengal tigers, proliferating wine bottles, and other indecipherable wonders. At US$ 35.00, the show isn't cheap, but it is unforgettable, and at only a fraction of the cost of an electronic device. On the other hand, if you are looking for a larger rendition of the iPhone, without the phone, that shares some characteristics with the Kindle e-reader, and if you don't have high expectations for flexibility or the privileges of ownership typically associated with a personal computer, the iPad might be exactly what you need.

Joe

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