

# DESKTOP DISCO

Dear Linux Magazine Reader,



Joe Casad, Editor in Chief

If you think the open source community is less susceptible to market forces than the commercial software industry, you are correct. If you think that open source is less susceptible to sudden and inexplicable waves of popular opinion, you are very certainly incorrect. Fads come and go all the time.

Most Internet users are fully aware of this global grapevine, and for the most part, these

waves of opinion are good because they bring some positive attention to promising new tools and trends. But once in a while, the bandwagon drives down a more negative path. I must admit that I've been a little alarmed lately with the talk I've been hearing about Gnome.

A couple of months ago, Linus reproached Gnome developers in a highly publicized web posting for intentionally removing functionality in pursuit of simplicity. He said that Gnome developers "seem like interface nazis," whose "excuse for not doing something is not that it's too complicated to do but that it would confuse users."

This was in follow-up to an earlier posting, in which he said, "This 'users are idiots and are confused by functionality' mentality is a disease. If you think your users are idiots, only idiots will use it. I don't use Gnome, because in striving to be simple, it has long since reached the point where it simply doesn't do what I need it to do."

Linus, of course, is known for his strong opinions, and if anyone has a right to strong opinions on Linux, he's the guy. But once Linus Torvalds goes out and says something like that, all the world suddenly wants to join in.

Linus's comments are actually tame compared to some of the other commentaries that followed, and, unlike some of the others, at least he stayed on the functionality topic, rather than drifting into a general tirade. Others who agreed with Linus were emboldened to speak out, with one commentator comparing Gnome to "a restaurant that based all its recipes on rat feces." Gnome users struck back, of course, and by now plenty of flames have flown both ways.

Was this discussion healthy? Maybe, if it helped to define the differences between KDE and Gnome and gave Gnome programmers some feedback

to think about. Would it have been more healthy without the references to disease and rat feces? Of course. This kind of negative imagery never helps. If Microsoft had said it, we would have called it propaganda.

What seemed missing from the whole discussion was a recognition that this standoff is a classic debate that occurs constantly in the software industry. Programmers, marketers, tech writers, and so-called "usability experts" face off all the time on this question of defining an acceptable level of complexity for a user interface. Although it is tempting to believe that the programmer, who has the deepest knowledge of the software, is in the best position to know how to present that software to the user, this may not always be the case. It all depends on the user you are trying to reach.

A world-class programmer like Linus (who wrote his own operating system when he was 19) may not be the best person to ask about what is an acceptable level of complexity for a non-technical beginner. It is very possible that Gnome might be totally wrong for some users and totally right for others. That's why both Gnome and KDE are included in almost all the major Linux distributions.

I'm not saying that Gnome has it right. In fact, I'm not saying I even prefer Gnome. But I like it that KDE and Gnome are not exactly the same, and I applaud Gnome's willingness to experiment with trying to reach users who are intimidated by the complexity of computer systems.

I wish them luck. And KDE? I wish them luck too.

Joe

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