DAWN OF THE ÜBER-DISTRO

Dear Linux Magazine Reader,

Joe Casad, Editor in Chief

Many years ago, when Linux was still a new experience we were all trying to understand, a friend of mine predicted that someday, when all the dust had settled, there wouldn't be all these parallel and separate Linux systems. "Eventually," he said, "only one will be left standing."

The prediction seemed unrealistic. No one really knew what was happening (in all honesty), but it really seemed like the General Public License, with its protections to ensure that all code would be shared, would prevent anyone from cornering the market. What company would invest so much in something they couldn't control? And who but a big corporation would have the money, the global reach, and the management savvy to launch an operation capable of overwhelming the competition?

We certainly didn't see the rise of a single dominant player, but in a strange way we couldn't have guessed at the time, it is looking like the path to the future may not be so far from my friend's prediction after all. One of the more significant recent events was the launch of the Debian Core Consortium (DCC) alliance, which has been discussed for a few months and was finally announced at LinuxWorld. Representatives from several well known Linux distros are forming a group to create a common version of Debian that they all will share. In true Linux spirit, million dollar companies such as Linspire and Xandros are standing in solidarity with small-scale (practically one-guy) operations like Knoppix and SimplyMepis to form the consortium. These companies have stated that they will continue to tweak their systems and contribute their nuances, but the engine beneath will be a common collection of Debian-tested components. Of course, these distros were all built on Debian anyway, but this announcement still breaks some new ground.

The Open Source industry is all about adding value to the work of communities. The first commercial distros built and tested their own collections of components around the Linux kernel. Then Debian evolved into a big, neutral agency that generated an inwardly compatible and interoperable system everyone could adapt. Now the DCC arises as a neutral agency for adapting the reliable but sprawling Debian into a more streamlined and commercial form. Note the progression away from each vendor creating their own version of Linux to something more like each vendor creating their own *product* based on a common version of Linux.

Of course, many of the most important vendors are not part of the DCC alliance. Red Hat, with its well establish reputation for tuning and tinkering, is probably least likely to join. And Ubuntu, which all too recently based a whole business plan around the concept of freezing and squeezing their own Debian snapshot, is probably horrified at the idea of giving up their game. But even big vendors like Mandriva and Suse may one day wonder why they are paying their own engineers to reinvent what the DCC is already doing.

We don't yet know if the coalition will stay together, or if it will succeed with its goal of producing a vendor-neutral, commerce-ready version of Debian. But one thing is for certain: a few month's ago, Debian looked a little lost. They had just spent three years working on a major release, and had invested thousands of hours porting their code to hardware platforms that most of their users will never even see. Now all of a sudden, Debian seems very important again – at least, if they embrace their emerging role as the über-distro and don't get too annoyed about the fact that Debian will run on millions of computers that will never see the spiral. But as all good revolutionaries know, the hardest thing about making revolution is knowing when the old revolution ends and the new one starts.

Joe