

Linux
by
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Many involved with the Apollo Area Economic Development Council are familiar with Oakmont resident and esteemed University of Pittsburgh professor Dr. Maureen McClure and her international efforts to bring decent education to children of third world nations. It was Dr. McClure who brought a group of Bosnian educators to visit the Apollo-Ridge school district a few years ago.

Included among the Bosnian educators was Bosnian Secretary of Education, Dr. Srebren Dizdar. He visited with me to examine the Internet service operations provided free by Apollo Trust Company to Apollo-Ridge High School.

Dr. Dizdar and I hit it off well as we began discussing affordable ways of bringing Internet access to students in Sarajevo. I remember mentioning how we employed an obscure free operating system found on the Internet which was written by Finnish college student, Linus Torvalds. This software was a substitute for an expensive UNIX solution and was called "linux". Remarkably, linux, named after Linus of Finland became the cornerstone of our fledgling Internet operation.

UNIX boxes generally run the machines employed by Internet service providers. The cost of a UNIX software license was expensive in those days. The cost of a UNIX box which was not an ordinary store bought PC was also very expensive. Linux was not only free operating system software, it was software that did not require the purchase of a special UNIX box. Thus, the idea of free UNIX software that could be run on an ordinary PC was relevant information for anyone strapped for cash as was the Bosnian government.

Mr. Torvalds probably never expected his homegrown UNIX software to become a hit but other Internet aficionados began expanding on his original version for free. Since those early years, its application has silently exploded throughout the world. Recently, that silence has become deafening.

Last week, Dr. McClure forwarded me an e-mail with some intriguing news. 140,000 Mexican school labs are being outfitted with "linux" instead of Microsoft Windows 95, 98 or NT. Why? The price for proprietary software for 140,000 labs with an average of six workstations and one server each is prohibitive for schools in Mexico.

While on the surface, this may seem like a step backwards for Mexican students, it may actually be a step forward. Not only have non-Microsoft computer vendors begun writing their applications (such as word-processing and accounting spreadsheets) for the linux operating system but linux can be run on obsolete 386 and 486 personal computers. And linux is Year 2000 compliant.

But there is a hidden benefit. Linux forces students to understand how a computer works. While you don't need to understand how an automobile engine works to drive a car, it certainly helps when problems arise. The best way to understand an automobile engine is to pop open the hood and get dirty. Likewise, the best way to understand a computer is to pop off the case and get nerdy. Microsoft operating systems attempt to plug and play. Currently, linux asks students to think and learn.

As the Department of Justice slowly grapples with Microsoft anti-trust violations, the legacy of Linus is revolutionizing operating systems as we know it. He has become the modern-day Robinhood. It may sound ridiculous but I strongly believe that within three years, all Microsoft personal computer operating systems will be free, downloadable from the Internet. Why? Free linux is becoming a viable alternative. Microsoft will be forced to make their operating system free so people will continue to purchase applications like Office which reigns supreme.

Linux can only be used by those with some degree of technical skill so if you haven't heard of it, I would not suggest getting it. I struggled mightily with it on my machine at home. But what an excellent education it has been, an education all students should have an opportunity to obtain.

We continue to use linux with our Internet operation. We'd be foolish to use anything else. Its free, reliable and fun, in a computer kind of way. I imagine I'll be saying "hasta la vista" with linux students from Mexico via e-mail soon.



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