

THE NEXT BIG THING

Dear Linux Magazine Reader,

Laptop ... toothbrush ... an extra sweater. A single spiral notebook, in which I am now writing. Three shirts ... four pairs of socks ... Did I remember my cell phone charger?

I don't go on so many of these tech conference junkets anymore. Maybe two a year? I could probably make it to three if I could ever get the print deadlines to interleave harmoniously with the conference dates, but the calendar never seems to comply. I've been going to big tech exhibitions for many years, though, and over those years, I've seen my share. I'm always amazed at how similar they all look on the surface – the visitors walking around with their badges around their necks, the exhibitors angling to scan the badges, some with little toys or rewards for a visitor who will stand close enough to hear the next talk about the next great technology.

I've stuffed many of these exhibitors' glossy brochures into my laptop case through the years. I sometimes wish I had kept them all just for the anthropological satisfaction of rediscovering the hype and swagger associated with technologies that disappeared from the scene so many years ago.

I remember a NetWorld show in Las Vegas in the 1990s when all the buzz was on NetWare. NetWare 3 was in nearly every office and NetWare 4 was appearing on the horizon, ready to conquer the world. The next big thing is always arriving, and NetWare had arrived – with 90% of the PC networking market – but the next big thing is never exactly the only thing. NetWare was big, but the Internet would soon be bigger, and those pesky Unix servers with their native TCP/IP support worked much better with the Internet. When Windows NT 4.0 arrived, with its own native TCP/IP stack and a reverse-engineered version of NetWare's IPX/SPX protocol, the star that I had seen rising in Las Vegas was soon relegated to nostalgia duty.

Why am I telling you this? I guess it is just that history happens fast in this business, so when you go to one of these conferences, it is always a good moment to survey the landscape, because this might be the only view you get of how things are exactly right now.

Where is the high-tech world right now? Ask me in three days, when I'm on my way home, but I'm always as ready as anyone to give it a guess.

Everyone knows the end-user space is all about gadgets and tablets. Gadgets are the next big thing, but they aren't exactly the only thing. The single-vendor incarceration practices pioneered by Apple will soon be adopted by other commercial vendors, thus permanently changing the application software business and eliminating many of the commercial software companies that haven't disappeared already, but it won't eliminate free software, because free software is free. It is

hard to put something out of business when it doesn't have a business.

On the server end, the world is changing even faster. Many hardware vendors who were happy to sell you a small- to mid-size enterprise server two years ago are out there now selling cloud space in their new data centers. Cloud is the next big thing, but it isn't exactly the only thing. The complications (and trust) intrinsic to all-cloud computing will never win over 100 percent of the market; 60 percent? 70 percent? That's enough market for the cloud vendors to make lots and lots of money, and it will definitely cause some consolidation, but for various reasons – such as security, privacy, personal preference, or just a basic unwillingness to place a critical corporate asset in the hands of another company – many organizations will still want to manage their networks the old-fashioned way.

If I were running a business that depended on selling local server hardware products, I would start working right now on identifying the segment of the market that is least likely to go to the cloud and design products specifically for this segment, rather than trying to sell across a whole general IT space that will soon have a big part of its head in the clouds. Then, for next year's trade shows, I would print up some T-shirts that say, "I survived the next big thing."

Joe

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