

OLD 100

Dear Linux Magazine Reader,

As these pages go to print, I notice that we have reached issue 147. The number 147 might not seem particularly noteworthy to the rest of the world, but I noticed it. You see, the first issue with my picture on page 3 was issue 48, and if you count by ones from the beginning of the issue 48 cycle to the end of the issue 147 cycle, you get to 100 issues. This number 100 is always good for a milestone moment in our base 10 universe. Celebrating a numeral is not so important on its own, but having these reasons to look back can provide some context for looking ahead into the future – or looking around at the present.

So many things were different back in the first year I wrote this column. The last version of the old Red Hat Linux (Red Hat 9) was just ending, giving way to a new Red Hat-inspired community distro known as “Fedora Core.” A few for-profit desktop systems were trying to nail down the role of Linux for non-geeks, including Xandros and Lindows (later renamed Lin-spire), and they actually carried a price tag of around US\$ 35 dollars before getting washed away by the all-free Ubuntu. SUSE Linux came in a light green shrink-wrapped box. Debian was a really big deal – we even had a column on Debian, and we provided close coverage of the Debian elections. (Actually, Debian is still a big deal; people just don’t talk about it as much as they used to.) Solaris was going open source; the kernel developers lost access to the BitKeeper distributed version control system and started building their own open source tool, which they called Git.

I see how far Linux has come, not just in terms of its stability and usability, but also as a permanent and respected element of the IT infrastructure; and yet, some of the things that we all thought would have happened by now haven’t really happened yet. For instance, Linux hasn’t really won the epic battle for the desktop, and it seems likely now that this battle might just fade away because of hardware obsolescence before anyone actually surrenders.

The good guys and bad guys were so clear back then. The Star Wars metaphor, with Microsoft as the evil empire and the Linux community as the rag-tag, lovable rebels, was so irresistible, and it played out as a subtext for almost every event or conversation about Linux.

But the rise of the mobile culture has muddied up the melodrama. For one thing, Microsoft is looking kind of shabby – not the intimidating menace that was so much fun to denounce, and they have even dialed down their rhetoric. (Not that they are exactly playing nicely, but from a cultural viewpoint, they don’t fit as snugly into the Godzilla role.)

Android is indeed the most popular smartphone in the world, and it is based on Linux, so maybe that is a kind of victory – but it doesn’t feel like Linux. It certainly isn’t the free-wheeling, infinitely customizable system we used to call Linux in 2004.

Perhaps most importantly, the concept of paying for an operating system by extracting personal data hadn’t really developed into a fully operational hydra back in those innocent days. How I wish I could pay \$35 to put Xandros on my smartphone now and not have to worry about what the “open source” Android operating system is learning about my personal life. Where does one put one’s trust?

As you might have noticed in the news this month (see page 12 of this issue), Ubuntu is dealing with this question now, as they seek to add integrated external search to their desktop configuration, and they are getting a strong response from some important players, including FOSS godfather Richard Stallman and the Electronic Freedom Foundation. We will hope the Ubuntu team can stay responsive to the feedback and keep their connection to the community – we need them on our side of the force.



Joe Casad,
Editor in Chief

