ULPC CHESS

Dear Linux Magazine Reader,

Joe Casad, Editor in Chief

Details are starting to emerge about a new plan from Microsoft to keep supporting Windows XP Home as a system for the new market of ultra-low-cost PCs (ULPCs). I feel like saying something about it, and yet I feel a pang of self restraint. A reader recently wrote to say that my "socialistic agenda" was "Orwellian at best," which seems pretty bad. I always thought I was genu-inely less tendentious than some who do what I do. I will admit to a strong dislike for software patents – mainly because they are so unworkable that they just look silly when you view them closely. I have also been known to cast pebbles at the business practices of certain corporations – not just Microsoft, but also Apple, Wal-Mart, and the occasional patent troll – but I never claimed that these business had no reason to exist (well – except maybe the patent troll).

Consumer opinion is an important factor in any free market. If customer loyalty is legitimate, non-customer non-loyalty ought to be in the loop also. And anyway, if you compare the market power of all the magazines that emphasize open source with the power and influence of all the magazines emphasizing conventional business models, what I'm doing here seems pretty innocuous.

As for this latest move from Microsoft, many worry that targeting XP for the ULPC market prevents the advance of Linux into a promising new niche. I worry about that too, but I also see some potential benefits. The first is that Microsoft did not succeed in getting the entire PC market to follow their move to Vista. They have already kept XP around longer than they originally intended, and this news is the strongest evidence so far that they won't be folding up the XP tent anytime soon. Instead, they will have to patch and maintain two sepa-rate home OS systems – under the costly closed source development model – which will only continue to threaten the profitability of their overall game plan.

You do have to credit Microsoft for being smart enough to notice that they need to adapt. But whenever they make this kind of a correction to ward off a threat, they give up a little more control. This move lends credibility to the low-cost computer movement, virtually ensuring its survival. And though they have temporarily checked the pace of Linux adoption by offering XP to ULPC ven-dors at a deeply discounted price, in the long run, the quantity of free Linux applications, and the reduced need for malware tools, offers significant advantages to Linux in the ultra-light market.

The part that Microsoft likes the least about this plan is having to produce a low-cost system to compete with their high-cost Windows Vista. To minimize this effect, they have placed some constraints on the systems that can use this low-cost XP Home edition, including a 1GHz or slower processor, no more than 1GB memory, and no more than a 10.2-inch screen. After all these years of looking at system requirements, it is interesting to see them expressed as *maxima* instead of *minima*, but because these limits seem to be more about marketing than technology, one wonders whether they truly can be defended at the contract table. If HP decides they want to make a new ULPC system with an 11-inch screen, Micro-soft has to either give up the business to Linux or else relax these "requirements," thus checking Linux again but surrendering even more control and encroaching still further on their own Vista space.

Regardless of how it ends for these two operating systems, the real story with the ULPCs is about the hard-ware. As a consumer of computer electronics, I'm just happy to see an end to the "Escher"ellian cost spiral that has marked the evolution of the PC – better hardware, supporting better software, requiring better hardware, supporting better software, requiring better hardware … while all the money flows into a little trough that is magically immune to gravity.

Joe

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