FUD REFLECTIONS

Dear Linux Magazine Reader,

Joe Casad, Editor in Chief

Acronyms become buzzwords so quickly in our blog-driven society that it sometimes takes time for the citizenry to catch up. When I first started hearing the term "FUD," I kept waiting for someone to explain what it meant. I finally had to do a web search to get a definition.

As you probably know by now, *FUD* means "Fear, Uncertainty, and Doubt," and it refers to the tactics used by proprietary software vendors such as Microsoft to foment paranoia about Open Source. The term *FUD* is truly at the zenith of its popularity now. I see it almost every day. Even big companies like IBM and Novell use the word to rally their troops.

My personal hope is that the Open Source community will have its fill of *FUD* sometime soon and will move on to a different term. It is not that I don't like the word – in fact, I'm glad we have a term for the patter of half-baked propaganda drummed out by the closed source PR engines. But I can't help thinking the over-emphasis on this term may lead to a disconnect regarding the purposes of debate. *FUD* has the appearance of an aggressive school-yard epithet. You can picture triumphant children singing to a bully, "You are a FUD…". But once you parse the acronym, *FUD* is ultimately a defensive term. It casts vague aspersions on the motives of the accuser, but it doesn't do anything to shift the spotlight or emphasize any real arguments.

Powerful people like Bill Gates are out there now characterizing Open Source as a form of disease. Microsoft advocates talk about the "viral" effect of Open Source software. The notorious Alexis de Tocqueville Institute, famous for the spurious claim that Linus didn't write Linux, refers to Open Source as "Open Sores" and followed up a recent headline on the topic with a disgusting picture of what appear to be some termite larvae, presumably consuming a house in the way that the GPL consumes the underpinnings of society. The public argument all too often goes like this:

"You're a pernicious spreader of disease and a threat to civilization."

"Uh uh, I am not. And you're a FUD for saying so."

I'm fine with *FUD* as long as everyone realizes it is a word to use among friends that has no particular value for swaying the undecided. In contrast, a term like *single--vendor-lockin* (which refers to the fact that if you go with Microsoft, you're stuck with Microsoft), delivers a counter punch that gives the listener something to think about. I'm not sure the unwieldy *single-vendor-lockin* is the answer – although it does have an interesting Dr. Seussian sing-song effect – but at least it doesn't just absorb the insult.

Joe