

# LINSPIRATION

Dear Linux Magazine Reader,



Joe Casad, Editor in Chief

Time passes so quickly in Open Source that you can easily trip over all the milestones if you don't watch where you're walking. Although this is definitely more agreeable than what you'll trip over in Closed Source, dancing around all the momentous beginnings and endings is always a challenge. We have one of those milestones this month.

Because this event is much mentioned and little analyzed,

I'll take a crack at it.

I'm talking about the appearance of the Linspire free version known as Freespire. You'll find a review of Freespire in our Reviews section, as well as a news bit on it in this month's Software News. What's the big deal about another free Linux distro from a consumer-end corporate supplier? In truth, I don't think there is really a big technical story with Freespire, but we should at least mark this moment as the end of an experiment.

You may remember Linspire used to be called Lindows, and it began in 2001 with the dream of a desktop Linux that was so much like Windows that Windows users wouldn't know the difference. Linspire's creators even planned to build in Wine functionality so the system could run Windows apps right out of the box. They soon decided that Wine was not sufficiently fermented for this ambitious deployment, but they held onto their dream of providing an easy Linux-based system for consumers.

Consumers are not like hackers, Linspire reasoned. They want the problems solved for them, and they are willing to pay to have these problems solved. If they pay money for the system, we can hire staff to solve more of their problems. Linspire was part of a new breed of desktop systems (along with Xandros and others) that were aimed at entry-level desktop users. Part of the value they brought to the system was not in what they added to Linux, but in what they took out – how they sculpted the user interface to make Linux look smaller and simpler. Both Linspire and Xandros were very conscious of their role as a well defined product for a well-defined customer. And both had a well-defined price, because well-defined products don't go for free.

Xandros went on to release a no-cost open circulation version in 2004, but until now, Linspire has held to this vision of a well-defined product for a well-defined price. The appearance of Freespire marks a transition away from this single, simple concept for selling Linux.

But, you are probably wondering, aren't other Linux vendors doing the same thing? How is this different from Red Hat with Fedora and Suse with OpenSuse? And the answer is, it isn't different. That's the whole point. These distros all end up in a similar place regardless of their original vision or business plan.

The point isn't that Linspire is different. The point is that Linspire tried to be different and realized it wasn't worth it. Freespire is not a sign of Linspire's desperation, but it is an indication that Linspire is modifying their idea of what they are doing. As many distros learned long ago, the goal isn't to sell Linux. The goal is to sell accessories and services around Linux. In the case of Linspire, that means getting as much traffic as possible to their Click N Run site, and if the best way to do that is to give the operating system away for nothing, give it away.

So Linspire went from its original vision that obtaining a consumer Linux system is like buying a toothbrush to a new philosophy that obtaining Linux is like signing up for AOL or getting a Hotmail account. The good news for Linspire is that they still have their value-added commercial system for pre-installed PCs and Walmart mega-contracts – plus they live on for another day of business.

Joe

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