

UNBREAKABLE

Dear Linux Magazine Reader,



Joe Casad, Editor in Chief

A couple months ago, we heard the news that Oracle will produce a Red Hat-derived Linux and undersell Red Hat for customer support. This bombshell landed hard and reverberated for about one day, until the news of Novell's deal with Microsoft washed out all the other competing dramas.

Since then, the Novell deal continues to receive more scrutiny and condemnation in the press, but as I've mentioned

previously, I'm more worried about the long-term effects of Oracle's profit scheme. Now that Oracle's Unbreakable Linux is up and running, I thought I'd better return to this topic and clarify why I'm so concerned.

Several knockoffs of Red Hat Enterprise Linux happily inhabit the Linux zodiac. RHEL clones include White Box Linux, and CentOS, which we have even included as a Linux Magazine DVD (see the April 2006 issue). The other clones, however, are small-time projects primarily concerned with distributing software. Although I'm sure these doppelgangers are an irritation to Red Hat, they never really compete directly with Red Hat because Red Hat is primarily interested in selling their services, not their software.

Oracle, on the other hand, is a huge corporation with deeper marketing reach than even Red Hat has. And unlike the other companies, Oracle is striking directly at Red Hat's livelihood by competing for the same service contracts.

How can Oracle afford to provide the same support for a lower price? They don't have to invest in research and development. The "software development" for their Unbreakable Linux distro consists of combing through the Red Hat source code and taking out trademark symbols – plus whatever tweaks they may want to carry off. (This part isn't especially clear.)

This use of Red Hat source is all perfectly legal and consistent with the GPL, of course, although it does seem short sighted on the part of Oracle. In the context of old-style corporate commerce, Oracle is merely "capitalizing on opportunities." However, as we know, nothing about Linux or open source fits into the mold of old-style corporate commerce. Enlightened companies realize a better long-term strategy for success is to work through the

community structure, rather than clawing out law-of-the-jungle-style solo victories at the community's expense.

My biggest fear is not that Oracle will put Red Hat out of business, but that it will subtly shift the way Red Hat does business. How will Red Hat compete with Oracle's low price? Two possible options emerge:

- Lower the price of their own service contracts to compete with Oracle. The internal belt tightening induced by these revenue reductions could ultimately lead to reduced investment in development time, slowing down further advances in Linux.
- Microsoft-like monkey-wrenching tricks from Red Hat, designed to make their code less adaptable and more difficult to work with. This tactic would preserve the advantages of first ownership for Red Hat, and in some scenarios, it may be necessary for Red Hat's livelihood, although it serves no real engineering purpose for anyone (including Red Hat).

Either of these outcomes is a huge and pointless tax on quality and productivity for Red Hat, Oracle, Red Hat's customers, Oracle's customers, and the Linux community. In the short term, Red Hat will probably weather this, but in the long term, we'll have to hope that Unbreakable Linux doesn't break anything.

Joe

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