ALL IN A NAME

Dear Linux Magazine Reader,

Sometimes if I hear the same debate long enough, I get this urge to mix it up and send it in a new direction. For instance, what about the long-running feud between GNU founder Richard Stallman and the namers of the system otherwise known as Linux?

The GNU website summarizes the argument as follows:

Just consider: the GNU Project starts developing an operating system, and years later Linus Torvalds adds one important piece. The GNU Project says, "Please give our project equal mention," but Linus says, "Don't give them a share of credit; call the whole thing after my name alone!" [1]

Stallman has a point about the importance of GNU, but his very personalized rhetorical style has the effect of only reaching the people who already agree with him. (It seems quite unlikely that Linus ever said "Don't give them a share of credit: call the whole thing after my name alone!" – which sounds more like something Genghis Khan or Idi Amin would say, but in any case, if he did say it, they should add a footnote with their source. If he didn't say it, it shouldn't be in quotation marks.)

Like many in the software industry, I see the arguments on both sides, but to be honest, I find it really unlikely that the *GNU/* formulation will ever catch on. Slashes are just a really inorganic and cumbersome way to name things. If the GNU Project believes they will not be getting the appropriate credit unless their name is integrated into the name of the system (which seems to be what they are saying), they should be arguing for some kind of hybrid, such as:

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GNU + Linux = Glunix
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Another approach mentioned by the GNU Project is to leave out any mention of Linux completely and just call it "The GNU Operating System," which doesn't really solve anything and actually just applies the same problem in reverse.

Of all the options I've heard, the more general term "The GNU system" seems the most useful as a means for referring to the vast body of free software components and applications Stallman's movement has given to the world. Not that Linux can't be Linux (or BSD, BSD), but in a future of many kernels, GNU will gravitate to a more independent identity as the common denominator.

Consider the following:

- GNU/OpenSolaris – Oracle just bought Sun, which means they just bought Solaris. They currently operate their own Linux distro cloned from Red Hat. They will no doubt continue to support Linux, but you can expect that this association with Oracle will breathe new life into the Solaris scene.
- Debian GNU/kFreeBSD – The BSD-on-Debian concept has been around for years; however, just recently, the Debian team announced new developments in this effort, with the kFreeBSD i386 and AMD64 architectures joining the Debian archive.
- GNU/Mac OS – Projects like Fink and MacPorts are busily porting free software to Mac OS X.
- GNU/Win – I know this looks really weird, but in fact, plenty of free software runs on Windows. The GNU project even has a web page summarizing free software tools for Windows [2].

As the competition among operating systems increases, the public will need a kernel-independent means to refer to this essential collection of free software tools and components, so no matter what happens in the great debate, it seems likely that GNU will continue to remain in the public eye – not just as an idea, but as a name.

Joe

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[1] "Linux, GNU, and Freedom":
http://www.gnu.org/philosophy/linux-gnu-freedom.html

[2] "Free Software Replacements for Proprietary Applications on the Microsoft Windows OS":
http://www.gnu.org/software/for-windows.html