

SOMETHING

Dear Linux Magazine Reader,

Leroy Robert “Satchel” Paige, the iconic athlete-philosopher who was probably the greatest baseball pitcher of all time, used to pass around this insightful list of “Rules for Staying Young”:

1. “Avoid fried meats which angry up the blood.”
2. “If your stomach disputes you, lie down and pacify it with cool thoughts.”
3. “Keep the juices flowing by jangling around gently as you move.”
4. “Go very light on the vices, such as carrying on in society – the social ramble ain’t restful.”
5. “Avoid running at all times.”
6. “And don’t look back – something might be gaining on you.”

After such a list, the last rule is always where the thoughts reside. In this case, Rule 6 seems vaguely like a line from an old movie or a vaudeville routine, with the playful and significant substitution of the term “something” instead of “someone.” (Could it be a monster? A train locomotive? A robot? A pack of wolves? Or some manner of human?)

As any Linux watcher will tell you, one of the great ironies of our subculture is the inversion of the tactical and the technical perspectives. From a business viewpoint, Windows has always been the leader in market share, with Linux and other systems endeavoring to catch up. In terms of technology, however, Linux is several jumps ahead – especially since the emergence of the modern open source desktop environments several years ago – with better security, a vast collection of free applications delivered effortlessly through an easy package management model, and a more versatile and adaptable programming environment.

It is no secret that Linux has picked up some market share on Windows over the years, though how much is a matter for debate, and clearly, more work remains. On the technical end, Microsoft ignored the glaring disadvantages of their systems for years, choosing instead to shift the attention away from the problems through politics and strong-arm corporate deal making. But gradually, because of changes in the market – and quite possibly changes in attitude – they have gotten a bit more serious. Just as Linux has been attempting to address the Windows lead in market share, Microsoft has been working on ways to narrow the Linux technical advantages. They wouldn’t admit it, of course, since that would be admitting they had a problem in the first place, but consider the following:

- Security – Windows security truly isn’t as pathetic as it used to be. They still have some issues to address before they catch up with the Unix-based systems, but the fact is, Windows 7 doesn’t sponge up the malware as badly as XP used to, and it seems to work better than the clunky Vista.
- Software delivery – the gadget age has brought a revolution in the realm of closed source software delivery. It is getting

to look more and more like open source software delivery. Microsoft’s App Marketplace is modeled on the Apple App Store, and other major vendors are also following this trend. These stores were originally intended to service smartphones, but vendors like HP are already announcing efforts to extend this format to laptop and even desktop systems. These app stores are a big advance for closed source software users, with no confusing, unsettling proliferation of different user accounts storing credit card information for different software products from different vendors. You often have to *pay* something for these apps you’re downloading, which still seems like a significant disadvantage to those of us who are accustomed to getting software for free, but in terms of convenience, closed source software will get easier to acquire in the next two years as the app store delivery model solidifies.

Linux is still in front of the pack, with a few technical issues of its own to work on, but the same litany of Windows complaints that worked five years ago might not work five years from now. The solution? Stay young and hungry, or in the words of a legend: avoid fried meats, which angry up the blood, don’t run, but don’t look back – just keep innovating.

Joe

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