

PLUMBERS

Dear Linux Magazine Reader,



Joe Casad, Editor in Chief

Linux is a community, and a community is a family, and a family is – well – not always a happy family. As vast and complex as the corporate world gets, it is often far easier to understand a mere multinational company than to comprehend the inner workings of a family, where the array of influences and arguments reach well beyond the simple quest for profits.

Nowhere is this dynamic more in evidence than in the recent spat between kernel developer Greg Kroah-Hartman and Canonical, makers of Ubuntu Linux. Although much of the smoke has already cleared from this exchange, many misconceptions remain about what exactly happened and what it all meant.

The short version is that Greg Kroah-Hartman gave a keynote speech at the Linux Plumbers conference (complete with pie-chart presentation slides) calling attention to Canonical's lack of participation in Linux kernel development and other core projects. Canonical responded with a spirited defense, protesting that the company helps the open source community in many other ways.

As often happens in such cases, the real story is somewhere in between the uncluttered certainties of the protagonists. A good starting point would be to consider quickly what the GPL does (and doesn't) do. The GPL requires anyone who distributes the software to make the changes available in source code form. In other words, if Canonical makes any changes to the Linux kernel (or any other GPL'd software), they are required to provide the source code associated with the changes. They are *not* required by the license to participate actively in the process of building a reference version of the Linux kernel for everyone else. However, just because Canonical isn't legally required to participate in this process doesn't mean a kernel developer can't use the weight of public opinion to influence Canonical's level of participation. In the open source world, the concept of "pitching in" or "giving back" has a real effect on how a company is perceived.

This debate caused quite a stir in the media and seemed to end in an impasse, with neither side acknowledging that the other had a point. But if you take a slightly longer view, the story is a bit more encouraging.

The Plumbers speech was actually a follow-up to an earlier presentation. The issue of Canonical's contribution came up in a general talk on kernel development Kroah-

Hartman gave at Google on June 5, at which point he reportedly stated that "Canonical does not give back to the community." A month later, at the OSCON conference in July, Canonical founder Mark Shuttleworth announced a new initiative to provide programming support for the X, OpenGL, GTK, Qt, Gnome, and KDE projects. Although Canonical was careful not to cast this announcement as a reaction to Kroah-Hartman's remarks, the effect is the same: The community raised a complaint, and the company responded swiftly with a new initiative to reassert their positive image within the community. In other words, the exchange was relatively healthy and the process worked exactly as it was supposed to work.

The debate since the Plumbers conference has focused on the details of what constitutes a "contribution" and what constitutes "Linux." To be honest, this whole discussion would be much easier if Kroah-Hartman didn't work for Novell – a major competitor of Canonical – and yet, by any account, he is an important contributor who has a right to some air time.

This question might ultimately boil down to a matter of opinion. If you believe the Linux kernel *is* Linux, then anyone who isn't contributing to the kernel isn't contributing to Linux. But if you see the kernel as just one of many components of a larger, less hierarchical software system, then Canonical is on the right track – or at least they have been since OSCON.

Joe

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