THE OTHER MONOPOLY

Dear Linux Magazine Reader,

Joe Casad, Editor in Chief

A fifteen-year-old I know came home from school recently with the announcement that he is taking a class in computers. I asked what he will be learning – maybe some beginning networking or programming? It seems that the course will instead cover how to do things in office suite applications – like word processors, spreadsheets, and slide show editors. I won't deny that it makes sense for schools to teach students these tools, although it is perhaps an overstatement to say they are learning about computers when they are learning to type. My real alarm came when I asked him what office suite they were using and he said: Microsoft Office.

Perhaps I am engaging in a bit of my own overstatement. I wasn't really alarmed; I could have guessed the class would be centered around Microsoft products. Still, this episode brought an important problem to light. How much are all those schools, everywhere in the world, paying for the privilege of indoctrinating students into a software merchandising model that will continue to exact tribute for years after graduation? I have no doubt that Microsoft offers a big "educational discount" to enchant buyers. They may even donate software to some schools. But the only effect of their generosity is to allow the school to offload the cost of computer literacy back to the student. A graduate who wants to use this new knowledge will have to either buy their own Office license or work for someone else who has purchased an Office license.

The solution, of course, is for all these schools and all these students to use OpenOffice, which is absolutely free and always will be. That isn't an especially profound observation for a Linux magazine, I suppose, but it leads to some strategic implications.

OpenOffice is one of the leading Linux applications and, for better or worse, the fortunes of OpenOffice follow the fortunes of Linux. It would be very difficult for a committed Open Source advocate to go into a local school office and demand OpenOffice without also demanding Linux. At least where I live, the entry of OpenOffice into the education sector is tied to the entry of Linux, even though OpenOffice runs on both Mac OS X and current versions of Windows. There is even a legacy build of OpenOffice that runs on Windows 95.

The problem is that issues related to operating systems are considered deep and voodoo-like to non-technical decision makers. It is easy to tangle the discussion up in conflicting information, as evidenced by the Microsoft "Get the Facts" campaign and the thousands of "Cost of Ownership" studies that appear almost daily. These complications simply don't exist in the realm of office software. Put simply: I can't imagine anyone paying real money for Microsoft Office if they don't have to. If you break the expectation that Office is somehow necessary, the entire operation (one of the biggest cash cows in the Microsoft portfolio) will very rapidly become extinct.

A lively debate is going on right now in Open Source circles about whether it is wise to port Open Source applications to Windows. Some advocates make the point that this would have the effect of letting Microsoft co-opt the work of Open Source developers and, therefore, would reduce the pressure for institutions to adopt Open Source systems. I agree with this point in general, but in the case of OpenOffice, the question is a bit more complicated. The port already exists, and all you have to do is download it. And the presence of OpenOffice in the Microsoft environment is not going to change. Sun, a company that still exerts significant influence on OpenOffice, isn't going to start boycotting Microsoft no matter what anyone says about it. So while the battle of the operating systems rages, maybe it is time for someone to lead an expedition into the lax defenses of the other Microsoft monopoly.

Joe