

NET-FREE NET

Dear Linux Magazine Reader,

I'm waking up today to headlines heralding the end of an era. This era, of course, will be over somewhere between 4 and 10 weeks by the time you read this, but something as important as an era deserves a little time for mourning and reflection. The reason why this era is ending, according to the newsphere, is because Microsoft just announced a new tablet computer, which they are calling the Microsoft Surface tablet. The reason this new tablet ends an era is because Microsoft has never before embraced this role of selling PC-like hardware.

Those who have lived through the entire PC epoch remember well that Microsoft built its whole empire on being the company that *did not* market PC hardware. They got their start as IBM's special little friend, shipping millions of MS-DOS instances with early, iconic IBM PCs. Then when IBM tried to swallow the whole sandwich, by pushing out Microsoft and bundling their own OS/2 system with consumer computers, Microsoft quickly made IBM irrelevant – and dealt a blow to the very concept of a PC brand – by making their own deals with OEM vendors, who thus had access to a gigantic market that soon exploded into the consumer PC industry we know today.

Later is the early Macintosh era, when it appeared that Apple was poised to take the industry by storm, Microsoft stuck to its game plan, and Apple eventually became mired in the complexity of managing the hardware supply channels, nearly going bankrupt before Steve Jobs came back and pulled the cat out of the water.

The announcement that Microsoft is launching its own PC-grade tablet is therefore big news that is receiving lots of media attention. Several commentators have asked what this will do to OEM relationships. Vendors like Dell and HP will be competitors – will they still want to be “partners”? We hear that Microsoft is “trying out a new business model.” Another story states that “Microsoft needs to do something to shake up the mobile world a bit and show they are indeed interested in competing in this space.” But what is “this space”? And how does one “compete” in it?

I'm amazed that the whole point of this announcement seems lost on the greater IT audience, although it is perfectly obvious to the open source community. Microsoft has launched itself into a whole new era, but the commentators are still back in the old era, analyzing this move in terms of its implications on the market for PC and mobile hardware – as if hardware even exists as an isolated market within this chariot race to capture and dominate the mobile industry. Those who got close enough actually to test drive one of the

prototypes say they are “impressed” with the display. They give their summary of minor complaints about the keyboard and postulate on the effect on OEM relations. But this move isn't really about selling hardware – it is about projecting control. Control over search. Control over links to download apps, music, and written materials. Microsoft doesn't envy the iPad – they envy iTunes. They want to start building their own silo to control the user's access to applications and content and to control the gold mine of data pertaining to that customer walking around with that tablet in a backpack.

This vision, which is ever more popular across the high-tech industry, is not just to sell products but to put users in a kind of net, and I don't mean a *Net* as in short for *Internet* – I mean a real net, the kind you use to ensnare fish and butterflies. I hope this strategy doesn't succeed for Microsoft. But then, I don't really want it to work out for Apple either. The way to stop all this is to pay attention when you make a consumer decision and hold out for products that don't influence or restrict your freedom of choice. Or to put it another way, how about if we all hold out for a net-free Net?

Joe

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