Here Now, Later Essay, Research Paper

Do you see fragmentation in the Linux distribution market to be a good, bad, or neutral thing? Do you think that the”media frenzy” over Linux tends to harm other worthy OS projects like the BSDs and BeOS? Do you think that big business’s entry into the Linux market will change the gift-culture aspects of Linux, or will the businesses in question adapt to Linux? Or both? What do you think is in store for humanity in terms of relations between governments, businesses, and individuals? Do you think that we should actively pursue colonization of other planets in our star system at this time, and if not, then when?

Abe answers:

You’ll feel better if you take the long view.

Your questions all tie together and fit the theme of “ask Abe” well. One part traveling with peers in Mexico plus two parts juvenile conflict and one part media distortion equals “The Bad Guy”? I digress, yet according to MTV it does. But the media is like a big baby with an infant’s attention deficit disorder – it focuses and probably tries to destroy one thing at a time; soon enough it moves on. The role of “big business” is less predictable but I think in the end likely to prove less damaging. For one thing, “big business” isn’t as big as it once was; there’s lots of money to throw around, sure, but success (a la Silicon Valley housing prices) ultimately leads to failure. Yin to yang.

So right now, maybe the earliest contributors to Linux are thinking about cashing inwives and kids and mortgages can do that to you. But behind them are more young coders who will keep the phenomenon of widely-shared free OS alive. That old joke about Microsoft and the Catholic church isn’t really all that funny, but Martin Luther came along. And then when the Lutheran church got fat and dull with official state sponsorship, new generations advocating a kinder, simpler (and less expensive) church came along. Same with operating software, only in a time frame of months, not centuries. The process of creative destruction is inevitable.

True also for our human self-organization. After a few hundred years, we’re in a period of decline for the nation-state. Borders are permeable (or fundamentally useless) in the “computer age.” I don’t know if your question comes from Peoria or Paris and it doesn’t matter. There’s still fear and a great respect for unimportant divisions among humanity, but there are many hopeful signs that that is changing. Even in a forum like this we tend to challenge each other’s ideas without reference to gender, race or religion. That’s nice; that’s a good model for the development of the world.

Eventually government, business and the individual will not be seen as antagonistic elements but as cooperative strings on the violin of human culture. And when we have progressed as musicians, then we will be free, ready and eager to explore and colonize space.

brianvan asks:

(He had many questions; this is just one of them) …you’re a person who had a rough childhood who happens to be good at computers. What are your thoughts on making computers and the Internet accessible to the “financially challenged?” What can people do to make sure that no one misses out on the computer age, including those who are poor and/or homeless?

Abe answers:

Your overall question is a larger issue that deserves more time than I’ve been given here. I feel strongly about making computers and the Internet a force for promoting greater income equality and educating everybody to their greatest potential, but strategies for doing that are complex.

One important thing is to make a difference in your own communities, and right now I’m a college student. The Associated Students of Cuesta College (ASCC) have an annual budget of approx $100,000. Through involvement with the student senate, I’ve learned that 4000 of those precious dollars had been partitioned off for upgrades of M$ office for the free ASCC computer lab. I’m going to have to volunteer my own time for setup, and I will likely need to ‘convert’ an IS administrator or two in the process, but I can guarantee you that while I’m at student at Cuesta, not a dime is going to be spent on M$ products. At least not any student body funds. I’m angling to get the money reallocated to hardware upgrades or making Linux CD’s freely available.

This summer BMP brought all of the recent Real World and Road Rules cast members back to LA for a professional three-day public speaking seminar. (BMP’s in bed with varsitybooks.com – “For the low, low price of $750 apiece, you can get MTV’s backwash live and in person at your local campus! Call BMP’s Joffe Agency now at 818-756-5244 and you too can meet the ‘punk hacker kid’ in person!”)

Joking aside, on the onset of this training all eighteen of us were given different topics we could speak on for our final-night presentation. A few hypocritically choose to speak about std/aids awareness or alcoholism. I choose the topic closest to my life, volunteerism. Having had little first hand knowledge practicing the topic, I ended up relating my personal experience from being on the receiving side. You know – planned on exemplifying how important volunteer work really is by telling my welfare and YMCA camp stories. I ended up giving a 1200 person crowd a short introduction to Open Source Software ideology and using OSS as an example of unconventional yet dramatic ways of giving back.

So, save participating in local LUG’s and extolling the virtues of OSS to unsuspecting BMP lecture audiences, I’m in no position to make sure the computer age reaches all. At least not yet

asad asks:

Do you feel that having a Slashdot interview about an 18 year old who got to be on MTV is sad evidence of Slashdot’s decline into media-whoring pablum? I mean, sure there are countless programmers, writers, artists, thinkers, or developers with something intelligent to say, but dude, have any of THEM been on MTV?

Abe answers:

Mr. Robin Miller came to me back in July. I sat on his request until August, replying that a position paper on how the Open Source movement is enabling a whole generation of otherwise misguided teenagers would probably be much more interesting. (”Ask who?! You’re kidding me!”)

I apologize to those who truly deserve the exposure.

When you’re on this end of things, Slashdot’s so-called “decline into media-whoring pablum” seems more a product of its tough crowd quotient rather than any particular interview or story.

DonkPunch asks:

Explain the universe. Give three examples.

Abe answers:

Our planetary system is a spit-drop on a cosmic string which has been growing and unraveling for roughly 18 billion years. In another two billion years, we’re going to ratchet back up like a yo-yo. The earth is a cosmic egg waiting for the right moment to hatch. The chick’s going to be a hungry 4-trillion-ton pecker and we’re all just feed. It turns out that hiccups are attempted transmissions from God. When we try to stop, we are actually inhibiting the evolution of the universe.

Python asks:

(Two questions selected from a long list he submitted)What line of work do you plan to persue after your 15 minutes of fame with MTV?

Would you recommend that others use your tactics of cracking boxes and breaking into future employers boxes and so on to get a job with them?

Abe answers:

I would recommend using all legal means available to unstack the deck. Contrary to many folks interpretation of the Salon story, I did not investigate Bunim-Murray Productions Windows/SMB network until the casting process was in it’s final leg. I had seen enough of BMP to make a judgment call that they’d probably more impressed than pissed. By that time I’d also returned all four signed copies of the 30-page contract they require of semi-finalists. Perhaps it could be argued in court that by being under contract, and under so much scrutiny from them, my explorations constituted an acceptable behavior.

In the end, I’ve never used or had any inclination to use ill-begotten information for a malicious purposes. That won’t protect my bare ass should MTV come calling with a legality spanking, but at least I maintained some dignity by not publicly airing their dirty laundry.

As for future plans – Every time I walk out of a class, I want to major in that subject. Perhaps Cuesta’s better than most community colleges, or I’m just passing through a standard deer-in-the-headlights freshman syndrome. In the long run, computer science and business would be an obvious choice, but communication, psychology and journalism better fits my personality. I want to do it all.

rcade asks:

I’m one of the people who suggested Abe Ingersoll as an interview subject on Slashdot. The guy snuck into the unsecured network of the Road Rules producers and used the information he gained to (a) improve his odds of getting on the show, (b) play head games with people on the show, and (c) improve his odds of getting laid while on the show. Millions of TV viewers know the guy as a “computer hacker” or “computer cracker.”

Add all of this up, and I think it’s worthwhile to see what’s rattling around in the guy’s head. Besides, he’s not much more of an MTV fan than people making comments here, comparing Road Rules to “looking up someone’s \*censored\*” in the Salon article.

Some questions:

If you are on probation for the credit card scam, snooping through Bunim-Murray’s network could have sent you to jail. Did Bunim-Murray or anyone else make noise about pursuing legal action against you?

What bug reports were you reading when you got the idea to employ Back Orifice on the Bunim-Murray network?

By all appearances, you haven’t suffered much in the way of negative consequences for cracking and other misdeeds. Now that you’re on the MTV-celebrity lecture tour, are you doing anything to teach the teeming millions that cracking is a bad idea?

Abe answers:

The only comment I got back from Bunim-Murray regarding the Salon article was a smile. I think they may have expected that I’d do much worse, and are just hoping I don’t get in bed with a lawyer who’s seen “The Fight” before a statute of limitations runs out.

As for bug reports, that’s essentially a misquote. I was asked to paraphrase statements about keeping abreast of computer world news in general into something more quotable.

If anyone needs to an example of how cracking is a bad idea and will eventually just cause you to hurt yourself, follow this link [no link was provided -ed.]and set your threshold low.

The article was written about four months ago and was passed around between a couple different media outlets before it was finally published on Salon. When I consider how many editors it went through, I can’t be too disappointed with the final product.

The hatchet job was the “hacker” verbiage! EVERY single chance I got during the interviews I would correct the writer’s inclination to use misuse of the term. “It’s cracker. CRACKER! CRACKED! CRACKER! Please don’t use ‘hacker’ or I’ll look like an idiot.” Back when I filled out “punk hacker kid” on my written Road Rules application I had wanted to sound cool to the technology illiterate casting team. My bad. I’ve since learned that ‘dropping the term’, even off-handedly, is painfully equivalent to ‘dropping the soap’ in flame hell.