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Dr. Unix Weekly: Why Linux will replace most proprietary Unices



Dr. Unix

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A fresh view at reality from the renowned Unix guru...

If you ask me, the Linux phenomenon is one of the most interesting things to have happened in and to the IT-industry since the invention of the abacus. A loosely connected, haphazard, group of volunteers, spanning the globe and only connected through the Internet, created an efficient, robust and complete operating system that is conquering the market by storm. The success of Linux is the most visible showcase for open source software development and it forces many market players and customers to rethink their attitudes towards software creation, support and maintenance processes.

My vision is that Linux will be so spectacularly successful that it will prompt most vendors of Unix to abandon their own proprietary Unix versions and switch to Linux. So, no longer any HP-UX, AIX, IRIX or Digital Unix, just Linux! This might seem like a pretty bold statement to make, but in fact this trend can easily be predicted from clear economic principles.

Take Hewlett-Packard as an example. They design, build and sell splendid computer systems. Their hardware engineers are among the best in the industry; I work with their stuff a lot and am usually very impressed with their products. On their RISC computers (HP9000) they ship HP-UX: Hewlett-Packard's proprietary Unix: highly conformant to all kinds of standards, and as open as can be, but still closed source. However, no customer I ever encountered choose HP specifically for HP-UX. When asked they usually cite reasons such as "service", "support", "speed" (performance) and a range of other reasons for choosing HP.

"So why", do I ask you "would HP develop and maintain their own version of Unix?" The answer is (or at least was) pretty clear: simply because it is (was) an enabling factor for their RISC server and workstation business. If they wouldn't write Unix for their computers, who would? And, without an operating system, who would buy their stuff?

But now this reasoning does not hold any more. With the appearance of Linux on the stage, there now exists a world class Unix operating system that will run on PA-RISC processors (or, at least, pretty soon; the Puffin Group, an Ottawa based Linux company now part of LinuxCare, is porting Linux to the HP9000. I am told it is pretty near shipping status). Why would HP invest the tons of time and money that are needed to maintain an entire operating system if there is a good alternative available that costs them nothing? You tell me! They surely don't make any money on HP-UX. As far as I can see they do it purely because otherwise they would not sell any HP9000's.

But pretty soon, some people at HP are going to wake up. "He, why maintain this massive HP-UX effort if we can achieve the same enabling for our hardware from Linux?" And then they start realizing that they can forget about most of their HP-UX developers and that they'll need only a small team of HP9000/Linux experts on board to assure the future compatibility of Linux with the HP9000. They will obviously support HP-UX for some time to come, and offer all sorts of migration assistance to customers, but slowly but surely new features will only appear in Linux and customers will be coerced in moving to Linux.

"But", will detractors argue, "HP has created extensions to HP-UX that are not yet available for Linux: for instance the Software Distributor, Ignite/UX and MC/ServiceGuard". Well, my guess would be that they will port all that stuff to Linux pretty soon; maybe they open source it, maybe not, maybe they will sell it and bundle it with Linux for the HP9000. Who knows? However, these are no very fundamental issues why this kind of software will not be available under Linux. And, as an added bonus, the move to Linux would finally enable HP to integrate their RISC and Intel server strategies!

I used Hewlett-Packard here as an example only. They are obviously one of the companies for which the move from their proprietary Unix to Linux would be very beneficial. However, the same reasoning holds for other Unix vendors as well: IBM (AIX), SGI (IRIX) and CompaQ (Tru64) to name but a few. The only vendor for my vision is not so clear is Sun. They are totally committed to their Unix (Solaris) and I would not see them abandon Solaris anytime soon. But for the rest, the vision is clear: Move To Linux!

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