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Global geeks bet on open source



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A number of people were taken aback when a variety of Microsoft Web sites, including the main microsoft.com site, temporarily disappeared last week.

After all, here is a company trying to convince the corporate sector that it has what it takes to support mission-critical business applications on the Web.

Whatever the cause of the original problem, it did reignite a debate that rages constantly in the world of the computer geeks: If a company can't keep its own Web properties up and running, how can it hope to convince others?

That debate goes to the heart of one hidden truth of the Internet: The vast majority of hard-core computer geeks don't use the Microsoft product for their Internet servers and other infrastructure.

They use a variety of open-source software, all of which is developed on-line through a sort of global community effort — and all of which is available for free.

Many people have heard of the idea of "open-source software" because of the well-known operating system Linux. Microsoft and other organizations have tried to cast the idea of "open source" in a negative light, suggesting that such software isn't reliable.

Yet much of the "plumbing" of the Internet is based on open-source software — indeed, the Internet works because of the massive reliability of such software, compared with the alternatives.

Consider Web servers. The large majority of sites around the world are based on a program known as "Apache," not commercial stuff from say, Microsoft or Netscape.

Want to have a little bit of fun? Visit NetCraft (www.netcraft.com), choose "What's that site running?", type in a Web site address — and you'll find out.

This is where things become fascinating. The Government of Canada Web site? It's running on Apache. Amazon.com? Same thing. The CBC, the Russian government, and Honda? Ditto.

In fact, Apache is predominant when it comes to the Web. The most recent study by NetCraft of over 25 million Web sites indicated that some 60 per cent of the Web runs on Apache Web servers, compared to 19 per cent for Microsoft. Other surveys confirm these numbers.

Not only that, the majority of Web sites worldwide run on Linux or UNIX systems, not Microsoft software or other systems. It's almost as if globally, geeks have voted on who they trust.

That's particularly the case with security issues. Most programmers often go with the system OpenBSD, also part of the global open-source movement, which is known for its absolutely bedrock security.

Open-source software is developed and shared among computer developers. The idea is that if the computer code is out in the open, any potential bugs and problems can best be fixed by a global effort.

Many other parts of the Internet are massively dependent on open-source software, such as e-mail program Sendmail or PHP, the tool-du-jour that lets Web sites do nifty things, such as process order forms and other information.

The list goes on and on. The fact is, the Internet was developed through a global co-operative effort so it isn't surprising that it is based on software that follows a similar philosophy.

All of which suggests if you are assessing your future technology direction on-line, you had better understand where the majority of global geeks place their bets.

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