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@RASC

# Flooding rinks and rebuilding kernels — for fun and the common good

This winter I volunteered to join the neighbourhood rink duty. We got a great deal — the city set up an outdoor rink, put in place a shed with a firehose, and left the issue of ice quality up to us.

And I had a ball! If you've never used an honest-to-goodness firehose, you have to try one out. And I'm in a good situation to be helping out. Many of the volunteers couldn't do anything during the week, since many of them have an early commute downtown.

But since I work at home and am an early riser, I could devote time to the cause. And I must tell you that the freezing conditions are usually great at 5 a.m., with the added benefit of no one up walking around who might damage the ice without thinking.

Yet according to Jim Allchin at Microsoft Corp., my efforts might be considered "against the American way." That's OK. I am Canadian, and proud of it. And I don't think volunteering is un-American at all.

There has been a lot of laughter, and often disgust, within the open-source community ever since Allchin made his asinine remarks in February, trying to paint a picture that open-source projects are not good for America. In typical fashion, Microsoft has now tried to furiously backpedal from Allchin's comments, but the fact is, with executives making such ridiculous statements, it shows that a) Microsoft is truly worried about Linux and open source and b) Microsoft still doesn't get it.

Now back to my rink. I'm willing to help out because in a small way, it makes my neighbourhood a better place. And every time I went for a skate and saw some kid with a smile on his or her face, well, I was sold. I'll do this until I'm old and grey and can't hold a firehose anymore.

The same motivation drives many of those involved with open-source projects. They're fun, and they help to make the world of technology a better place.

Let's forget for a moment the issue of how you make a business model out of open source. It's a complicated matter, and I don't think anyone really knows. But dig deeper, and think about what is truly happening here with systems like Linux and other open-source projects. I know it sounds silly and condescending, but to me, there is something pure and honest about the idea of open source.

Why? Because everyday I sit in my office, caught up in the whirlwind of IT industry hype. PR agencies encircle me with their fax-based covered wagons, eager to put their spin on the latest greatest vapourware, hoping that I will write about it in one of my columns. And working with e-biz, I've come to realize what the phrase "unrealistic hype" really means.

To purify myself from the blather, I often hit slashdot.org and browse the listings at linuxtoday.com in order to get a sense of where we are really going with this technology world. I decided one day back in 1997 that I simply had better get my head into Linux and the whole open-source movement.

What I've come to realize over the years with my voyage into this world is this: the objective of many open-source wizards is simply to build something better, and to have fun doing it.

Just as I help out with the ice.

Does this make them un-American commie-pinko-revolutionaries, folks who would make Archie Bunker bite off the end of his cigar? Not at all.

Fun? Damned right! For many people, including myself, the world of technology has become rather staid, predictable and boring. Case in point: I recently obtained an IBM Thinkpad A20p. A fabulous laptop with a killer 15-inch screen that does 1400x1050 resolution.

Upon receiving it, I installed Windows 2000, visited the IBM and 3Com Web sites, and everything worked fine with a few additional drivers. Dullsville city. I mean, it couldn't have been less fun than if I had to watch paint dry.

Linux? It was another thing altogether. Right off the bat, X wouldn't work. So I set out to find a solution — I was a man on a mission! And from there began a voyage over a few nights into the mysteries of X version 3.x vs. 4.01, and the new architecture involved. I did a lot of reading, getting maybe 50% of what I read, and one night, I managed to get it working. And that brought me a singular joy with technology that I haven't encountered since I figured out how to use dBase II without a manual back in 1982.

Hey, this is fun! That's why I spent time here. Not only that, but throughout the process, I learned a heck of a lot about how the video gets from my CPU and video card to my screen. And so it was also a knowledge exercise, folks, and I'm a better person for it.

My next challenge? I've got a 3Com wireless LAN card. No problem in Windows 2000. But Linux — now I'm stuck. In exploring my solutions, it became evident that I would need to rebuild the kernel. After all, I found drivers over at sourceforge.net, but they would require this dark and mysterious step.

Oh man, I sat there for days, freaked out. This is scary, I thought. I'm an accountant, for cryin' out loud. Well, a geek-accountant, if the truth be told. But compiling a kernel? I can't do that. But I stoked up my courage, did a lot of reading, got the necessary files, rebuilt my kernel — and the fifth time I got it right.

Whoopee!

My next task? I'm going to build a Web page detailing my solution to getting X and my wireless 3Com card working on my Thinkpad, and I'll make it available to others. I'll add some details on some of the things I learned in order to make it easier for others. And the fact is, I'm helping out in my own small way with open source, and I'll get a singular thrill every time I examine my Web logs and see someone looking at those pages.

Add up the efforts of hundreds of thousands of people worldwide, and that's open source in a nutshell. Many people, whether they are flooding a rink or helping with open source, are blessed with a community spirit in which they love to help out for the common good.

There is nothing un-American at all about open source. Indeed, the effort perhaps best encapsulates everything that is great about the society we live in. ◄◄

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