

The “Green” Operating System: Linux

BY JIM LEISY

A few weeks ago, I was driving south on Interstate 405 in Portland, Oregon. The radio was tuned to the local NPR affiliate. As beautiful Mt. Hood came into view, a story about computer recycling was launched.

Its focus was Free Geek (<http://www.freegeek.org>), a Portland nonprofit organization that takes in cast-off computers and monitors for recycling. Oso, the organization’s founder and director, was the invisible talking head fielding the interviewer’s questions. He is young, accomplished (a former architect), and articulate. His argument for being concerned about the fate of obsolete computers was con-

vincing. Computer components make up 40% of the content of our landfills. Many of the ingredients needed to manufacture them are extremely poisonous (lead, for example). These toxins are now leaching into the soil and threatening the purity of our drinking water.

Free Geek routes a computer one of two ways depending upon its chip technology. 386s and below, plus old Macs, are checked for still viable components and then broken up for delivery to metals and plastics recyclers. 486s on up (and

newer Macs) are checked out, rebuilt, and serviced as needed. These machines are either given to volunteers who have completed 18 hours of service at Free Geek or offered to nonprofit organizations.

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When these computers are returned to useful service they sport the Linux operating system. Why? Because it is free. Neither Microsoft nor Apple see any gain in allowing organizations like Free Geek to offer old hardware with their operating environment. Unless licensing fees are collected.

So, it turns out, Linux is not only the free operating system, but the green operating system. And with the addition of Gnome or Kde it be-



Outside the Office of Free Geek in Portland, Oregon

comes the green operating environment. It is unlikely that Linus Torvalds (the father of Linux) anticipated such a positive environmental side-effect of his brainchild.

This feature-rich operating system brings even greater possibilities to Free Geek's born-again machines. They can be powerful workstations (equal to any Wintel or Apple workstation), network servers, and Web servers. Linux fans say they will be even more dependable and enduring than their highly visible commercial counterparts.

In my opinion, Microsoft and Apple are missing a chance to build goodwill and a great opportunity to help the environment. The nature of their business contributes directly to this serious environmental problem. They should overtly address this issue by giving either light editions or older versions of their operating systems to nonprofit computer recycling organizations. Sales of their other software products would very likely follow.

I will briefly digress at this point. Every industry deals with competition from legacy products and environ-

Related Sites of Interest

Free Geek
(<http://freegeek.org/>)

Digital Dinosaurs: What Should You Do with Your Old Computer?
(<http://www.fbeedle.com/technote/01-01/dinos/dinos.html>)

FreeOS.com-The Resource Center for Free Operating Systems
(<http://www.freeos.com/>)

Linux Online!
(<http://www.linux.org/>)

SlashDot
(<http://www.slashdot.org/>)



Checking In a Computer at Free Geek

mental issues in one form or another. For textbook publishers the used textbook business is our legacy threat. Used textbooks have a huge impact on publisher revenues. However, in the face of revenue and

profit erosion most publishers choose to support their constituency by providing desk copies and instructor support materials at no charge. One could argue that since used book companies are reaping

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The Intake—Parts to Be Sorted and Reused at Free Geek

the profits, they should be obliged to pay for this service. But publishers take a longer view and believe building goodwill is a part of doing good business.

Our industry also drives the consumption of forests to make paper and oil to make ink. However, significant conservation and environmentally friendly solutions have been implemented in the book manufacturing process. Today's textbooks are manufactured with up to 50% recycled paper stock. The paper is acid free. Whenever possible, water or soy-based inks are used to print the text and cover. As an industry we continue to reduce consumption and to avoid the use of hazardous products.

Okay, what's the point? Not that book publishing is the model for doing green business. The point is that getting greener is good for the planet and for sustaining business. Every business must examine how its practices affect the world we live in. In the process of defending a proprietary operating environment against Linux in the marketplace, Microsoft, for one, is failing to recognize the potential of a growing Linux constituency created by organizations such as Free Geek. Linux is becoming many things to many people, and without a Microsoft-size marketing budget. It is the people's operating system and the green operating system.

In the long run, computer recyclers may not have a big impact on the spread of Linux. However, Microsoft and Apple should create a registration program for legitimate nonprofit computer recyclers, like Free Geek, that would provide a free license to restore the operating environment to the one they currently offer on new hardware. It would do a lot for the corporate images of these companies and for the environment!