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## Linux Journal and the GPL Utopia

The cover of the October 2007 issue of *Linux Journal* boasts a striking photo of a green cellphone with the heading “Program the Trolltech Greenphone”. The GNU/Linux community bears a stigma of being a society of programmers, and if one were to take the journal cover at face value, one might find this stereotype confirmed. However, a look into the index of *Linux Journal* tells a slightly different story. Articles range from “KDENLIVE...KDE enliven your videos” to “OpenMedia my PVR...MythTV made easy” to “Ten Questions for Sean Moss-Pultz”. Including the piece on the Greenphone, each of these articles have one thing in common: they promote a way of thinking. To take this a step further, one could conclude that *Linux Journal* promotes an entire lifestyle (Diehl, 2006). While this is not uncommon for technology journals (consider Apple-centered magazines and the Apple lifestyle, many competing Linux periodicals focus more on the programming or business side of linux. While *Linux Journal* may be read and enjoyed by business professionals, its intended audience is more likely the devoted layperson: the home-brew techie who considers GNU/Linux an ideology and has little or no financial investment in its success or failure within the marketplace beyond advancing development for community use.

The articles themselves usually fit into one of three categories:

**1) The practical how-to.** This can range from setup and configuration of certain applications to providing a primer for programming in a certain language or for a certain device. These how-to articles usually avoid advanced programming topics more appropriate for advanced Linux developers and focus on gadgets or adding functionality to lifestyle software, such as MythTV,

which is open source DVR software similar to Tivo.

**2) Exploring software and gadgets.** Rather than provide in-depth details on such things as the setup and maintenance of firewalls and routing tables, *Linux Journal* generally focuses on information about media players and graphics-related software. One could find much of this information on a command-line man page, but *Linux Journal* provides practical examples that would otherwise take a bit of research to find. *Linux Journal* explores alternatives to common proprietary software, an emphasis that can be helpful for users transitioning from Windows to Linux. Even when *Linux Journal* does venture into the realm of professional or business-oriented tasks, the articles keep the coding to a minimum and provide more general guidelines with little more than a configuration file or two to edit. For example, the April 2007 issue features security and cryptography, but rarely do the writers provide more than a tertiary glance at an application. The same basic principal holds for exploring gadgets.

**3) Interviews with key open source figures and advocates.** It is uncommon to find *Linux Journal* interviews with key open-source figureheads, such as Richard Stallman of the Free Software Foundation or Jonathan Swartz of Sun Microsystems. In fact, the most recent interview the journal conducted with Linus Torvalds, original author and current maintainer of the Linux kernel, was back in 1994. That said, *Linux Journal* makes up for this deficiency by including interviews with the individuals that work behind the scenes. The October 2007 issue features Bob Sutor, who was key in advancing IBM's adoption and subsequent promotion of open source and Linux. In the conversation, IBM provided the setting while the questions kept returning to the GPL, which is more likely to be of interest to idealists. In 2003, *Linux Journal* also published another sort of interview titled "Interview with a Grandmother" (Klemmer), which profiled an elderly woman's experiences transitioning to Linux on the desktop.

*Linux Journal* provides a unique genre infusion of utopianism and social realism. The aspect of social realism is somewhat easier to justify, considering that so many of the articles involve a hands-on exploration of hardware and software. Rob Kling describes social realism “a genre which uses empirical data to examine computerization as it is actually practiced and experienced” (1994), a definition which can also include many of the interviews. Both the interview with Bob Sutor and “a Grandmother” examine the use of technology to complete a task along with the resulting impact. Perhaps more interesting is the technological utopian point of view present in most articles of *Linux Journal*, even if just an undertone. For the most part, this utopianism centers on the potential for an open society unbound by corporate restrictions and proprietary software or hardware. The vehicle for this society is the General Public License, or the GPL, which aims to keep all software free and open while avoiding abuses from sources of power. The Bob Sutor piece provides an illustration of the *Linux Journal's* utopianism clashing with Sutor's more business-minded approach: “[Q]: So if you thought you could serve your customers better and still make a profit, would you then be happy to make everything open source? [A]: Well, I want to get away from this 'everything open source', because I'm afraid people will extract just snippets of that discussion. We are doing more open source in 2007 than we did in 2006, let's put it that way. And as we figure out how to serve our customers, we will go with that” (Moody, 2007). Sutor side-stepped a question that some might see as laden with ideology and provided a practical, business-minded answer, and this is one of many examples of similar side-stepping during the course of the interview. The interviewer wanted an empirical pro-GPL quote, but Sutor never fully obliged. For *Linux Journal* interviews, this resistance is somewhat unusual. For example, in a previous issue Moody interviews Simon Phipps of Sun Microsystems, who is almost anxious to trumpet Sun's growing commitment to the GPL (2007). When Moody asks why IBM hasn't

followed Sun's example, Sutor responds, "Well, let me say that Sun will do what Sun feels is appropriate for its business model and its history in the software business, and we will do the same."

In many ways, the Greenphone article and the Sean Moss-Pultz interview epitomize the overall focus of *Linux Journal*. The Greenphone article is a programming primer, which describes basic interaction with the device using Qtopia, a C++ based mobile framework on which the Qt APIs are based. In this respect, it is an example of social realism. At the same time, the article promotes the Greenphone as an open source device with the Qtopia mobile operating system released under the GPL. For Linux users, the Greenphone could be seen as an open alternative to the much more closed Apple iPhone, which has only been on the market for a few months. Both phones fit different lifestyles, and the *Linux Journal* rhetoric emphasizes the differences between those two lifestyles. The same *Linux Journal* issue also includes an interview with Sean Moss-Pultz, who leads OpenMoko: another GPL-based phone project often seen as a Greenphone competitor. To quote Mr. Moss-Pultz, "Apple is about giving you an incredibly polished experience—exactly how they want you to have it. End users really have no freedom. They cannot change the device if they don't like the way Apple chooses to make things. OpenMoko is the anti-iPhone" (2007). Both the Greenphone and OpenMoko represent a utopian desire for openness under the GPL. "For the people pushing this project," Moss-Pultz goes on to explain, "an open phone is not really even a product. It's the very embodiment of our vision of technology. We absolutely, passionately, believe that something as fundamental to our lives as the mobile phone must be open." Moss-Pultz's statement could almost be seen as a thesis for the entire GPL movement as represented by *Linux Journal* and its intended readership. Someone like Bob Sutor might applaud this statement but then ask if it really represents their customer needs. It is questions

such as that which are often absent from *Linux Journal's* utopian point of view. Grandma may be able to use certain Linux-based applications, but how can she benefit from an open source phone? What happens if something goes wrong with her device? To whom does she turn if her grandson is on a business trip to Norway? Open source users are accustomed to finding answers through other members of the community, whom are generally found online, but more casual users of technology do not necessarily understand this dynamic. In other words, a sudden shift to open source in the consumer marketplace would have a serious impact and require a fundamental change in the way the public considers technology. For the time being at least, the views of *Linux Journal* will likely remain isolated to readers of *Linux Journal* with little room for expansion. Businesses and the general tech-savvy public will require time before they will be willing to subscribe to *Linux Journal's* technological utopian point of view.

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