Dell Backs Open-Source Operating System

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The phrase "humanity toward others" does not usually inspire images of computer code. However, Ubuntu, the most popular version of the Linux operating system, may provide just that: humanity toward others, without the hefty price tag.

Dell Inc., the biggest direct-sale computer vendor in the world, will begin offering computers with Linux in the coming weeks, giving consumers the option of choosing between the open-source Linux software and Microsoft Windows, which commands around 90 percent of the market for operating systems.

David Lord, spokesperson for Dell, explained the company recently began eliciting customer suggestions and critiques through IdeaStorm.com, and found there was a big consumer demand for Linux.

"Customers said they wanted it, and we're addressing customer need in that area," Lord said. There was an overwhelming response for Linux on desktops and notebooks."

Ubuntu, the most popular form of distribution for the Linux system, comes from a sub-Saharan African concept, and is defined as "the belief in a universal bond of sharing that connects all humanity."

Linux is open-source, which means its source code is free to the public, unlike proprietary software such as Windows. Linux is also free for all users, though it offers less corporate tech support than its Microsoft counterpart. Still, it has a very large user base to provide support, with millions of users speaking over 40 languages.

Allen Gunn, executive director of Aspiration Tech and a strong advocate of open-source technology, sees the push toward Linux as a welcome move away from Microsoft dominance, but insists that Dell is still ultimately motivated by the bottom line.

"Dell sees a market demand for a non-Microsoft operating system, a secure operating system, a real operating system, a free and open-source operating system," Gunn said, explaining that software like Windows could hide secrets from users, who cannot see the source code. "When I'm running [free and open-source] software, I arguably have control over my technological destiny."

Adam Thompson, associate director of the UC Santa Cruz-based Global Information Internship Program, teaches the use of free and open-source software, particularly for nonprofits and social enterprises, calling the open-source movement the "democratization of software."

"The open source community as a movement is one of the definitive movements of our lifetime," Thompson said. "Software leads to power, profit, and education. When you bottle that up in a few companies, it's inherently undemocratic. Open-source software has the possibility of giving the people the tools of power and education."

Susan Hauser, general manager of strategic partnerships and licensing at Microsoft, said the company is not worried that Linux will cut into sales of Windows Vista, which has received mixed reviews and carries a price tag of one hundred to several hundred dollars.
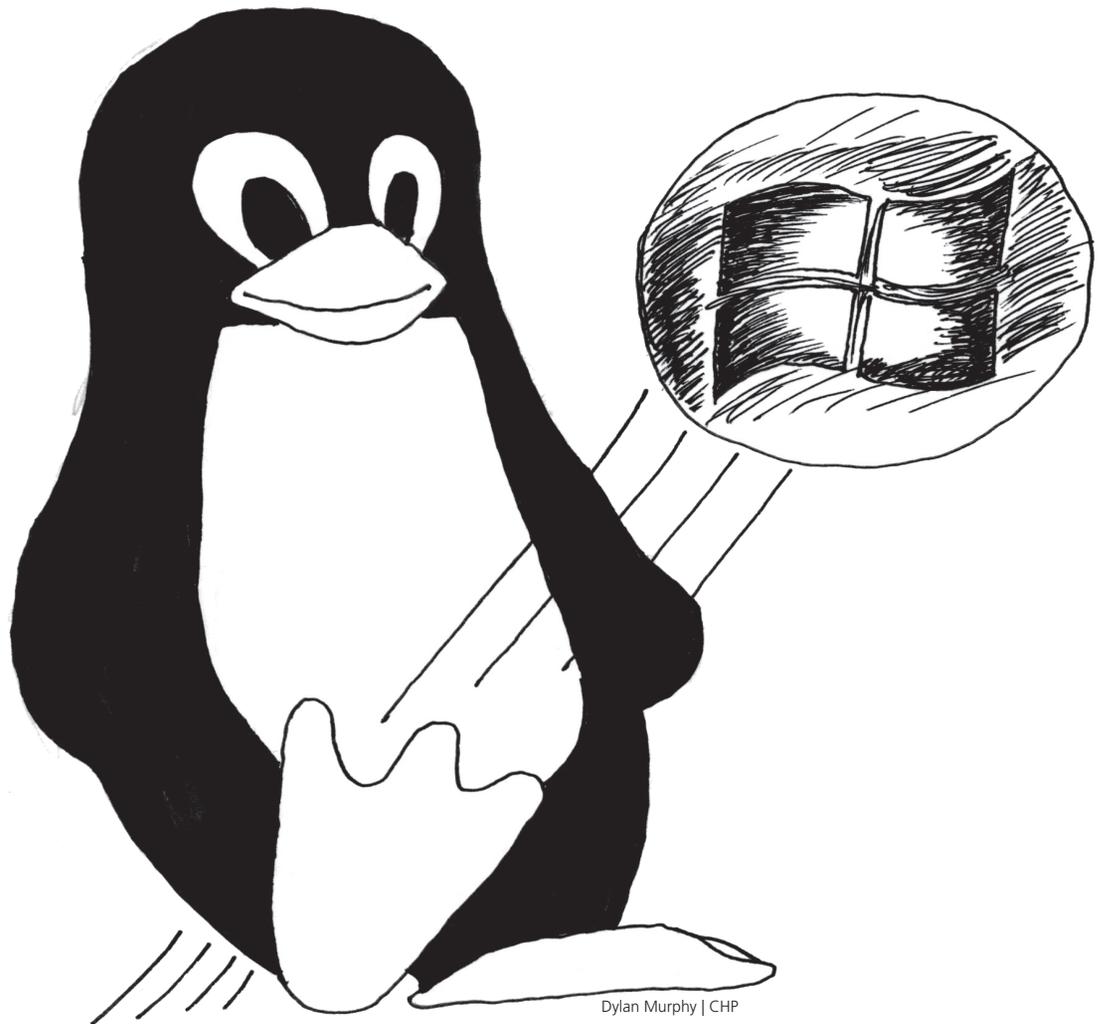
"Dell is one of Microsoft's most valued partners. At the same time, Dell is a multi-platform company that offers a variety of PC solutions to meet customer needs," Hauser said in an e-mail to *City on a Hill Press*. "We don't anticipate their relationship to affect sales of Microsoft Vista. Windows Vista is safer, easier to use, more entertaining and better connected at home, at work and on the go than any operating system we've ever released."

Hauser also said Microsoft recognizes the importance and significance of open-source technology.

"This deal creates a blueprint for cooperation between traditional software providers and those pursuing the open source model," Hauser said.

Despite Microsoft's statements, Gunn insists that Microsoft is not happy.

"I think it is evolutionary; it is common sense; and it is the future," Gunn said. "It gives the user the ultimate option of which solution they want. It puts the user in the driver's seat."

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