

The Prophetic Voice of Linux

© 2008, Martin Grashoff

I have already explained [why I like Linux](#). All I've said there is true, but actually there is more. Apart from all the practical and rational arguments there is something behind the Linux concept that I think is the strongest reason to prefer it as an operating system and a development platform.

Ethos and pathos

As the iconic example of open source software (OSS) Linux fits much better in the postmodern culture we are all part of than the Windows-based proprietary products which have monopolised the IT world, and are totally focussed on controlling the user and the market. Bill Gates clearly shows this in his [book](#) *Business @ The Speed Of Thought*: his digital nervous system is strictly hierarchical. As Eric S. Raymond [explained](#), this traditional, still dominating, way of producing and using software is like building a cathedral, a huge, centrally directed project. But today's world is rapidly moving away from that and has become a global bazaar where everyone can contribute and exchange. To some extent my argument will be ethical, but moreover it will explore the principles on which Linux is based.

Do not worry. I am not going to give a long rant about good and bad software manufacturers, nor will this be a piece of monomaniac OSS evangelism. [Others](#) can do that better than me. More than the ethos of OSS, it is its pathos that interests me. The ethos is about what you want and the choices you make. That's important of course, but it can waver in opportunistic ways, or simply be neglected. The pathos is about what you intuitively know to be the right thing, down in your guts. It is the prophetic voice revealing what is major and minor, which way to go or not to go, what brings in truth and what belies us. You can try to walk away from the pathos, but if you are honest, you cannot.

Aha. Is it even worse than evangelism? Well, surely I don't hope so. I know, it is not very Anglo-Saxon to talk about Principles, but sometimes it just helps. I also know that Linus himself is probably one of the least philosophical people when it comes down to the [Meaning of Linux](#), but that does not rule out that others can approach it a bit more contemplatively. After all, there *is* more in heaven and earth than our philosophy can dream of.

Fundamental features

This article will focus on the how, rather than on the what, on the benefit, rather than on the profit, on the whole, rather than on the parts, on the concept, rather than on the tricks.

I think there are five fundamental features behind the Linux concept: it is about creating, sharing, communicating, building community and justice. All are great, but all definitely have their downsides too. (Yes, I am a presbyterian.)

Since I am working in a churchy environment, even out of my own free will – that's what they call 'a call' – I think each of these elements should be appealing to church officials and clergy alike. I believe it is actually embarrassing that the revelation of OSS in general and Linux in particular has not even started in most churches. Having some kind of website or using presentations in worship – nine out of ten in *.ppt format of course – is not a valid excuse. Very rarely church folk ask *why* they use what they use. As a rule the vast majority seem to be hampered by a firmly outdated understanding of technology as 'just a tool to do the same'. But this is *not* 'only about machines', and therefore an irrelevant issue, seen from the lofty perspective of spiritual business. First of all, machines and the way you use them *do* matter. There is something like the ethics of technology. But moreover, this is not about machines, but about the people who work with them, the purposes of their work and the way they achieve their aims. Indeed, about pathos, rather than ethos.

Open Source Software (OSS)

For those who are not yet familiar with the concept of OSS, here is a brief description.

'Open source' refers to the software's source code being freely available and freely shared. 'Sharing' means making the source code available for anyone to extend, debug or comment which will result in a better product according to the wishes expressed by users. In this context 'free' has two meanings: it is free out of principle ('free as in free speech') and it is free from any fees. The second meaning seems to attract most users, but there has always been a clear caveat. The OSS world has no reason whatsoever to deny a worker his – rarely her, in this case, I'm sorry – wages, but payment should be for actual labour and reasonable costs. The vast majority of OSS developers and maintainers earn their living with something else and only ask for free donations, e.g. to keep their server running. If users want a project to continue, they should contribute, or it will unfortunately end up as 'abandonware'. Although most OSS will be written for a Linux platform, there is still more than one might expect for Windows, Mac or other platforms.

Without the Internet the huge expansion of OSS would have been impossible. From its very start in 1991, Linux has fully relied on the world-wide web to bring developers in their hundreds and thousands together and allow them to share the code they had written. It actually started with a [posting](#) Linus Torvalds made in a Minix newsgroup. At that time the concept of open source was already there, i.e. in the GNU Project, started in 1984 by Richard Stallman. As users too we are strongly dependent upon the Internet to download the software.

Today, virtually 25 years later, OSS is really gaining momentum. Because the costs are only a fraction of what proprietary software companies would charge, because there are no problems with licenses or patents and because of its flexible modular structure, OSS has become a serious alternative. Sometimes technical issues re-

lated to stability or security play an additional, yet important role in making the choice. Just one example: the German Foreign Ministry has been migrating all of its servers to Linux over the past few years and recently announced that by mid-2009 all of its 11,000 workstations world-wide will also run Linux and OSS only. Costs were a factor, but so was security. Often unknowingly every Internet user is relying on OSS, since at least 70% of the world's webservers run on LAMP (Linux, Apache, MySQL, PHP) and Google has always been 100% Linux.

Now let's have a look at these five features that make the Linux concept so special – as well as their downsides.

It's about creating

Creativity is not confined to OSS. I came across this quote from [Joseph Beuys](#), when he explains the concept of '[Soziale Skulptur](#)':

“Creativity isn't the monopoly of artists. When I say everybody is an artist, I mean everybody can determine the content of life in his particular sphere, whether in painting, music, engineering, caring for the sick, the economy or whatever. All around us the fundamentals of life are crying out to be shaped or created.”

I fully agree, knowing that Mr Beuys was a pretty controversial and dramatic personality. Creativity is not about being artistic, but about (re-)arranging our world, revealing its beauty, appreciating simplicity, and using its power for the good of all. Biblically speaking we are God's partners in creation.

Although creativity is all but restricted to OSS, as a matter of fact, the Linux concept certainly offers more freedom to let it flourish. People are encouraged to participate in projects because they value them and out of the relative chaos of an on-line community something good and beautiful will emerge. Because if it does not, the project will grind to a halt.

The downside can be that many people's creative input gets too conflictual to merge into something that works. People can have too high or too much diverging expectations. And it can be difficult to think out of the box once you are used to a certain way of working with computers.

It's about sharing

While it is perfectly all right to write and keep something just for your own use, e.g. a script, skin, translation or plug-in, the OSS movement strongly encourages us to share it. Others can benefit from or just have fun with something you made and that enhances the joy of making it. Besides, someone else might find a solution for something you could not figure out, or add functionality that you in turn can enjoy. In the process of sharing things normally only get better.

The only thing you need to accept is, that you always have to share ownership. As soon as you open source a piece of work, it's public domain, and someone else may change it in a way you would not prefer. Well, that's the risk you have to take. If you do not want to, just don't open source it.

It's about communicating

Because contributors are connected by the world-wide web and only rarely will meet in person, communication is extremely important. The internet is very much egalitarian and in a virtual way you can easily get in touch with people you would otherwise never have met with. The chances that you learn something new from these encounters are pretty high. Likewise you will absolutely find yourself crossing borders – national, social, cultural – before very long as soon as you seriously participate. Email, blogs, newsgroups, mailing lists, forums, wikis, video sharing, picture galleries – the ways of communicating are almost unlimited.

The downside is that diverse ways of saying things and cultural differences in general can seriously disrupt communication. [‘Flames’](#) are notorious and easily ignited. Another downside is the sheer volume of information, questions and opinions that will come your way. Bill Gates is said to have a dozen people working around the clock just to handle his email... Therefore it is extremely important to keep communication open, to the point and brief. For bigger projects professionally managed and moderated newsgroups are essential.

It's about building community

If sharing and communicating work well, a true community is built. Initially, and often permanently, this community is only brought and held together by a common purpose: making the project work. But people being people, it is easy to go beyond this purpose-driven surface, depending on how personal participants want to be. The bigger OSS projects often invest – made easier by having some kind of funding – in real life meetings at regular intervals for at least the core group of contributors. The combination of fast, virtual contact and more personal meetings can greatly empower a community, which will result in better results. To be honest, to most (young) people the bonus of having a weekend together in Brussels or Beijing easily outclasses any business model of promotions and bonuses. This combination of direct, digital communication all around the world and meeting in real life, is one of the most important strengths of the Linux concept.

As with communicational problems, it is often the volume and variety of people in a software community project that can become a problem. Most participants will work on a project beside having a professional life, and that certainly requires a sensitive balancing with the personal life they will also have. Reading through the long lists of activities with which people seem to overfill their days, you sometimes wonder if they still have time to sleep. Clashing expectations about the course and speed of a project can also burden a community.

It's about justice

Last, but not least, the Linux concept is about justice. This is probably the feature least noticed by those engaged in some OSS project. But the model, with its direct communication, high level of user participation and strongly cross-border character, actually does give the power to the people. By sharing their partial understanding and different skills their most essential creativity is used to its maximum. Without the need for huge funding to keep a large group of paid professionals at

work, without the need to avoid risks for reasons of competition or maximising profits, things can be much easier, and more productive. In OSS projects it's the user who is back at the wheel, not as an object of commercial enterprise, but as a creative person. OSS opens up the closed world of monopolies and patents and makes ICT accessible for all, around the globe.

To be honest, I cannot see a downside to this.

The prophetic voice

I deliberately use religious language in this essay. Not to provide the mundane world of IT and OSS with a heavenly canopy, or some kind of higher value. It is rather the other way around. Developments like the web based OSS communities are absolutely relevant to christian faith today. Again, the main direction is not to bring some message into this digital world, but rather the opposite. The pathos of choosing for Linux, once it is cordially embraced, will draw faith and church directly into today's cultural environment, regardless if you label it as postmodern or give it another name. That's why I call it a prophetic voice.

Yet, if you ask IT professionals what they think about Linux and OSS, the chances are high that their response will be negative. There is a simple and clear explanation for that. Microsoft has dominated the computer world since the early 1990s. Most of the IT specialists are relatively young and in their professional training as well as their professional career they have probably never seen anything else than Microsoft-based software. Those who are in business for longer than that may have (fond or feeble) memories of other systems, like UNIX or Novell, some may prefer a Mac at home, but they too have been thoroughly submerged in Microsoft ever since.

Those who enthusiastically turn towards Linux, are often (very) young too. They speak without a long-standing professional experience and more than rarely without much diplomacy too. Which is refreshing indeed. The voices of prophets tend to be neglected anyway. But that might be a grave mistake.

When the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced their plan to migrate their workstations to Linux, the IT Department's top manager had to make a confession. The move, he said, had taken almost 2 years to implement. At the start he had expected that the users would have major objections to working with open source applications, but that turned out to be the easy part. Once they had figured out 'where the buttons had gone', they were quite happy and also appreciated new features. (The German government has invested actively in adding a series of useful features to office applications for Linux, which has resulted in really good value for money and a nice contribution to the wider OSS community.) The real problem, according to the German IT manager, came from the Ministry's own IT staff. Although they had already been running their servers on Linux for some years, they fiercely opposed installing the system on desktops. Only after they had completed their mandatory Linux training, they were able to think out of the (Microsoft) box. And now they gradually turn into Linux missionaries...

Another example of the power of the Linux concept is [Barack Obama](#)'s presidential campaign. I think it has been the most successful campaign for a very long time. It was totally web based *and* very much in the field, and it was the combination that maximised the impact. The accessibility and openness of the Internet was a great way of spreading the news, but it worked really well because it was directly linked to thousands of local groups of campaigners. On the Obama website each group could easily build its own corner to reach their locals (the 'toolbox' is still on the start page). Another wee miracle was Obama's fund-raising. He took the risk of opting out of the funding Washington can give to each presidential candidate, totalling something like \$85,000,000. Instead there was this simple link on the Obama web pages: 'Click here to donate'. In September 2008 alone that brought in \$190,000,000, of which 80% consisted from contributions less than \$100. All of this was made possible exclusively through using [LAMP](#). Overhead costs were minimal compared to the use of proprietary software, and Obama's only concern will have been to gather enough LAMP [geeks](#) to get it all running. Well, for that he could fall back on his personal charisma.

If the voice of Linux is prophetic, then following it may feel like going into the wilderness. The land of proprietary software may be unfree and dear, it is so familiar. You know it has its price, in money and in lack of freedom, but it has become very difficult to think outside this safe box. But perhaps we should see it different. Perhaps listening to the prophets actually will lead us out of the wilderness, bringing us to a new land where creativity, sharing, communication and justice are the fundamental features of a new community.

I'm not naive enough to think that Linux and OSS will simply overturn the power of proprietary software monopolists. Naturally some compromise will evolve between the economic need to earn money and the benevolent gesture of simply sharing all your software. People need to eat. But I do like to be so naive to believe that this Linux concept is really going to make a difference in our culture. And if that is the line along which the culture will change, then it should be taken most serious by those who want their christian faith to be relevant in today's world. On a practical level by using the software, and on a fundamental level by integrating the concept in their religious life.