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**As Linux on the desktop** becomes a realistic proposition for the average user, thanks to the impressive efforts of free software developers worldwide, a disturbing possibility raises its head: what if the various competing efforts to create a user-friendly Linux distribution fragment the emerging market into sub-critical splinters? A case, perhaps, of: "Judean Free Software Front? F\*\*\* off. We're the Free Software Front of Judea!"

With all environments considered together, Linux could quite easily overtake the Macintosh as the number two desktop system, if it hasn't already. From there, it would be the only viable challenger to the Windows desktop hegemony. But, broken down by distribution and desktop variant, the Linux market looks decidedly like the fractured computing landscape of the past. Most of us remember a time when a genuine diversity of incompatible proprietary operating systems existed, and a relatively small UK computer company could acquire a dedicated user group, only to see it fade away after a few years.

Linux is in danger of following a classic software forking model, with splits upon splits, each with a tiny share of the overall desktop market. Already, Red Hat software packages are binary-incompatible with other distributions, and Mandrake looks set to follow with the controversial gcc 'snapshot' release included in version 8.0 of its distribution.

The Linux Standard Base specification provides a set of standards for compatibility between Linux distributions which should enable software to run on any compliant Linux system. Caldera, Debian, MandrakeSoft, Turbolinux, Red Hat and SuSE are all signed-up members of the Linux Standard Base organisation, but you wouldn't know it when trying to install binary software packages.

It was bad enough that KDE and GNOME, two free desktops with very similar aims, if not methods, were each being developed in parallel. Now that both projects have reached a usable state, it's extremely unlikely that either will back down, and the industry sponsors lined up behind each effort make it all too serious to give up now.

In addition, we now have two different companies attempting to make a sustainable business out of the GNOME desktop. Eazel is hoping to earn revenue from offering services to Linux users, such as integrated software updates. Ximian is hoping to earn revenue from offering services to Linux users, such as... integrated software updates. Eazel has created the Nautilus file manager to perform this function, while Ximian has the Red Carpet utility – both running on top of GNOME.

Eazel has already spent the capital originally invested in the company, and is laying off staff. The financial position of Ximian is unknown, but its business model is based on providing services for

software that hasn't been fully released yet. This calls into question the long-term viability of the whole project, since key contributors to GNOME work for these companies.

It hardly matters that both variants of GNOME will be based on open standards, or that they remain compatible for the time being. Potential users will perceive a fork in the road ahead, assuming they don't believe one exists within GNOME already, let alone between GNOME and KDE. There's little point of

finally achieving 'write once, run anywhere' if the users can't be expected to go from machine to machine and recognise the desktop environment.

Training and support costs for a multitude of variant free software desktops would make Linux less attractive to organisations than the proprietary opposition. Microsoft has attempted to convince us that no new interface training for its 'standardised' desktop has been required since 1995.

Forks that don't lead anywhere always present a problem. The assumption that an open source desktop would be maintained

indefinitely hasn't been tested yet, but the fewer users exist for any one desktop environment, the more likely it is to go dormant. Telling the average desktop user to go and find the source code if they want improvements is likely to be met with confusion.

A partial solution would be for Eazel to buy Ximian or vice versa, and produce a single, authoritative version of GNOME. That would leave just two major desktop projects but, with a combined market share that would remain a minority, it's no time for them to be fighting each other, splitting the effort of free software developers. The GNOME Foundation and KDE League should merge, and concentrate on the promotion of free desktop software rather than technical in-fighting. Many of

the major industry players are members of both organisations already.

Then the two projects should be encouraged to diversify, so they are no longer in direct competition. For example, one project could concentrate on a feature-rich 'power user' desktop, while the other could work towards an 'ease of use' interface for the mass market. At the moment, both projects are trying to cover all the bases – probably because developers are 'power users' who recognise that 'ease of use' is a priority for the ordinary users, whose needs drive that market.

Passionate GNOME and KDE supporters might argue that it couldn't be done, which is the point. The Linux desktop is forked to the extent that a simple merger at the code level would be impossible. If the Linux desktop is not to become one of those products which was good technically, but never caught on, the supporters of each project will have to put down their rocks – or at least throw them at the Romans instead of each other.

# What about the Romans?

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