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R.I.P.: The Counterculture Aura of Linux

By STEVE LOHR

Linux, the free operating system once seen as a symbol of a computing counterculture, is becoming a mainstream technology and is being forced to behave more like one.

A step down that path of maturity came yesterday when Linus Torvalds, creator of Linux, announced that software developers making contributions to the operating system would have to sign their work and vouch for its origin.

The pledge, called a Developer's Certificate of Origin, is a response to concerns among corporate users of Linux that procedures for adding new code to the evolving operating system have been too informal and lacking in documentation. Tracing the origin of code, analysts say, is vital to avoiding legal challenges that Linux contains pilfered software.

The SCO Group, a Utah company, sued [I.B.M.](#) in March 2003, claiming that I.B.M. illegally contributed Unix code to Linux and seeking \$1 billion in damages. SCO owns the license rights to the Unix operating system and contends that Linux, a variant of Unix, violates its rights. I.B.M. is a leading corporate supporter of Linux, which is improved and debugged by a worldwide network of programmers, led by Mr. Torvalds, who wrote the original kernel of the operating system in 1991 as a student in Finland.

I.B.M. admits that its programmers have contributed code to Linux and its defense is that they had every right to do so. I.B.M. asserts that SCO's interpretation of its Unix rights is far too broad. The trial is scheduled to begin next year.

As part of its legal campaign, SCO also sued two corporate users of Linux earlier this year, the automaker [DaimlerChrysler](#) and the car-parts supplier Autozone. The suits came after SCO sent warning letters to several hundred corporate users of Linux, contending that Linux is essentially an unauthorized version of Unix. SCO, in its letters, warned the companies that they could be sued unless they bought licenses from SCO.

In a statement yesterday, Mr. Torvalds conceded no flaws or weaknesses in the Linux development process. He described the Developer's Certificate of Origin as mainly adding a trail of documentation to the Linux community principles of peer review and personal responsibility. "We want to make it simpler to link submitted code to its contributors," he said. "It's like signing your own work."

"This process improvement makes Linux even stronger," he declared.

In a message posted on a Linux mailing list on Saturday, Mr. Torvalds cited SCO and what he termed its "outlandish claims" that copyrighted code had been illegally put into Linux. But refuting the SCO accusations, he wrote, had involved a tedious combing through several years of Linux mailing lists. "Not much fun," he noted.

The new approach, he said, will make it easier to trace the origin of code.

Mr. Torvalds, who now lives in Silicon Valley, is employed by the Open Source Development Labs, a consortium that promotes Linux. The chief executive of the consortium, Stuart Cohen, described the change as a response to customer demand - as businesses and governments rely more and more on Linux.

"They are asking for and looking for more documentation - who put this stuff in," Mr. Cohen explained. "It was important that a process be put in place and Linus realized that."

The handling of intellectual property in open source software projects like Linux, to which many developers from around the world contribute code, is a sensitive issue, given the potential for litigation, said George Weiss, an analyst for [Gartner Inc.](#)

"It's not SCO that concerns corporate executives so much, but post-SCO and the uncertainty of facing intellectual property claims if they use open source software," Mr. Weiss said. "And this Linux move is a step in the right direction."

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