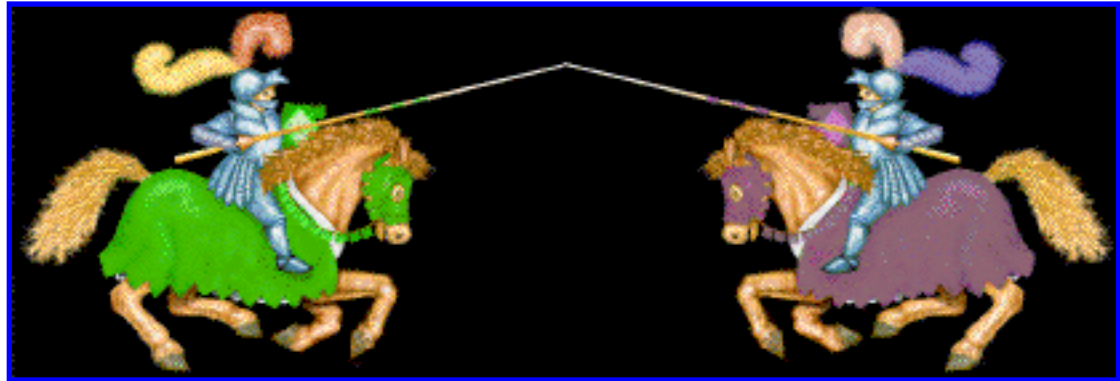




Operating System Wars

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Read two days worth of posts on any Usenet . advocacy newsgroup and the phrase ``operating system wars'' does not seem as silly as at first glance. Operating systems are a hot topic. Users take their operating systems *very* seriously.



This is quite different from the attitudes felt about other ``religious'' issues in the world of computing. For example, arguments often ensue over programming languages. Yet, users do not hold onto languages as fiercely as operating systems. For example, if you push even the most fervent C++ proponent enough, she will admit that Smalltalk is also good for some tasks. Other issues simply do not have the same power as operating systems.

So, as I scan through the fiftieth message whose subject states: ``Ms-Windoze considered harmful,'' I begin to wonder why everyone takes their operating systems so personally. People have made them a part of their being. What possesses someone to do this?

As I see it, there is an easy, simple answer and a difficult, more puzzling one.

The simple answer can be found in the very language used when discussing the issue. Computers are *personal* computers now. Once something becomes personal, people tend to take it closer to heart. Thus, the operating systems that one uses, once a largely uncontrolled choice, has now become a personal decision.

But this explanation is too simple. Operating systems arguments are not contained within the personal computer realm. For example, mainframe machine users argue vehemently over VAX/VMS (or its new incarnation, OpenVMS) versus Unix. These arguments sometimes get hotter than even the popular personal computer debates.

Simple explanations attempt to compartmentalize issues and tend to overlook major movements and attitudes. Such is the case with the simple answer that I gave. I believe that operating systems wars go beyond operating systems, computers, and even the individuals who wage these wars.

There is a new generation of computer users coming to their own across the nation. This generation is special; it is the first to grow up since computer technology became an integral part of society.

Of course, this is not the only thing that sets this generation apart. The term Generation X is a prolific phrase that refers to what has made this generation different. This phrase was invented to describe people born after the baby-boom, but before the majority of baby-boomers started having children.

However, what sets this generation apart is not simply the term, but the world which the generation faces. On all levels, the job market is poor. Even in the frequently under-staffed field of computer science, recent graduates who do not have perfect GPA's find themselves without jobs after receiving degrees.

This generation has also grown up with few heroes. The mass media guarantees that political figures are shown in the worse light possible. Religious faith, which had always been a source of unbeatable heroes, has faltered because the new generation is very quick to question rigid doctrine. Fictional heroes are not what they used to be, either. Even Superman died.

I often question these stereotypes associated with the new generation. I do not question it because I doubt their veracity; I simply wonder if a society does not push its own feelings and fears into the stereotype of the young.

Americans are a frightened people right now. America's financial security (whether it was real or imagined) has fallen, and the future is no longer as concrete as it once seemed. In times like these, people attempt to latch onto stability. To find this, many have turned to the rising ``religious right." Some have turned to the Republican ``Contract with America," in hopes that our Congress can save us. Regardless of the many methods, people are seeking foundations upon which they can rebuild.

Not everyone can make a religion or a political party their foundation. For many people of this age, their computer is something that they rely on--something that they can believe in. The computer, in reality a mere tool, have transformed into a fundamental foundation of many people's lives.

People are now approaching computer technology with the same moral fever that once reserved for only religion and politics. Religion and other moral dogmas are not the answer for some, and these people will often make a de-facto religion out of anything that becomes important to them. As computers integrate into daily society, the operating system -- the fundamental computer program that the user sees -- becomes paramount in the minds of users.

Thus, an operating system gains followers. There are sects and factions of users. People take what operating system they use as a defining characteristic of their whole person.

This movement toward an operating system as a life philosophy is small, but it is quite prevalent among those of us who spend as much time on computer networks as we do in interpersonal contact. In cyberspace, what operating system you run represents who you are and for what you stand.

In our unstable society, we are all on a search for something to help define who we are. Those of us whose lives are intertwined heavily with computers often choose an operating system to fill that void.

As for me, I will proudly wear my [Linux](#) T-shirt until it is tattered and torn. When all else fails, I still have my operating system.