Face to Face: Mitch Kapor

From Lotus to Linux

CREATOR OF 1-2-3 SPREADSHEET IS BULLISH ON OPEN SOURCE

SOFTWARE PIONEER MITCH KAPOR, co-founder of Lotus Development Corp. and creator of the Lotus 1-2-3 spreadsheet, is keeping busy as chair of the Open Source Applications Foundation. Kapor sat down at the O'Reilly Open Source Convention in Portland, Ore., this month to share his views with eWEEK Senior Editor Peter Galli.

What is your take on the lawsuit [The] SCO [Group] has brought against IBM and its claims that Linux is an unauthorized derivative of Unix?
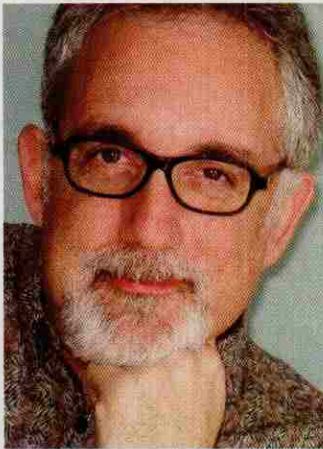
My interpretation is that the suit was brought by a group of people who are pursuing litigation in the absence of a business strategy. The sad thing is that history has proven they don't need the facts on their side and that in many cases your opponent will ultimately settle with you in a profitable way. That's what this is about. I really believe that if there is a problem—and I'm not saying that there is—that it can't be rapidly fixed, given the 10,000 developers working on open source. This litigation technique has been used by the management of the company before.

Do you think IBM will settle or fight it in court?

I hope IBM doesn't settle, and there is nothing in its history that suggests they are predisposed to do so. But at some point if you can't get the matter thrown out of court and litigation is inevitable, settling could be less expensive than litigating, even if you are sure to win. So it is possible that IBM will settle, but I hope that is not the way it goes. SCO's actions are about sowing fear, uncertainty and doubt. It is morally utterly despicable.

Do you think the SCO litigation will have an impact on open-source and Linux adoption?

I am willing to put my head on the line and say that I think that litigation will have zero effect on open source going forward.

There's a lot of buzz about Linux's gains on the server, yet many still believe it's not enterprise, mission-critical ready. Do you agree?

We have already seen Linux move from the edge to the center in a meaningful way. Regardless of whether it is ready for the data center today or not, it is clearly moving in that direction, and I see no reason why it won't mature into that space. There are a lot of very motivated companies and developers because of the enormous economic opportunities there.

Why do you think Linux has not made the same headway on the desktop as it has on the server?

A Linux desktop is harder, and I think we have come a long way and already provide a good solution for millions of people. There is also good adoption in the public sector inside and outside the U.S., and the technology is getting better all the time. The current open-source desktop is fine for many people; the two groups least likely to adopt it at the moment are consumers and information workers who are rigorous about compatible file formats and the range of desktop applications available to Windows.

You are the chair of the Open Source Applications Foundation. What are you working on?

We have a project under way code-named Chandler, after the great detective novelist Raymond Chandler, which is a personal information manager intended for use in everyday information and communication tasks, such as composing and reading e-mail, managing an appointment calendar, and keeping a contact list. Many people's lives are becoming increasingly e-mail- and Internet-centric, in ways that many of the current tools never predicted. We want to be able to deal with huge amounts of information, not just on a day-to-day basis but also over its lifetime.

Microsoft [Corp.] executives are talking about the Linux "threat." How do you think they will respond, and what is the biggest threat to their business from open source?

Microsoft has already responded by showing that they will cut costs in response to Linux. They cannot use a strategy where they choke off their competitors' revenue streams, so I expect they will cut prices even further. Open source is ultimately going to threaten and eat into their server, database and desktop businesses.

You have worked in the technology sector a long time and have seen products come and go. What technologies excite you now?

I'm excited about Weblogs, which are a new form of publishing. I'm also very excited by camera phones, which are cool but still have a long way to go in terms of ease of use. The user interfaces are appalling. The only way I get it to work is by constantly reading the manual and support documents. It's certainly not a consumer-friendly technology today, but the potential is there.

What operating system and desktop productivity applications do you use?

I use both a Windows PC and an Apple [Computer Inc.] Mac and am also about to get a Linux desktop. I'm also about to switch from my Windows desktop to my Apple as the primary one I use.

What do you think about Lotus, its products and the way the company is being run?

Let's save that for another conversation completely. *e*

Kapor: Suit won't harm open source.