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# Linux and Supercomputing: How My Passion for Building COTS Systems Led to an HPC Revolution

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ack in the early 1990s, when I was a graduate student in electrical and computer engineering at the University of Maryland, the term "supercomputer" meant Single Instruction, Multiple Data (SIMD) vector processor machines (the Cray-1 was the most popular), or massively parallel multiprocessor systems, such as the Thinking Machine CM-5. These systems were bulky—a Cray-1 occupied 2.7m × 2m of floor area and contained 60 miles of wires<sup>1</sup>; expensive, selling for several million dollars; and required significant expertise to program and operate. Supercomputing was mainly a function of the U.S. Department of Defense and its Soviet counterpart, large government, and academic labs, and large industrial users. Each system used its own proprietary software and none was compatible with any other.

But something new was on the horizon—a revolution in supercomputing technology was beginning that would bring scalable, less expensive systems to a much wider audience. That revolution involved using a new, open-source, operating system called Linux, and collections of commodity off-the shelf (COTS) servers to obtain the performance of a traditional supercomputer. I was deeply involved with that revolution from the start. In 1989, as an undergraduate student at Lehigh University, I built my first parallel computer, using several Commodore Amiga 1000 personal computers that the company had donated to Lehigh. They had been collecting dust in a closet when a friend and I networked them together. A year later, I designed parallel algorithms on a 128-processor nCUBE hypercube parallel computer donated by AT&T Bell Laboratories. Building these systems taught me that the development of powerful parallel machines required a simultaneous development of scalable, high performance algorithms and services. Otherwise, application developers would be forced to develop algorithms from 45 scratch every time vendors introduced a newer, faster, 46 hardware platform.

By the late 1990s, the term "cluster computing" 48 was common among computer science researchers 49 and several of these systems had received significant 50 publicity. One of the first cluster approaches to attract 51 interest was Beowulf, which cost from a tenth to a 52 third of the price of a traditional supercomputer. A 53 typical setup consisted of server nodes, with each one 54 controlling a set of client nodes connected by Ether- 55 net and running the Linux operating system.<sup>2</sup> In the 56 spring of 1998, Los Alamos National Laboratory intro- 57 duced a more powerful version of Beowulf called Ava- 58 lon, using 68 personal computers running on DEC 59 Alpha microprocessors.3 However, neither the Beo- 60 wulf cluster nor Avalon were genuine supercomputers, 61 for they could not deliver high performance across the 62 broad set of applications that ran on contemporary 63 supercomputers.

The Beowulf project was not about developing a 65 supercomputer per se, but rather aimed to "explore 66 the potential of 'Pile-of-PCs" at the lowest possible 67 cost and develop methods for applying these systems 68 to NASA Earth and space science problems. As 69 Thomas Sterling, co-creator of the first Beowulf clus-70 ter, observed, "Basically, you can order most of Beo-71 wulf's components from the back pages of Computer 72 Shopper or get them for free over the 'Net." Beowulf 73 clusters were limited to solving problems that could 74 be neatly divided into independent tasks, because the 75 communication among processors required to run 76 massively parallel applications on supercomputers did 77 not exist yet.

Avalon was powerful enough to make it onto the 79 "Top500 List" of supercomputers in 1998, but although 80 the system was fast, it was not truly a supercomputer. 81 As a Beowulf cluster that could run several applications, Avalon's nodes were connected via Ethernet 83 and utilized message passing over TCP, which meant 84

1058-6180 © 2021 IEEE Digital Object Identifier 10.1109/MAHC.2021.3101415

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relatively low bandwidth, high latency, and serious performance issues when executing parallel programs. Avalon made the list based on its ability to run the LINPACK benchmark. But its limited connectivity meant it could only run applications with a minimal need for communication as well as some domain decomposition methods, where performance is based almost entirely on processor speed.

## FROM EXPERIMENTAL CLUSTERS TO THE FIRST BONA FIDE LINUX **SUPERCOMPUTER**

Less attention has been focused on parallel computing systems using COTS components and opensource operating systems that were developed before Avalon and Beowulf. Building these systems was my passion. In January 1992, I joined the University of Maryland as an electrical and computer engineering doctoral student and visited the NASA Goddard Space Flight Center in search of fellowships in parallel computing. In August, I received the NASA Graduate Student Researcher Fellowship and built my first parallel computer using Ethernet-connected, Intel-based PCs, and the FreeBSD operating system in 1993, prior to the Beowulf project. After receiving my Ph.D. in May 1996, over the next 18 months I was a postdoc at the university and a National Science Foundation (NSF) research associate at its Institute for Advanced Computer Studies (UMIACS). In this role, I built an experimental computing cluster comprising 10 DEC AlphaServer nodes, each with four DEC Alpha RISC processors and a DEC PCI card connected to a DEC Gigaswitch ATM switch. It used either my own communication library or a freely available MPI implementation. This system was more advanced than Los Alamos National Laboratory's (LANL) Avalon cluster, which used Fast Ethernet for interconnection rather than an ATM network with lower latency and higher throughput.6

## THE NATIONAL COMPUTATIONAL SCIENCE ALLIANCE AND ROADRUNNER

From Maryland, in January 1998 I moved to the University of New Mexico and the Albuquerque High Performance Computing Center (AHPCC). There I had the opportunity to build and deploy, to my knowledge, the first bona fide Linux supercomputer while continuing to develop clusters of COTS processors into systems with the speed, performance, and services of a traditional supercomputer. I came to UNM with the idea of building the first x86 Linux supercomputer as a



FIGURE 1. Myricom M2M-PCl32c network interface card. (Image credit: CSPi).

teaching tool for advanced computer design. My sys- 135 tem design took a revolutionary new direction that dif- 136 fered significantly from Beowulf and the HPC research 137 community's cluster efforts. From my experience with 138 real applications, I knew that Beowulf did not have 139 the capabilities to run the broad set of scientific 140 computing tasks on contemporary supercomputers, 141 and more engineering was necessary to create a 142 Linux-based system that would displace traditional 143 supercomputers.

While Beowulf optimized to minimize cost per meg- 145 aFLOP and required only free software, my system 146 design maximized performance per price per mega- 147 FLOP, and used both mass market commodity compo- 148 nents and proprietary software and networks. Beowulf 149 used only Ethernet for the system area network, and I 150 engineered the first use of a proprietary scalable net- 151 work, Myrinet, in a Linux system since communication 152 was often an HPC bottleneck. Instead of a single net- 153 work, Ethernet, my system design used three: a con- 154 trol network (Fast Ethernet with Gigabit Ethernet 155 uplinks); a highly scalable data network (Myrinet 156 switches); and a diagnostic network (chained RS-232 157 serial ports) to monitor the nodes for failures, provide 158 staged boot up of systems, and enable remote power 159 cycling capabilities for system maintenance. Donald 160 Becker, co-founder of the Beowulf project, advocated 161 for clusters that combined "independent machines.... 162 With a cluster, you have the opportunity to incremen- 163 tally scale, where an SMP is generally built to a [pre- 164 configured] size."7 I argued for and built clusters of 165 SMP nodes.

After becoming the sole principal investigator 167 [PI] for the AHPCC's SMP Cluster Computing Proj- 168 ect, by spring 1998 I had built the first working Intel/ 169

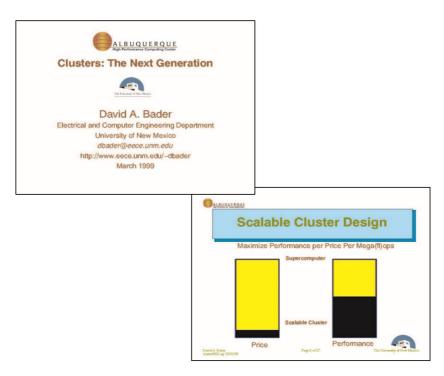


FIGURE 2. Bader's Chautauqua talk on Linux Supercomputers (slides from March 1999). (Image credit: Courtesy of the author.).

Linux supercomputer using an Alta Technologies "AltaCluster," consisting of eight dual, 333 MHz, Intel Pentium II nodes. This required my porting of software to Linux to provide necessary components;



FIGURE 3. Linux prototype on lower-left, and Roadrunner (right). A Myricom dual 8-port SAN Myrinet switch sits on top of the left-most cabinet of the prototype, and four octal 8port SAN Myrinet switches (not visible) connect Roadrunner. Above Roadrunner's console is a 72-port Foundry Fast Ethernet switch with Gigabit uplinks to the vBNS and Internet. (Image credit: Courtesy of the author.).

modifying the Linux kernel and shell to increase 174 space for very large command lines; and porting the 175 codes from members of the National Computational 176 Science Alliance (NCSA) to Linux-none had run on 177 Linux previously. My work also included a partner- 178 ship with Myricom's president and CEO Chuck Seitz 179 to incorporate the first Myrinet interconnection net- 180 work for Intel/Linux. I also ported a job scheduler, 181 the Portable Batch System developed at NASA 182 Ames Research Center, to the Linux system and 183 installed RedHat's "Extreme Linux" before its wide- 184 spread distribution that May.8

Around this time, I also became a PI with the 186 NCSA, an NSF-supported effort to integrate computa- 187 tional, visualization, and information resources into a 188 national-scale "Grid." NSF and NCSA, led by Larry 189 Smarr, made a high risk, high payoff bet in my vision of 190 the first Linux supercomputer widely available to 191 national science communities by allocating \$400,000, 192 based on demonstrations of my 1998 16-processor 193 Linux machine prototype. I assembled a team and we 194 built Roadrunner, which entered production mode in 195 April 1999. Its hardware comprised fully configured 196 workstations powered by 128 dual, 450 MHz, Intel Pen- 197 tium II processors; a 512 KB cache; a 512 MB SDRAM 198 with ECC; 6.4 GB IDE hard drive; and Myrinet interface 199 cards. The Myrinet System Area Network (Myrinet/ 200

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FIGURE 4. Inside a Roadrunner cabinet with each node attached to three networks: Myrinet (ribbon cable), Fast Ethernet (CAT5), and Diagnostic (RS232 serial port). (Image credit: Courtesy of the author.).

SAN) interconnection network was one of Roadrunner's main improvements over previous Linux systems, such as Beowulf and Avalon. At full-duplex 1.28 GB/s bandwidth, it was twice as fast as Myrinet/LAN and 204 about five times faster than Ethernet, with much lower 205 latency: in the tens of microseconds. Roadrunner's 206



# UNM To Crank Up \$400,000 Supercomputer Today

#### Machine One of 100 Speediest in World

By JOHN FLECK Journal Staff Writer

A cluster of computers looking like a stack of oversized dorm room refrigerators is about to plug the University of New Mexico into an ambitious new supercomputer "mega-brain" spanning the nation. Dignitaries from around the country will gather at UNM's Albu-

querque High Performance Com puting Center today to throw the switch on the "Roadrunner Super-

ner is one of the 100 fastest computers in the world.

But its rocket-sled speed is just part of a more ambitious idea — an attempt to give scientists around the country access to a distributed supercomputing "brain" stretching from Boston to Maui, ready to solve their toughest problems.

The Roadrunner Supercluster will be part of what researchers are calling the "National Technology Grid," a collection of supercomputers across the country wired together to help handle scientists' growing demand for computer time.

Sitting at their own desks, the researchers could hook into the grid and begin solving large-scale prob-lems without having to worry about lems without having to worry about where the computer doing the work is located, explained Larry Smarr, director of the National Computa-tional Science Alliance, the federal-ly funded group that paid for the new machine.

"The goal is to be completely eamless," the University of Illinois-based Smarr said in telen interview this week

unterview this week.

UNM professor David Bader
envisions a day when a researcher
studying an ecosystem — Chesapeake Bay, say, or the Rio Grande
Valley — can log in and rapidly spin
through vast amounts of satellite
data on climate and ground cover



for their plot of land.

They wouldn't need to be located a specialized superconsearch center.

out having to worry about which power plant is generating the electricity.

"That's the vision," said Bader, who has spent the last week testing the brand new Roadrunner machine in preparation for today's unveiling Smarr, one of the leaders of the nation's supercomputer research community, is scheduled to join Sen. Pete Domenici, R-N.M., and others to formally throw the switch turning on the computer at a ceremony this afternoon.

mony this afternoon.

The \$400,000 computer, built by Alta Technology Corp., bears the mark of a new breed of moderately priced machines that are making inroads in the high-performance scientific market.

Instead of using specialized high-performance computer chips made especially for supercomputing, it's built around 128 top-of-the-line Intel Pentiums, the same breed of computer chips used in desktop

Programmers split up a large

problem into smaller pieces, farm ing them out so that each of the 128 chips can work on a portion of the problem and then share results.

"You get to profit from the col-lapse of PC prices," explained Vic-tor Yodaiken, a computer scientist at the New Mexico Institute of Mining and Technology who does research on a similar machine at Tech.

machine at Tech.
Similar machines also have been
built at Sandia and Los Alamos
national labs for nuclear weapons
and physics research, and the experience of the New Mexico research
community is one reason UNM was
chosen to host the new machine,
Smarr said

Smarr said. UNM is one of six "supernodes on the National Technology Grid. In addition to the Roadrunner Cluster the grid will be connected to UNM's Maui High Performance Computing Center, an Air Force-funded research complex in Hawaii run by the university for the military.

FIGURE 5. The launch of Roadrunner makes the news. "Machine One of 100 Speediest in World," with David Bader pictured at Roadrunner's console. (Copyright: The Albuquerque Journal. Reprinted with permission. Permission does not imply endorsement.).



FIGURE 6. NCSA Director Larry Smarr (left), UNM President William Gordon, and U.S. Sen. Pete Domenici turn on the Roadrunner supercomputer in April 1999. After the ceremony, Sen. Domenici asked if this new capability could be shared with his friend Senator Ted Stevens in Alaska. I packaged the prototype machine for shipping to its new home, the Arctic Region Supercomputing Center affiliated with the University of Alaska, Fairbanks. (Image credit: Reprinted with permission of NCSA.).

system software included the Red Hat Linux 5.2 operating system; sets of compilers from both the GNU Compiler Collection and the Portland Group; and the Portable Batch System (PBS) job scheduler originally designed for NASA's supercomputers. These features enabled parallel programming, such as software-based distributed shared memory (DSM) and the Message Passing Interface (MPI), a standardized means of exchanging information between multiple computer nodes. For MPI, Roadrunner used MPICH, a high performance open-source MPI implementation from Argonne National Laboratory; Myricom GM network drivers; and MPICH GM, Myricom's MPI implementation.

Roadrunner was among the 100 fastest supercomputers in the world when it went online. It provided services that were lacking in the first Linux clusters but are now regarded as essential for supercomputing, such as node-based resource allocation, job monitoring and auditing, and resource reservations. 10 At the time, Roadrunner was dubbed a supercluster, combining the low cost and accessibility of Linux clusters with the services, fast networking, and low latency of a supercomputer. It was however one of the Alliance's first hardware deployments designed to bring supercomputing to the desktop. Roadrunner went on to become a node on the National Technology Grid.

The Grid was envisioned as a way to give research- 234 ers access to supercomputers for large-scale 235 problem solving from their desktops, no matter their 236 location, through the nation's fastest high-perfor- 237 mance research networks. Alliance Director Larry 238 Smarr likened the National Technology Grid to the 239 power grid, where users could plug in and get the compute resources they needed, without having to worry 241 about where those resources came from or their own 242 location.

Within the Alliance, computer scientists and 244 software and hardware engineers worked closely 245 with domain scientists to ensure that the systems 246 being developed would meet the requirements of 247 scientists needing supercomputers to solve compli- 248 cated scientific problems. Scientific software that 249 ran on Roadrunner included AZTEC, algorithms for 250 solving sparse systems of linear equations; BEAVIS 251 (Boundary Element Analysis of Viscous Suspen- 252 sions), used for 3-D analysis of multiphase flows; 253 Cactus, a numerical relativity toolkit for solving 254 astrophysics problems; HEAT, a diffusion partial dif- 255 ferential equation using conjugate gradient solver 256 methods; HYDRO, a Lagrangian hydrodynamics 257 code; and MILC, a set of codes developed by the 258 MIMD Lattice Computation collaboration to study 259 quantum chromodynamics. 260

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Roadrunner's performance on the Cactus application benchmark showed near perfect scalability, unlike systems such as the NASA Beowulf cluster, the NCSA's Microsoft Windows NT cluster computer, and Silicon Graphics Inc.'s family of high-end server computers, the Origin 2000. Several scientists who pioneered the use of the Roadrunner system shared their memories:

"It was a very exciting time; Linux clusters were emerging as a huge force to democratize supercomputing and software frameworks providing community toolkits to solve broad classes of science and engineering problems were also taking shape. The collaboration we had between the Cactus team at the Albert Einstein Institute in Germany and David Bader's team with the Roadrunner supercluster was a pioneering effort that helped these movements gain traction around the world. The collaboration helped advance the goals of the Cactus team, led by Gabrielle Allen, whose efforts continue to this day as the underlying framework of the Einstein Toolkit. That toolkit now powers many efforts globally to address complex problems in multi-messenger astrophysics."

—Edward Seidel, Ph.D.

President, University of Wyoming

Former Head of the Numerical Relativity and

E-Science Research Groups, Albert Einstein Institute

"We tested our large weather prediction codes on Roadrunner and found it to be a powerful platform for code development and application, with the move to COTS hardware and software opening the doors to nonproprietary clusters for many researchers who until then only did their work on workstations and laptops. The Roadrunner network (Message Passing Interface) results were superior to those from previous clusters' Ethernets in moving data from one processor to another during a weather forecast, thus enhancing the forecast turnaround time or forecast quality by allowing for more grid points to be used and a correspondingly more resolved weather feature prediction. We also used Roadrunner to produce detailed simulations of thunderstorms and turbulence generated at commercial airline flight levels."

—Dan Weber Retired Research Meteorologist

and
 —Kelvin Droegemeier, Ph.D.
 Regents Professor of Meteorology, Oklahoma

University	312
Weathernews Chair Emeritus	313
Roger and Sherry Teigen Presidential Professor	314
Former Director, White House Office of Science and	315
Technology Policy	316

"Roadrunner, to my knowledge, was the first Linux 317 cluster-based supercomputer available to the rese- 318 arch community. It was a forerunner of what has 319 become a dominant approach in supercomputing. In 320 1999, while just starting at MIT, I was able to obtain 321 access to Roadrunner to test and scale a number of 322 key parallel software technologies, which formed the 323 basis of establishing our supercomputing center at 324 MIT. This early work pioneered on Roadrunner 325 impacts thousands of researchers across MIT."

—Jeremy Kepner, Ph.D.

Head and Founder, MIT Lincoln Laboratory Supercomputing Center

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The development of the first Linux supercomputer 331 had effects far beyond the needs of Alliance scien-332 tists. It permanently changed supercomputing and its 333 impacts are still felt today. 334

# THE CONTINUING LINUX SUPERCOMPUTING REVOLUTION

As leader of the Alliance/UNM Roadrunner project, I 337 presented my team's work at professional events, such 338 as the Alliance Chautauquas held at UNM, the University of Kentucky, and Boston University in 1999. 11,12 After 340 Roadrunner, I embarked on another Alliance project, 341 working with IBM on development of LosLobos, IBM's 342 first Linux production system, which was assembled 343 and operated at the University of New Mexico. LosLobos, which premiered on the Top500 list at number 345 24, consisted of 256 dual processor, Intel-based, IBM 346 servers with Myrinet connections, creating a 512-processor machine capable of 375 gigaFLOPs.

LosLobos entered production in summer 2000. The 349 Linux supercomputing movement was well underway, 350 thanks to the proliferation of commodity components, 351 the development of high-speed COTS networks such 352 as Myrinet, the rapid expansion of the open software 353 movement, and the ability of researchers, myself 354 included, to exploit all these developments. For the 355 first time, supercomputers could be built at a relatively 356 low cost. While LosLobos was used primarily by scien-357 tists to model and solve complicated problems in 358 physics, biology, and other fields, IBM's move toward 359 the open-source framework was a sign of things to 360 come. Within a year, it used the knowledge gained by 361

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working with my Alliance research group on LosLobos to create the first preassembled and preconfigured Linux server clusters for business.<sup>13</sup>

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Today, all supercomputers on the Top500 list are Linux systems. Simply put, today's machines are no longer purpose-built monoliths. Using an open-source operating system, running on commodity microprocessors, and networked with high-speed commodity interconnects, Linux cluster supercomputers can be easily customized for different uses, unlike vendor-specific Unix systems. They provide users speed, high-end services, and unprecedented flexibility, all at a lower cost than in traditional supercomputers. They can also be integrated into any datacenter, making feasible enterprise systems that are similar to those breaking scientific barriers.

The ease of use of Linux supercomputers has had a profound impact on how scientists conduct their research and on the most pressing issues of our time, and I am proud of my role in this revolution in computing and discovery. Whether they are simulating astrophysical phenomena, the impacts of climate change, or biological functions at the cellular level, Linux supercomputers are today's primary tool of knowledge discovery.

Today, researchers are building a new generation of exascale computing systems-machines capable of calculating at least 10<sup>18</sup> floating point operations per second (1 exaFLOPS). The Linux operating system is intrinsic to this effort because it provides the scale and flexibility to support high-performance computing at the exascale level. The framework that I developed in the 1990s remains the foundational infrastructure of today's Linux supercomputers, including the fastest machines in the world.

For me, this is both thrilling and gratifying. My interest in parallel computing dates to 1981, when I read an article on a parallel computing system for image processing and pattern recognition.<sup>14</sup> I have spent my entire career making Linux-based COTS systems a viable and more affordable alternative to traditional supercomputers. I have incorporated popular compilers, job schedulers, and MPICH to COTS Linux deployments, and those innovations are still used today on Linux supercomputers, enabling Linux to become the OS of choice on high performance machines.

Exascale supercomputers will provide unprecedented capability to integrate data analytics, AI, and simulation for advanced 3-D modeling. They will tackle problems related to neuroscience, nuclear fusion, the biology of cancer, and will give nations a competitive edge in energy R&D and national security. It is my hope that somewhere a young computer scientist is reading my published work and it is sparking the same inspiration in them as H. J. Siegel's work inspired in me. My work has become one of the building blocks of 21st-century com- 415 puting technologies, and I look forward to seeing how 416 others build on my innovations with their own. 417

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