‘Linus to Linux’: A biography of a Software Engineer Kilian Carolan 15318097

Using a laptop with limited capability’s such as mine which regularly crashed, I looked for a way to speed things up and not have as many unnecessary background applications running which I neither wanted nor needed. I began to think maybe this was just the limitations of my laptop and nothing could be done because Windows 10 required these programmes to run. That was until I stumbled upon Ubuntu an operating system based on Linux, created by Linus Torvalds. Over the course of the next few pages I will be giving a brief overview of his life.

Linus Benedict Torvalds was born on December 28th 1969 to parents Anna and Nils Torvalds in Helsinki Finland. Torvalds maternal grandfather Leo Törnqvist was one of the first professors of statistics in Helsinki University, and it was through Törnqvist where he was first introduced to programming. As somebody studying in a statistics orientated course such as management science and information systems studies, I feel his grandfather’s involvement in statistics was the catalyst needed to send Torvalds down this path.

In the mid-1970s Törnqvist bought a pc known as the ‘Commodore VIC-20, Torvalds became bored with the limited programmes available for the pc and began programing his own, originally in BASIC but then moved on to using machine code by directly accessing the 6502 cpu.

In 1987 Torvalds purchased his first computer a Sinclair QL, the worlds first 32-bit computer for home use, however despite the significant increase in power from the Commodore, Torvalds was unable to reprogram due to the Os ROM (read only memory).

In 1988 Torvalds enrolled in Helsinki University and it was here he was first exposed to UNIX. Torvalds bought an Intel 80386 based clone of an IBM pc on January 5th 1991, however the OS on this pc was MS-DOS, Microsoft OS.

Torvalds was not satisfied with this OS and he preferred UNIX used by the college. This started Torvalds down his journey, he decided to create his own pc based version of UNIX and in 1991 he announced his new system known as Linux making it available to download for free.

For me the more important thing he did rather than simply making the OS available to download was to release Linux under GPL (GNU General Public License), in other words making it open source where anyone can study modify and redistribute the software as long as they made their own source code available for the same purpose. This started a huge collaborative project, however Torvalds efforts cantered around developing a kernel for Linux, and eventually with the help of other programmers refining the software in 1994 the Linux Kernel version 1.0 was released.

He was appointed as an instructor in the University of Helsinki and this allowed him to continue working on Linux, and despite disruptions due to the birth of his first daughter he managed to release Linux Kernel 2.0 in 1996, marking a significant improvement in performance.

In 1997 Torvalds moved to Silicon Valley at the beginning of the “Dot Com Boom”, taking a position with Transmeta Corporation developing commercial software to facilitate the communication between operating systems. This was controversial with Linux fanatics partly due to the fact that Transmeta Corporation was part funded by Paul Allen co-founder of Microsoft, however Torvalds had a growing family to support and his contract allowed him to devote part of his time to Linux development.

After his move to Silicon Valley comparisons were quickly made between Torvalds and Bill Gates, however bar occupation and the fact they both wore glasses not much else was similar. How I would describe the differences between the two would come partly from the economic/political ideologies of the country they come from. Torvalds is from a socialist state Finland’s which operates a system known as the Nordic model, whereas Gates hails from capitalist U.S.A. Microsoft products are proprietary software products, if you do not pay for them you do not get them, meaning if you cannot afford them you cannot acquire them, whereas anybody can acquire Linux. It’s almost similar to the welfare systems in both countries. Where Torvalds believes everyone benefits from software being available to everyone as it can be improved upon by everyone, Gates model allows constant revenue streams allowing his products to be constantly developed and worked on. It is important to not like the way Gates is not opposed to Charity evident by his massive altruism every year, Torvalds is also is not opposed to Capitalism and does admit the comforts of wealth.

In my opinion there is no clear winner in either system and I regret to say I am on the fence on that debate.

Torvalds economic situation did change in 1999. Red Hat and VA Linux (now VA Software), both leading developers of Linux-based software packages for large enterprises, rewarded Torvalds for his creation by awarding him stock. Red Hat went public, and his net worth increased to $20 million.

Linux has continued to develop over the years, and Torvalds is now seen as almost the spiritual leader of Linux.

He was also the developer of Git, a software which allows the tracking of source code development which was introduced in 2005 for use with the Linux Kernel. Like Linux this is also Open Source.

In Conclusion, Linus Torvalds created a free operating system which I use today in the form of Ubuntu. His philosophy is that open source development is best, but in this regard I would again link him to his home country’s economic system of socialism rather than a more severe communist approach. He believes the best tool for the job should be used even if this is proprietary software, and in this regard I totally agree with him. I will continue to use Ubuntu, however I am not going to stop excel for my spreadsheets because I feel it is the best tool for doing that.

Sources:

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