Sun Microsystems — Much Ado About Linux

Analyst: Anne MacFarland

There has been much ado about Sun-and-Linux, Sun-but-not-Linux, and Sun-or-Linux. Really, it's more about Unix. Sun is just continuing its journey from "Solaris only" through "Solaris and open appliances" (with Linux hermetically sealed) to a broader Unix-centric strategy. Despite earlier dogmatic rhetoric, this is a natural evolution, and one that augments Sun's arsenal of technology with which to wage its continuing wars against the evil homogeneity of Microsoft and the aggressive heterogeneity of IBM. Other preparations are evident in Sun's build-out of its storage offerings, and the expansion of its "The Network Is The Computer" vision into "N1," which introduces the concept of a Solaris-based meta-operating system for large, complex networks.

Sun's consistent promotion of the virtues of tight integration of components under a single, coherent operating system (Solaris) makes it easy to forget that behind Sun's brand strength is a company which, like all companies, grows in large part by interacting with the world beyond through licensing, OEMing, acquiring and refining technologies, and gaining and shedding channels. This flood and filter paradigm (think about the feeding habits of the sperm whale) counters the natural tendency of many organizations to develop a "not invented here" attitude, reduces hard-to-control costs, and enhances corporate agility. As Sun CEO Scott McNealy, in his penguin costume, said at Sun's recent Analysts' Conference, "better best-of-breed than a family tree that doesn't fork."

In the past, Sun has developed comprehensive solutions and controlled costs by actively cultivating a developer community for the Sun platform, feeding it with lots of free development products, and rewarding it with co-marketing. As applications are written more to multiple APIs than to singular platforms, a single-approach strategy becomes self-limiting. By publicly embracing Linux, Sun is expanding their developer strategy to embrace the open source community and its free-wheeling Internet-enabled, hyper-accelerated and self-correcting product development model. Open Source is like a big skunkworks without the direct costs. These days, that is not something a rational person would shun.

The recent Linux announcement included a lot of old news as well as new initiatives, and was more about Sun, and its recognition of the value of a wider community, and of precipitating Linux capabilities throughout the Sun environment:

- When Sun bought Cobalt last year, it ingested Linux on Intel as a solution for low-end, horizontally scalable applications. To extend Sun's presence in this space, Sun will extend the Cobalt product line with new low-end Linux servers using x86 microprocessors.
- Sun will deliver their entire Sun ONE infrastructure software suite on Linux as well as on Solaris. (Much of it is already available on both platforms). Sun will ship its own full Linux implementation on its x86 low end servers.
- SuSE and Lineo Linux implementations run native on Sun SPARC processors.
- Sun will partner with Lineo to distribute Linux on SPARC in the embedded space.
- Sun will provide support and professional services, as well as a LinCAT (Linux Compatibility Assurance Toolkit) for the Linux environment.
- Sun's storage products will support Linux.

Over 20 years, Sun has developed from rebel to its current self-declared role as family elder of the UNIX clan. Sun sees Linux, not as a UNIX black sheep, but as a cousin – perhaps with some philosophical differences – but still family.

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