

Mirror War

Or the confession and struggle of a Linux user

For more than three decades, I have been building, operating systems, and teaching digital literacy. I lived through the heyday of Novell, the conquest of Windows, and then in 2001, when I launched my own Slackware internet server, I found the freedom I had always been drawn to. Today, I am personally a committed Linux user and a FLOSS activist too. But as I write these lines, I feel mostly like a disillusioned lover. Because, in my opinion, when it comes to Linux, Microsoft or Apple are not our greatest enemies. We, Linux users, are the ones fighting a mirror war, and in reality, we are tripping each other up.

The free software movement has always been about community, sharing, and technological self-determination. This philosophy was the invisible force that made Linux the ruler of servers, routers, and smartphones. When Stallman founded the GNU project in 1983, and when Torvalds released his first kernel version in 1991, they were guided by the spirit of innovation and freedom. The possibility of a "fork"—for a project to branch off if the original path loses the community's trust—is in the system's genes. This ingenious idea ensured continuous renewal. As a wonderful example, just look at the success of LibreOffice, which started on the wave of OpenOffice. But somewhere along the way, this freedom turned into liberated light-heartedness, perhaps even license. When the freedom of choice turns into a denial of responsibility, chaos is born out of diversity. And the Linux desktop world demonstrates this every day with countless, often meaningless, forks, unnecessary duplication, and endless debates.

Let's take a closer look at this symphony of genius and chaos! Linux rules the cloud, the world wide web, and embedded systems. The world of desktops, which we constantly argue about, is a statistically almost negligible segment in the Linux ecosystem. But it is crucial from the perspective of the human experience, because this is where technology meets the everyday person, where first impressions are formed, and where it is decided whether a student, a teacher, or a retiree can come to love the open-source world. And here, within this sanctuary, we are waging war. Not about which distribution is "better," but about which is "cooler". The puritans, fighting for the Debian main repository, proclaim freedom, while often forgetting that the first step to freedom is the possibility of choice—even if they don't always like it. And the pragmatists, who shout, "It just has to work!", sometimes forget that chains of compromise can be just as much a fetter as the limitations of closed-source systems.

I, who live my daily life in the stable world of Debian, am repeatedly excited by the solutions of Fedora or Arch. This is precisely why this war deeply stirs me. Because I see the shadow of technical elitism when a new user is bombarded with "install Arch and learn," while the poor soul only wanted a functioning browser. I see the painful beauty of community democracy in Debian, where the search for consensus often cramps development, but at the same time creates a stability that cannot be bought with money.

And I also see the war of package formats—that surreal situation where we store the same Firefox in ten different package formats, while fundamental security vulnerabilities remain unpatched due to a lack of development resources. This is not freedom, but a waste of resources, which we try to sell under the label of "freedom of choice".

And here I am, a person who deeply believes in the ideals of FLOSS, but not blindly. One who adores the purity of Debian, but recognizes that a modern everyday laptop will not even boot without non-free firmware. One who appreciates the freshness of Arch, but knows that a banking system does not need it. This is my internal war: the eternal struggle between freedom and practicality in my soul. When I install LibreOffice on Debian in my own environment, and I see that my students lose nothing compared to MS Office on the go. That's when I feel it's all worth it. But when I see in the Linux Facebook groups that the majority of members do not know the Debian Social Contract or the significance of licenses, that's when I lose faith.

The most painful thing about all of this is that I know the solution is not technical, but cultural. As long as distributions find their identity in belittling others, this war will never end. As long as "your distro is stupid" is louder than "look how we did this", we are just shooting ourselves in the foot. As long as system administrators and developers live in two parallel universes, there will never be a truly unified desktop experience. The systemd war, the battle of package formats, the strife between desktop environments—all are just symptoms of our inability to grasp that we are in a giant supermarket where everyone buys from the same selection, just into different baskets.

But I believe in recovery. I believe that Flatpak and other universal package formats, even if slowly, will bring us together. I believe that individual efforts like mine—patient education, providing help without aggressively "shoving" Linux down people's throats as the solution—will be more fruitful in the long run than any war. I believe that the common enemy—the world of closed systems, digital dependency, the commercial use of user data—are big enough problems to unite us, but only if we allow it and act on it.

The ultimate paradox is that the greatest strength of the Linux desktop (desktop) —the freedom of choice—is also its greatest weakness. But I continue to believe in dialogue, in creating common ground. Because I know that the real victory will not be when the last Windows user switches to a Linux-based operating system, but when we, Linux users, finally lay down our weapons and realize that we are rowing in the same boat, even if with different oars. When we understand that a corporate sysadmin needs something different than a developer, and a student, a teacher or an engineer sits down at their machine with different expectations than a retiree. And that these different needs do not exclude each other, but rather complement one another. The future does not lie in a single, perfect distribution, but in learning to respect the choices of others while working together toward common goals. This is my faith, and this is why I will continue to learn, build, and teach—preferably without war.