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SHINY NEW FORK

The world is left to wonder if the recent news of a Debian fork is an important event or a minor historical footnote. Either way, it seems like a good story, reminiscent of the Linux stories of the past, when the community really looked and behaved like a collection of individuals rather than a corporate fan club.

If you haven't been listening, the rift is over whether Debian [1] should mandate `init` neutrality, or whether the Debian distro should be allowed to follow the drift toward the `systemd` service daemon, which is rapidly replacing the classic `System V` `init` elsewhere in the Linux space.

The reason `systemd` was born in the first place was because many developers believed the ancient `init` is not fast enough or versatile enough for today's systems. But `systemd` also has its critics. Many believe `systemd` is too complex – and too far out of step with the Unix philosophy of “do one thing and do it well.” Others cite technical reasons why they don't think `systemd` will work well in container-based virtualization environments. Still others simply don't like change or the oppressive tug of popular opinion. The underlying arguments on both sides are too extensive to recount in a one-page column, but the press announcement and the website for the new Debian fork [2], known as Devuan (pronounced DevOne), provide some interesting reading.

The group spearheading the fork calls itself the Veteran Unix Admin collective, hinting that this controversy might ultimately result from a generational divide, with the next generation calling for new stuff and the veterans beating the drum for old stuff. The Debian community took on the topic with its usual candor and clamor. Eventually they voted on it, using the arcane Condorcet voting technique [3] to evaluate five different options simultaneously, and the winning option was not to mandate support for other `init`s, thus ensuring the continued drift toward `systemd` and precipitating the fork.

When I first started working for this magazine, Debian was really big in the Linux News. We even had a column in the community section with regular updates on Debian elections and decisions. Since emergence of polished Debian derivatives like Ubuntu, Debian has assumed a lower profile, but it is still

hugely important behind the scenes. At last count, 135 Linux distributions called themselves Debian derivatives.

We tend to use the term “community distro” to describe any Free Linux that relies on contributed developer time. Ubuntu, Fedora, and openSUSE are all known today as “community” distros, even though each has a corporate sponsor that lingers close to the action and calls the shots for most important decisions. A messy or divisive public feud like Debian's `systemd` crisis would never happen with Ubuntu, because Canonical simply wouldn't allow it.

Even the Linux kernel community – the ultimate Linux hackers, would not go through anything quite like what happened with Debian because Linus Torvalds is in the position to set the direction with more authority than anyone can actually exercise over the Debian project.

If a corporate-backed Linux announced a major change, they would already have a plan for how to make the change happen, including sources for funding. When Debian gets forked, what happens? That's what makes the real, authentic Free Software movement embodied by the Debian project so interesting. It all depends on what people do. You would have to think the Veteran Unix Admins will have a hard road peeling off volunteers from Debian, which many contributors consider a labor of love. But if enough disgruntled coders join in, Devuan could be around for years as another stable Linux that keeps `init` in the game as an alternative to `systemd`. Could a ragtag group of renegade developers really launch a project that takes on the corporate world and changes the face of the IT industry? It has certainly happened before



Joe Casad,
Editor in Chief



INFO

- [1] Debian: <http://debian.org>
- [2] Devuan project: <https://devuan.org/>
- [3] Condorcet voting method:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Condorcet_method