

As Seen On:



Linux and PS2 - A Marriage Made in Heaven

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Is use of Linux on Playstation 2 the onramp that eventually will enable Sony to compete as a full-fledged computer hardware and software provider?

I have always liked Sony's products. I like well-engineered and integrated solutions, which explains why I am such a big fan of companies such as Sun, Apple, and Cisco. They provide a seamless and comprehensive set of solutions in Enterprise/datacenter/server computing, desktop computing, and networking, respectively.

When it comes to home entertainment, Sony provides a similarly broad and capable array of camcorders, TVs and DVD players, gaming consoles, satellite receivers and so on.

But the Achilles' heel in Sony's hardware strategy has been its VAIO line of computers.

Something's Missing

Don't get me wrong. If an omnipotent entity suddenly blotted out all but Intel/AMD computer vendors, I'd turn to a VAIO, be it desktop or mobile. The fatal flaw I'm talking about is the operating system that Sony ships with the VAIO.

Take, for instance, setting up an 802.11b wireless network. With a Macintosh (news - web sites), the process is relatively trivial. Plug in the card, hook up and configure the base station, select the network, and in a few moments you are ready to go.

With a PC -- even a VAIO from Sony with a Sony 802.11b card -- it's like pulling teeth.

The problem isn't hardware quality. Apple's products are essentially based on Lucent Orinoco hardware, anyway. The problem is with the VAIO's Windows operating system, as well as with its drivers and networking software.

The people who wrote the operating system simply did not have the luxury of tailoring and integrating the code with the underlying hardware. This is why hooking up can take hours of fussing with Windows while a Mac takes only minutes.

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Desktop Contender

Consider the Sony PlayStation 2 (news - web sites). For a retail price of US\$300, you get a gaming console with excellent hardware capabilities. It has an IEEE 1394 port (which Sony calls iLink and Apple calls Firewire), two USB ports, and is capable of high-quality optical audio (DTS/Dolby Digital) and video (S-Video). In essence, it is the perfect gaming console.

Just when you thought it couldn't get any better, Sony announced the availability of a Linux (news - web sites) for PS2 option. For an additional \$200, you get a 40 GB hard drive, a 100 Base-T Ethernet card, a computer monitor adapter and a keyboard and mouse. You also get the Linux operating system, compilers and programming tools.

So for as little as \$500, you'll be able to play the best-selling console games on the market, watch DVDs and get a very capable Linux workstation.

Similarly, the device can be converted into a TiVo (news - web sites). Considering that the PS2 has MPEG decoding hardware built in for DVD viewing, along with hard drive space and the Linux OS -- which the TiVo runs on anyhow -- it's theoretically possible.

More for the Money

In my humble opinion, such a combination would be hard to beat at a \$500 price point. Hardware-wise (knock-off color plastics aside), budget PCs would have nothing on a PS2 Linux box.

If Sony's embrace of Linux for PS2 is any indication, the company finally has an operating system to call its own. Sony now can tailor the operating system to the hardware products it is preparing.

If the company manages to make inroads toward Linux desktop usability while also bringing the ease of use of its hardware products to the PS2 (and hopefully to its VAIO line), it will have eliminated the biggest shortcoming of its PC strategy.

Is use of Linux on Playstation 2 the onramp that eventually will enable Sony to compete as a full-fledged computer hardware and software provider? Respond in the Talkback Forum and let me know what you think.

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