

# Over a lunch with Linus

Päivikki Karhula

*Being on the right mailing list at the right time ended up in spending about three hours over a lunch with a Finnish hero: Linus Torvalds. If you are not familiar with Linus: he is an acknowledged godfather of the open-source movement and the creator of the Linux kernel operating system. And just to let you know, credits do not motivate him – and he hates mobile phones.*

**T**orvalds visited Finland to receive the 2012 Millennium Technology Prize awarded to him by the Technology Academy Finland in recognition of his creation of a new open source operating system Linux.

## **Working for the good of people**

Even without the Millennium Prize Torvald's credits are impressive. Just to mention some of them:

in 2012, at the Internet Society's Global Conference in Switzerland, Torvalds was one of the inaugural inductees into the Internet Hall of Fame. In 2004, he was named one of the most influential people in the world. In 2006, Time Magazine's Europe edition named him one of the revolutionary heroes of the past 60 years. Hmmm. And, in 1996, an asteroid was named after him.

However, Torvalds seems not to work for pri-

zes, recognition - or even for money. - My work for Linux is not dependent on prizes, Torvalds underlines.

- Prizes do not motivate me. I enjoy working for things which are useful for people, tells Torvalds. - This is not to say that I would not honor the credits I have received. I certainly respect receiving the Millenium Prize. With this money I can probably send all of my kids to Stanford University, instead picking up one of them and giving him that opportunity.

## **Spontaneous organization**

How the open source software development is organized? The whole arrangement of software development is largely behind the network of skilled programmers who may be volunteers or work for companies which invest part of their time on the development of Linux.

- It all seems to take place very spontaneously, Torvalds describes. - We do not have a highly structured organization rather we depend on the spontaneously developed network of programmers. Each new version of Linux is a result of co-operation between more than 1000 programmers.

- I make the decisions about the code which is used. Decisions need to be made to enable progress. This is actu-

ally the work that I am doing, Torvalds states. - Many practical decisions are also made on the producer level of the code. The one who actually does the programming work makes the decision. If you have an idea, you need to prove your idea works, by making it real.

- People also make mistakes, Torvalds admits. - If a poor program is made, someone will make better next time. However, this model of development is not democracy. It is about making a good code.

## **Misinterpreted copyright**

- Copyright is essential, Torvalds says. - It is also important that anyone who earns it gets credit for his work. Authors and creators of ideas need to be recognized and they need to receive credit for their good work. Ideas need to be protected. However, I do not agree with the way this is done

in copyright legislation.

- The protection period of the present copyright legislation is too long, Torvalds corrects. - Copyright is no more used to support authors, but to make financial profit. It was not the original idea of copyright. Nor does the length of the protection period relate to the periods of technological cycles. Just think of what dramatic changes have taken place within

the past ten years.

Open source software has its roots in open science. What could be done to the privatization and high prices of publications and science? - A critical mass of academic institutions would be needed to fight back, Torvalds explains. - Maybe some strong and prosperous universities, like MIT or Harvard could make a difference. Universities should make joint efforts to support open science and open access.

## **Pragmatism and freedom movement**

- I am very pragmatic, Torvalds underlines. - I understand that free software is like a religion for some people. These people may think I have made open source software an everyday, boring and technical thing.

- People have very different attitudes to the free software world, Torvalds describes. - 30 years ago there was a lot of idealism. 'Information should be free' -like statements. The open source movement does not any more emphasize antagonism between commercial products and open

source world. And open source software has become commonly used.

In these days, a significant part of the development work for Linux is done by companies. How this unorthodoxy of open source ideology works without developing dependencies? - We haven't seen conflicts of interests in our way of working, Torvalds states. - People have had fears that e.g. a million dollars sponsorship from a major IT-provider would have had an impact on our work. It didn't.

- Neutrality is important, Torvalds points out. - I don't want to work for any Linux company. In the Linux Foundation I work in an independent position. This arrangement also guarantees that no one needs to see the Linux Foundation as a threat. 📖

## **Information on the writer**

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