

REMARKABLE
PEOPLE

TECHNOLOGY ROCK STAR

BY FIONA TANG

Though it was created by a single individual named Linus Torvalds, Linux has truly become a world-changing software environment. An estimated 64 million people around the world use Linux, according to the Linux Counter. The Linux Foundation projects the Linux ecosystem will reach \$50 billion in the next two years.

A self-professed geek, Torvalds hails from a family of journalists, where he is considered the black sheep. He was named after Linus Pauling, Nobel Prize-winning chemist, and Linus from the Peanuts cartoon. He attributes his “dualistic nature of serious and not-so-serious” to his name.

Torvalds was awarded one of the 2008 CHM Fellow Awards, for creating the Linux kernel and overseeing open source development of the widely used Linux operating system. Linux got its start as an operating system when Torvalds began playing around with MINIX, a UNIX-like operating system—short for Minimal UNIX. Torvalds had simply posted it to a MINIX forum to gather a little feedback. And feedback was what Torvalds got—in spades. Users have quickly become fanatical in their following of Linux.

In spite of the ingenuity of the original creation, Linux, as we now know it, is founded on a quiet spirit of collaboration. To Torvalds, collaboration came hand-in-hand with passion. How did Linux manage to pick up such a huge fan-base of users all working to continually improve on the product? Torvalds said, “They always volunteered. I wouldn’t even want to work with people who don’t feel passionately about what they do because searching for people to do something doesn’t work... It started out slow and on a very small scale. But it was a natural progression.” As a result, Linux, with the help of the Internet, has spurred the widespread, successful movement of what is now known as Open Source.

This August, Linux turned 18. It has grown from 10,000 lines of code to roughly 7 million. And even though Torvalds is one of the few scientists in a family of journalists, he’s now likely to be the most widely published of his family—and have more fans than most rock stars.

“The impact that Linus has had on the software industry can’t be overestimated. He sparked the world’s largest technology project in the history of computing. And now, 18 years later, millions of people are contributing to the Linux kernel and the \$50 billion ecosystem it supports,” said Jim Zemlin, Executive Director at The Linux Foundation. ○

This article was based on Linus Torvalds’ contribution to the Computer History Museum’s oral history collection. Explore the oral history collection at: computerhistory.org/oralhistory.

Linus Torvalds at the
Computer History Museum’s
2008 Fellow Awards.

SYNCHRONIZED ELEGANCE IMAGING