

Dead Trees

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Red Hat Linux: Is it a mainstream product yet?

Have you ever noticed that when many people say something is “ironic” they really mean it’s “coincidental”? Well, consider this: I’m writing a review of Red Hat Linux (which is running on a Dell laptop computer) on an Apple iBook running Apple OSX (which is really just BSD Unix). When I’m finished, I’ll copy it to a Windows XP computer and massage it in Ultra Edit before I copy it to Ventura Publisher for formatting in *Dead Trees*. Is that ironic or just weird?

No matter. The question that really matters is this one: Should your next computer run on Linux?

And there’s no “one size fits all” answer.

If you’re a programmer, and particularly a programmer who writes applications that run on a Linux server, the answer is a resounding **YES**.

If you’re a user who doesn’t want to know anything at all about the operating system, but who just wants to get some work done on a computer, the answer is an equally resounding **NO**. (If that’s a description of you, then you should look seriously at a Mac because even with Unix running behind the scenes, the Mac still has the operating system that requires the least amount of user knowledge.)

A tinker’s what?

But what if you’re somebody who likes to tinker with the computer when you’re not using it to get work done? What if you’re independently wealthy and like to play with computers? For the first person, a dual-boot computer might be the right answer; the latter person can just buy a dozen computers and install a different OS on each.

Is Linux for the average user?

I think it is not. Understand that I’m not a Unix/Linux expert. My website runs on a Linux server and I know enough about “X” systems not to log in as root and type “`rm *`”. But when it comes to understanding and using the OS, I still have to pull out the reference books. (*For those not familiar with X systems, the command noted here would delete all files on the disk, including the operating system. This is not a good thing to do.*)

I’m sufficiently clueless about the finer points of Linux that ...

- When installing Sun’s Star Office 5.2 did something bad to my Red Hat Linux installation, the fastest solution I could find was to *reinstall the operating system*.
- Because I installed Linux while my USB mouse was installed (and told the OS that the system’s mouse was a “Microsoft Optical Mouse USB”) the trackpad mouse built in to the computer didn’t work and the system wouldn’t even boot

to the graphical user interface if the USB mouse wasn’t attached. My solution: Unplug the USB mouse and reinstall Linux.

It’s easy ...

The installation process is remarkably easy. Just boot to the installation CD, press **Return** a few times, swap CD 1 with CD 2 when the process is about half complete, create a password for the root account, and (optionally) create at least one user account. That’s it. Nothing could be easier.

It’s a little more complex if you want to keep any of the data that was on the disk drive. To do that, you have to understand disk partitioning. And if you want to keep an existing operating system on the computer and add Linux, you must understand dual-boot setups.

This is well beyond what a lot of “average” users want to learn and I can’t blame them. The concepts are easy enough, but performing a series of involved tasks that can (if you make a small error) delete everything on the disk is enough to make some folks just a little uneasy.

So that’s one reason that I believe Linux will be left out of mainstream computing for a while longer.

The other reason is a lack of software. This makes Linux users scream *There’s LOTS of software!* So let me reword that: There is a lack of software *from companies with names you’ve heard of*. Yes, you may have heard of Sun, but Sun’s *Star Office* suite lacks features and compatibility needed in real-world offices. And, yes, Corel’s Wordperfect Office Suite is available for Linux, but it’s version 8 while the current Windows version is 10. Corel’s graphics applications? Not for Linux. Microsoft products? Nope. What about applications that work with my Palm OS organizer? Sorry. Does Intuit make finance applications for Linux? No. E-mail programs? Sure, but not with names like Eudora or Outlook. What about Web browsers? You have a choice of Netscape version 4 or several “open source” browsers you’ve probably never heard of and that lack features you probably want.

What the heck is this?

Dead Trees is the William Blinn Communications newsletter. It’s published whenever I feel like it, although I generally feel like it when I’m preparing the month’s invoices. If you didn’t receive an invoice with this newsletter, kindly contact me and we’ll rectify that situation. Please note that despite the name, of the publication, I bear no particular animosity toward trees. The name is simply an acknowledgment that paper is made from, well, dead trees.

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So – yes, there's a lot of software available for Linux. There's graphics software. There's finance software. Word processors. Spreadsheet applications. E-mail programs. Text editors. But unless you're an X-system guru, you won't have heard of them. They won't be compatible with applications you've been using. And while many of these applications are free, they also tend to be buggy and have limited feature sets.

But don't ignore Linux!

A Linux computer is probably in your future. Home networks are becoming increasingly popular. And while I don't think much of Linux as the operating system for desktop computers, I think even less of Windows as the operating system for servers.

That's right. When one of your older computers is ready to retire, give it a *Linuxotomy* and turn it into a character-based server. Let everyone on your home network store files there. Let it be a print server. You'll need to install some (free) software that will let Windows computers work with Linux print and file servers but once you get that running, you're done.

The computer you want to retire because it's too slow for Windows will be just right for running a Linux server. Servers run in character mode and (at least in a home setting) don't need much computing power.

In very nearly the same breath, let me add this: **Linux is NOT faster than Windows** despite its reputation for speed. Linux in character mode is faster than Windows for the same reason that DOS is faster than Windows – the computer doesn't have to deal with all the graphical user interface overhead.

But the minute you put GNOME or KDE on the system and run Linux in GUI mode (also known as *X-Windows*) the computer will be every bit as slow as if you had installed Microsoft Windows. Don't let the rabid Linux folks fool you. There is no free lunch.

Prepare for the future with Red Hat

Linux is free, so why should you buy a distribution from Red Hat or anyone else? The best reason I can suggest is that it's good for your mental health. I simply can't imagine trying to get Linux up and running on a computer without the assistance of a professionally prepared "installer".


That's part of what you get when you buy a distribution instead of downloading the operating system. You also get support (invaluable when you can't figure out what's gone wrong) and printed manuals. Unix and Linux include "man" (short for "manual") so on-line help is available for every command. Typing "man li" at a command line prompt will explain the X-system equivalent of "dir" for DOS.

Or you can type "man man" to read the man manual.

I'm one of many people who still prefer books. I can open a book and put it beside the keyboard. That means I don't have to keep flipping from a "man" screen to the screen I'm working on and trying to remember what I just read.

For anyone who's interested in learning more about Linux or who wants to put Linux to work, spending a little money on Red Hat Linux 7.2 would be a wise investment indeed.

For more information about Red Hat Linux, take a look at <http://www.redhat.com/>. The basic distribution sells for about \$40. The "pro" version (around \$160) includes Sun's Star Office suite, additional CDs (mostly with demo versions of software), a half-year subscription to the update service, and support (60 days' Web-based installation support with unlimited Web tickets and 60 days' telephone-based installation support, including two incidents).

If you're curious about Linux, Red Hat gives you a good way to quench your thirst for knowledge. 

Coloring the news

You've probably noticed that this edition of *Dead Trees* is a little more colorful than what you've seen in the past. Color can be helpful (as I hope it is here) or it can be a distraction. It's easy to fall into the "I'm going to use every color I have" trap, just as it's easy to fall into the "I'm going to use every typeface I have" trap. Neither is good.



How valuable is color? Well, most of today's publications are in color. That suggests one of two possibilities: (1) Publishers have proved to themselves that color helps them communicate or (2) Publishers are fools who throw money away.

While there is some evidence to support the second theory, the first seems more likely. So color, when it's used properly, can aid communications.

One of the nice things about the Web is that a website with a lot of colors costs no more than one in black and white. So color abounds on the Web, in magazines, even in newspapers. It's still not common in newsletters such as this.

When I found that I could buy a \$3000 Tektronix Phaser 740 color laser printer for \$500, I jumped. No, it's not "hot"; it's used. The previous owner printed 40,000, but that's not much for a network printer. It has 128MB of memory, prints 1200dpi, includes a 10-BaseT connector, and handles Postscript output.

What's the point of this rambling? The main point is that sometimes you find what you've been looking for in an unlikely place. And sometimes you can find a way to create a profitable business if you look beyond the obvious.

A guy in suburban Columbus decided that he could make money selling used printers and copiers. Along the way, he's employing several people. And because of all that, I'm the happy owner of a color printer! 