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Should your next computer run Linux?

It's increasingly difficult to pick an operating system. Buy a new Intel-based Mac and you can install Apple's OS X, Microsoft's Vista (4 versions) or XP (2 primary versions), and Linux (dozens of variants). On a standard (that is, non-Apple) machine, you still can choose to mix and match the Microsoft operating systems and one or more versions of Linux. It used to be that Linux was for geeks, hobbyists, and anti-Microsoft cranks. Today's Linux is far more mainstream.

Past advice usually has been to figure out what you want to use the computer for, identify the applications that will do the job, and then match the operating system and the hardware to the software. Today's hardware and operating systems are all compatible with applications that do just about anything you might want to do.

If you create professional videos, you'll probably use a Mac. If you develop video games, you'll find the most flexibility on a Windows machine (which could be a Mac). If you're a scientist or you plan to run an Internet hosting company, you'll want Linux machines. For most of us, any one of the major operating systems will do.

Even the look and feel of the operating system is less of a factor than it once was. Windows machines put the Task Bar at the bottom, but you can reposition it. Most Linux machines put the Panel at the top, but you can reposition it. Macs put the Dock at the bottom of the screen, but you can reposition it. All 3 operating systems have task switchers. Apples have widgets, Windows machines have gadgets, and Linux machines have desklets. All 3 operating systems have an icon or button to reveal the desktop. Disk drives in Windows have letters with associated names. Disk drives on Apple machines have names. Disk drives on Linux machines have mount points, but the operating system can make these appear as letters or named drives. All 3 operating systems can index any attached drives for faster searching. It goes on like that. More similarities than differences.

The widest selection of commercial software is available for Windows machines. Some applications run only under Windows. A few applications are available only on Macs. Linux systems run primarily open-source applications, which are similar to commercial applications (Open Office is like Microsoft Office, for example).

If your work doesn't depend on features of applications that are available only for Windows machines or Macs, Linux can be a reasonable choice because the operating system may be obtained without cost, it will run acceptably on more Spartan hardware, and free applications are readily available for most tasks.

They play well together, too

I have worked with Microsoft's Vista and XP, with Apple's Leopard, and with Ubuntu's Gutsy Gibbon Linux. I see features in all of the operating systems that I like and I see shortcomings in each. Mac magazines are generally dismissive of Windows, PC magazines are often equally dismissive of Macs. Linux lovers see nothing good about either Macs or PCs. Articles by these publications generate a lot of heat and are good for keeping subscribers, but they don't create much light and they certainly don't help people determine which operating system will be the best choice for their individual needs.

You won't find a perfect operating system, but no matter which you choose, it will be capable of handling just about anything you ask it to do. If money is no object, buy the fastest Intel-based Apple you can find, load it up with lots of memory and disk space, and install Vista and Linux along with Leopard. If money is a large object, a sub-$500 computer (including monitor, keyboard, and mouse) with one of the Linux distributions will probably serve you well.

This report, for example, was written and edited on a notebook computer running Open Office Writer on Ubuntu Linux, then prepared for the TechByter website in Adobe Dreamweaver CS3 under Microsoft XP, with final editing under Microsoft Vista. I made significant modifications to the article in preparing it for *Random Thoughts* in Microsoft Word and then formatted it in Adobe InDesign under Microsoft Vista. Some components were generated, edited, or prepared on a Mac running OS X 10.4.

What's this Ubuntu thing?

It's pronounced oo-BOON-too and the word expresses a South African concept that roughly translates to "humanity toward others". It's a Linux distribution that's based on Debian GNU/Linux, but it has a strong emphasis on ease of installation. Installation has always been a challenge for Linux users. The average computer

geek can install it, but the average person could not. Mark Shuttleworth, who is a wealthy resident of South Africa felt that a free desktop operating system that comes with a variety of open-source applications would be worthwhile. I have to agree.
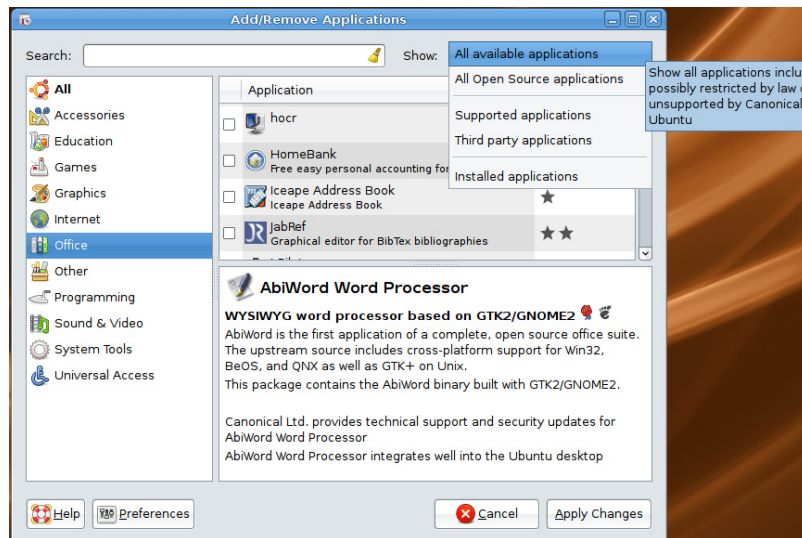
Those who do not depend on specific features of Word, Excel, Powerpoint, Access, Photoshop, Dreamweaver, InDesign, and such could find that Ubuntu offers just what they need at a far lower cost than either a Windows computer or a Mac.

Version 7.10 of Ubuntu was released in October and I installed in on a spare drive in my notebook computer. This involved downloading the 700MB Ubuntu file and burning it to a CD. During the installation, I had only to answer a few questions (my name, what login I wanted to use, what the password should be, what language to use, and what time zone I'm in). I could have set up Ubuntu to share the drive with Windows, but I allowed it to use the entire hard drive.

Software is easy

What impressed me most was how many applications the Ubuntu distribution includes so that you can start using the computer right away. There are standard Linux system tools, of course, but Ubuntu comes with Open Office (word processor, spreadsheet, presentation), Firefox (Web browser), Pidgin (an IM client that used to be called GAIM), and GIMP (a graphics application). You'll also find a bunch of games (card games, sodoku, and chess.)

Here's the application installer at work. The user needs only to select applications to install. The installer downloads the software, checks all dependencies, and handles the installation. Later, updates are installed automatically, too.

If a 700MB download is too much, you can request a CD (free, but it will take perhaps 10 weeks to arrive). Because you can boot and run Ubuntu from the CD you create or have mailed, you can see immediately whether the operating system is compatible with your hardware.

By default, the Start Menu equivalent in Ubuntu Linux is at the top of the screen, but you may move it to either side or the bottom of the screen. Add/Remove applications looks a lot like what you'd find in Windows, but it does more than Microsoft's Control Panel function.

If you ask Ubuntu to install an application that depends on another application that isn't present on the machine, you'll be asked to approve installing the "dependency" application.

Some might say that this is the way applications should be installed. I would be one of those who would say that. Ubuntu Linux also calls out *community-maintained*

applications such as the VLC Media Player. When you add programs, Ubuntu clearly delineates open source, community-maintained, and commercial applications.

Hard times with hardware

Linux has had problems in the past detecting some hardware. Modems, for example, are a challenge because most computers come with WinModem hardware that depend on functions that are built in to Windows. But when I plugged in a thumb drive, Ubuntu immediately detected it and mounted it, then it placed an icon on the desktop. How Mac-like!

You may encounter rough edges if you use a high-end graphics card or a special sound card, but it seems that more hardware manufacturers have figured out that it's good business sense to provide Linux drivers.

What makes Microsoft nervous?

Recently, I visited the Ubuntu Linux discussion board and found 8000 users logged on. In the overall scheme of operating systems, 8000 users isn't a big deal. But Ubuntu is just one of dozens of Linux distributions and the number of Linux users is steadily increasing.

Ubuntu has been around since late 2004 and the goal has been to release a new version every 6 months. It includes the latest GNOME release. GNOME is the GNU Network Object Model Environment, an international effort to build a desktop environment entirely from free, open-source software. The primary emphasis is on simplicity, usability, and making things "just work".

GNOME runs on most Unix-like systems and is the default desktop environment for many GNU/Linux distributions in addition to Ubuntu. In May of 2007, Dell announced plans to sell computers with Ubuntu installed. These machines are available in the United States, the United Kingdom, France, and Germany. Microsoft has good reason to be concerned by these developments. ß

on the market by A.J. Stinnett

CORNER

"Jobs must be structured so that employees will gain the knowledge they need to advance."