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Linux Moves In

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An "operating system" is the collection of software programs that runs a computer. Once upon a time it seemed like it was inevitable that everyone would use Microsoft software everywhere. How things can change in a few short years! The increasing utility and usability of Linux have caused many people to take a serious look at it. Those looks have led to an explosion in the use of Linux. The robustness and openness of this twelve-year old software 'phenomenon' are well known in the computing community. Uptimes of over a year are considering unremarkable when a computer is running Linux.

Originally used mostly as a server platform, Linux has improved so much over the last couple of years that many companies are now looking to deploy it on the desktop. The GUI (Graphical User Interface) has improved greatly in usability and looks (leading to the phrase "eye candy"). This increasing ease of use, and simplified installation and configuration, are making Linux more attractive for home desktops, too.

Unlike Microsoft OS's, Linux comes with many applications you'd normally need to buy. Things like OpenOffice, a complete suite of great desktop apps that are compatible with MS Office; a great graphics program GIMP, to rival Printshop, and many other applications all come with the CD's, at the same low, low price! When you do a Linux installation they're all installed, and can be found on the menus for your use.

Yes, Linux is inexpensive. It comes as a set of CD's, known as a "distribution". It can be had for free, by just downloading the ISO image files from the net and burning them onto CD's. (See <http://www.redhat.com/download/mirror.html> for sites you can download Red Hat Linux from.) Or, if you're relatively inexperienced, buying a copy of a Linux distribution at your local store is a good way to start, as you get some great documentation with the CD's.

There are specialized versions of Linux, too. If you're interesting in trying Linux, you can do so without even loading it on your hard disk. Knoppix Linux is a Linux that runs right off of a CD. Buy running it, you can get your feet wet with Linux without making a commitment. Knoppix Linux is found at <http://www.knoppix.net/>. Other Linux distributions are designed to run strictly as a firewall for your household. Search google for Smoothwall, IPCop, or ClarkConnect;

What kind of hardware do you need to run Linux? In the famous words of Anonymous, "it depends". If you just want to use an old PC as a firewall, you'll need a PC with two Network Interface Cards (they don't have to be PCI, but it's easier if they are). The firewall will run nicely on a Pentium 100 with 32 Megabytes of RAM and 500 Megabytes of disk space.

On the other hand, if you want to run a workstation with a high resolution screen with deep color depth, it takes more CPU power to move those windows around on the screen. Still, for good performance, Linux doesn't require as much horsepower as WindowsXP (for example). Good results can be had with a 600 Mhz PC, 192 Megs of RAM, and 3-4 Gigabytes of disk space (a bit more if you go crazy and click on "load everything").

And if you aren't comfortable with the idea yet of switching out your whole operating system, you can load Linux alongside of Windows on your hard disk, and dual-boot into the OS you want to use.

If you're not ready to run Linux, but do want to experiment with OpenSource software within the comfort of Windows, you can: OpenOffice is available for Win32 as well as Linux (<http://www.openoffice.org>). GIMP, the Photoshop replacement has been ported to Windows.

(<http://www.wingimp.org/>), and GAIM, the GNU Instant Message program that's compatible with AIM, is found at <http://gaim.sourceforge.net>. It's improved so much recently that many people prefer it over AIM. It's also multi-lingual, speaking AIM, ICQ, MSN, Yahoo, and several other instant messaging protocols.

And if you burn CD's with these programs, feel free to share them with your friends; they're licensed under the GPL (General Public License), and can be legally copied. No worrying about bootleg software here!

If you start working with Linux and need help, there are many LUGs (Linux Users Groups) around the world and here in the United States. Their members are happy to give you a hand. You can find your local LUG at <http://www.ssc.com:8080/glue/groups/>.

Try out Linux. But be warned – it's seductive in its power and utility!

Useful Info:

Linux metadirectory (directory of useful Linux web sites)
<http://yolinux.com>

Directory of Linux software:
<http://freshmeat.net>

Information for new Linux users:
<http://www.linux.com/>
<http://yolinux.com/TUTORIALS/index.html>

Linux documentation:
<http://www.tldp.org/>

Information on KDE:
<http://www.kde.org/documentation/>

Information on GNOME:
<http://www.gnome.org/start/2.4/>