

Linux Beginnings - Down the Rabbit Hole in Wonderland

By C. E. Woollen

Once someone gets past the old joke in computer support, "A 'PC' need not be running Microsoft Windows", it's still a big leap from knowing about other operating systems from the news and actually going for one. In the desktop/laptop space there are three big Operating Systems. Microsoft Windows is the famous one. Apple has put Mac OS X into the news this decade. Right away a huge factor comes into play. MS Windows and Mac OS essentially come out in "one flavor". Yes, Microsoft likes to remove some features as an entry level offering, but it's still mostly the same Windows. Mac OS X only comes in a couple versions per edition.

And then there's Linux. Linux is like the Tower of Babel. It comes in a vast array of different flavors called Distributions or Distros. So once that is selected like a family, then you get back to the question of which edition. It's a multiplication effect. At the very outset the user has to solve a very complicated choice she/he has never heard of! These Distros come about because of the open nature of the Linux community. When something goes awry in Windows, about all you can do is submit a bug report and then hope a fix comes through in a patch. Warranties aside, even if you found a hack fix yourself, you couldn't share it without violating Microsoft's rules. For Linux, if something goes badly enough, you can fix it yourself, then submit the fix into a shared archive for anyone to use if they liked. For really big situations, you can even branch off and make your own distribution.

From this comes the first hurdle. If you decide to tell 100 users to "Use Linux" and they actually agree to do so, they're going to end up with a colossal discussion of which Distro suits them. While the Distros are similar, they're not quite perfectly compatible. It's like Parisian vs. Canadian French (without any pejorative meanings.) Ubuntu has emerged recently as a popular Distro because of the efforts of Mark Shuttleworth's Canonical Company.

A problem of a different variety is that a potential user must actually install the operating system. Microsoft Windows and Mac OS X come installed upon the purchase of the computer. It turns out that the Linux culture values flexibility in the OS, sometimes at considerable cost to newcomer friendliness. The types of decisions required by a Linux install can get them into a whole heap of trouble in a hurry. For this reason, Canonical made ease of installation one of their priorities. I myself am a bit nervous at these options. So to start somewhere, I went with Ubuntu first.

Ubuntu produces a new edition every six months, and every fourth one is designated a "Long term support" edition. Pretty soon the question of hardware comes up. For all else that may be said of them, Microsoft has actually spent a ton of work on hardware drivers, and hardware is mostly designed to work with Windows. Linux does a passable job with most hardware, but it's quite common for some piece to go unrecognized. An expert can

look up their hardware type, scour the net for a driver, and put it in. I am not an expert. My screen comes through with a misc generic driver for a low resolution. I'll suffer with that for a while. Let's say the OS is happily installed, more or less.

The second you try to do anything at all, you come to the issue of Graphical User Interface (GUI) design. For Windows and OS X, the GUI is "just there". In Linux, the back end kernel is separated from the front end GUI. There are two major GUI packages called Gnome and KDE, flanked by many specialized other niche GUIs. I learned my computing skills on a first generation Mac, then Windows. You "click this to do that". In these Linux GUIs, some of it is there, but a lot of it is positioned differently. I've seen Gnome so far. One of these months I'll look at KDE. The way I'll really learn is to build a translation chart to map "ThingToDo X" with "New Command Y".

Upgrades

Microsoft ran into some colossal bad luck about 2004 and lost some two whole years as a result. Vista was a "get it out the door as a placeholder", so the "real succession" is Win XP -> Win7 SP1. Linux seems to be a bit more like Apple with their upgrades, getting something out every couple years in the distros. But each Distro has its own upgrade paths, and Ubuntu wheels out a new edition every six months. Trouble is, the upgrades don't always play nice. Rumor on the street is to cold install each one, then load your data back in. True, you have to do this with the other major OS's usually. But Microsoft users got used to the big delay when XP was the only game in town.

I got a random box from Best Buy some time back for Linux. I've had my best luck so far with the April 2009 edition of Ubuntu. CD burners interacting with ever-cheaper CDs can make it tricky to burn a proper CD, so I have to hold my frustration with the scientific method and first be sure I didn't hose the live disk burn. There are rumors that different CD brands have noticeable quality differences, so we'll see. I'll probably just start in my learning bit first for a while, making my translation chart.

Milestones

I'll just be practicing on this edition of Ubuntu. I think my usage habits lean toward the long support releases. The next one is due up in April 2010. Ubuntu is based off the venerable Debian build, which has seen a colossal surge in maturity lately. The big contrast I hope to try out is a pure Debian install that might let me evolve itself over time as needed rather than the big 6-month spins of Ubuntu. (Which, if you miss one, they don't skip-update.) User errors burning CD's aside, it does seem to be harder to get going. That's a topic for 2010.

Other Distros

I'm not anyone's Ubuntu fan. Since hardware annoys me and I saw a note than Knoppix is supposed to be solid on hardware detection, I might give that a try. I have an ancient laptop from the Jurassic period that might be nice to surf with. There's some ultra small Distros like Crunch Bang (I think) expressly designed for such extinct beasties. (Though I never understood the Netbook craze. Let's rebrand the specs from 7 years ago and sell it again!)

Apple coupled with Google is an interesting case study. Ya' gotta' give the credit to Steve Jobs. Twice. The man is unbelievable. Google is covering the far end of the squeeze play against Microsoft. Purists may not like certain decisions coming down the pike from those companies, but together they are scaring the daylights out of Microsoft, Telcos, and the RIAA. What they're doing is taking some 40% of an open source base, then welding their GUI on top. They've given back a decent amount of components & low tech.

The big convergence point seems to be about May 2010. Ubuntu's Long Term release will be there, and I believe the fresh Debian Stable build is close to that time period. By then Open Office will be about Version 3.2, Firefox at about 3.7, the bugs ironed out of the KDE 4.4 release or so, and some other big refreshes I can't recall at the moment. If there ever was one, May'10 to May'11 will be the "Year of Linux". (Which NEVER will happen, but we kept having "just wait for this thing" checkpoints the last few years.)