

Using Linux for Everyday Activities

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Introduction

Linux is a flexible and stable environment for developers and computing enthusiasts to get down and really do some work in. But what about the everyday, casual user? Users who really only need a computer for email, internet access and maybe some documents and spreadsheets? Where is Linux for them?

In recent months, Linux companies and individual developers have started gaining attention for Linux as a desktop operating system for all those users who *aren't* power users. People who don't want to know how to tune the kernel, or build all of their own software from sourcecode or fiddle with Perl in the middle of the night just because they can.

Most notably, powerful applications such as Star Office are available for Linux, providing end users with the features available in applications such as Microsoft Office. Applications exist in the realm of graphics design, entertainment, and general productivity, such as fax programs.

Access to the Internet and Other Hardware Concerns

The biggest issue for casual users using Linux is hardware compatibility. Linux supports more and more hardware every day (literally), but checking out all the hardware is always a good idea, and can save headache and disappointment later. Sites like www.e-linux.com provide insight into which systems on the market are supported under Linux.

Major hardware that can be troublesome includes video cards, sound cards, and modems. Many multimedia vendors, like Creative, are supporting Linux at the vendor level, rather than waiting for enthusiastic programmers to reverse-engineer all their hardware. Modems known as Winmodems can also be decyphered for use on Linux, with support known as the Linmodem. Winmodems are basically a hardware adapter that requires the driver software to do all of the work; the adapter simply talks to the physical media.

Connecting to the Internet using a network interface card (NIC) is incredibly easy. There is support under Linux for all the popular cards on the market, including models from Linksys, RealTek, 3COM, and Intel. Most NICs are discovered during install, and the user won't have to worry about them again. This is especially helpful for home users with LANs and shared connections to the Internet.

Software: Office Suites

Office software for Linux has been available for several years from various vendors. StarOffice is one of the most full-featured, integrated suites available for Linux. An effort was put forth by the developers of StarOffice to provide users of Linux with an

office suite similar to Microsoft Office. StarOffice includes a word processor that is capable of reading Word documents and a spreadsheet that recognizes Excel files. These programs have all the most popular features of the commercial products they are meant to be an alternative to.

GNOME and KDE, being the two most popular GUI interfaces for Linux, have both begun to offer applications that provide similar functions to StarOffice. KDE, for example, has put together Koffice, consisting of KSpread, KPresenter, KIllustrator, and several other applications. GNOME has put together a package of existing free software, such as AbiWord and GIMP for use in GNOME Office.

Users already familiar with commercial office suites will see similarities in the free alternatives. Icons look similar and behave as expected. Popular functions are available and easy to use. Dialogs and menus help guide the user through the many options of these full-featured applications.

Software: Graphics Authoring

Popular commercial graphics software has not yet been ported to Linux. However, the GIMP, GNU Image Manipulation Program, is native to Linux and gaining notoriety and popularity. GIMP is a powerful application that provides the functionality that Adobe Photoshop users are accustomed to. The GIMP also has a set of libraries that can be used to generate images and graphics on the fly with programming languages like Perl.

Software: Mail Clients

Mail clients abound for Linux. As with most Unices, there are pine, and mutt, and mail. For users who require a little more in a mail client, KDE and GNOME both have more extensive mail clients that give users features like easily configured multiple mailboxes, support for HTML messages, cut and paste, and use of external browsers.

Aethera is a new product available that gets Linux users a step closer to fully integrated messaging and scheduling, with features like sending and receiving task requests and appointment requests in addition to email. It also acts as a personal information manager, handling contacts, notes, tasks, todo lists, and journals.

Pulling It All Together: Network Services

Networked resources can be accessed from Linux in a variety of ways. Shared filesystems can be accessed using NFS or Samba, depending on the platform of the server. Samba is the opensource implementation of Microsoft's Server Message Block protocol that allows Windows computers to share file information. It allows client machines that are not running Windows to use fileshares and printers that are hosted on Windows servers. Samba also authenticates users against the Windows network.

NFS and NIS can be deployed with Linux as they would for other flavors of Unix, allowing Unix administrators a backup fix if they are strapped for computing and budget resources.

When You Just Can't Get Away: Emulation Environments

Some great software hasn't been made available under Linux, and the copycats just aren't the same. The most notorious of this group is personal finance software. GNUCash is available, but cryptic to use, and does not incorporate all of the features of commercial software in this area. That's where emulators come in.

Emulation environments like WINE help users get all the programs they liked under Windows without rebooting or having two computers. WINE can run programs from existing Windows installations provided the Linux installation can see the Windows disk. Win4Lin is another emulator which requires the user to actually install Windows in their environment for the emulator to run. Where WINE runs Windows programs in Linux, Win4Lin runs Windows itself in Linux.

Missing: What Users Won't Get

Due to Linux being a completely different platform from Windows, Windows users will miss out on certain things they might be used to. Email attachments in the form of little executable programs won't run on Linux. The rich array of off-color joke programs, programs to open the CD-ROM drive, and animated birthday cards have not yet made it into the realm of ported software.

As far as the average person using Linux for documents and email, the most useful features are present. If a user is looking more into going crazy with multimedia, watching streaming video, DVDs, etc, Linux is not usually a supported platform. DVD support for Linux is missing, and decoding DVDs to watch under Linux is causing legal problems.

A major caveat to remember in networked Linux computers is security. Linux has many services that casual users don't necessarily need or understand, but may have security weaknesses that can be exploited. While the proliferation of virii for Linux has been extremely slow, as more people use the platform, more crackers will be interested in exploiting weaknesses.

Conclusion

As more offices become centered around intranet applications and web-based information solutions, the reasons to budget more and more money for user operating system licenses become cloudy. When most users don't need more than a few applications to get their work done, there is less and less motivation to maintain a Unix based network for developers, a Windows based network for administrative and management staff, and a Macintosh network for the creative staff.