

From Russia with Linux (hangover)

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I was bouncing in my seat on the Moscow metro, bounced ragged as we hurtled down the track in a carriage that looked as if it was built pre-war (the first one!) and in desperate need of repair when a strange thought occurred to me (they often do but this one I CAN write about!). It has been a long while since I last worked in Windows ever since my first tender REAL steps toward Linux just over half a year ago. I can't say it has been all roses, it has been and still is, a sort of love/hate relationship. I'm in awe of the flexibility of the thing, the ingenuity of the developers and the ease in which things are updated and installed when needed. I am at the point of frustrated tears with the lack of support in some areas and the amount of faf that goes into getting a simple thing working like the built in SD/Memory stick reader. Nonetheless I am sticking it out. I even took a foray into wine recently, having some spare time and not being able to understand a bloody thing on Russian TV I played Half Life 2. Worked well, liveable problems and easy to set up. I think I am a convert in heart and soul now.

I have Kubuntu running on my Vaio ar11m, yes I know it's a chunky laptop but I need it as I am a developer and hate small screens and this is my main dev machine that I cart around to the clients that pay my bills whilst implementing some good tax countermeasures. Anyhow, it's not always been Kubuntu as it has been on and off this laptop more times than a sailor on shore leave at Liverpool docks. It is on there because it worked the best out of the ones I tried. I preferred Fedora 6 (which is now installed on my wife's pavilion laptop and she loves it after the initial WTF is that and my quick witted explanations about needing a backup just in case mine is?!) How quickly the benefits are realised. She has a split partition, Windows and Fedora Core 6 (much hassle to get it working and still some problem areas but I really can't be arsed fixing or patching it? lazy husband). On the windows side she has now noticed more the popups, warnings, virus warnings, slow media player streaming Russian TV. All highlighted because she spends most of her time in Fedora (pretty loading graphics and nice programs). Can't get the headphone socket to work though, that's the only bit outstanding and she has given up Photoshop for GIMP and office for Open Office without so much as a grumble.

On my laptop I tried Fedora, headphone socket problem and I managed to break it by trying to install an internal IBM package I need to connect through IPSEC. Issues with the soundcard in general, broken NVIDIA package. I tried Mandriva (nothing against the frogs, I own a Peugeot 407, granted I do prefer my Alfa 166 but I do own something French that I don't mind) but something was missing and I didn't really take to it and what's all this paying lark? If I want to pay I'll stick with Windows as I know it works with ALL my hardware. I spent a day or two with Mandriva and found it was lacking in help via forums or support compared to Fedora/Ubuntu/Suse. I tried Suse and it worked fine apart from no sound and even less hardware working. In the end I went back to Kubuntu and therefore back to Debian. I was trying to move over to a red hat base as all the packages supplied by work that I need are red hat supported rpm's. No joy. Am I a happy bunny? I would think so, it's been stable for a while until I recently allowed an update that broke NVIDIA and I had a lovely few late nights sweating over and swearing at the computer. Tears of joy when KDE finally loaded with the NVIDIA drivers re-installed! I won't be doing that again in a hurry. You live and learn and only Linux can take you from the darkest, deepest depths of computer depression to the dizzying, head spinning heights of delight (even when it is a trivial thing you have managed to get working). The damn Ricoh web cam is still a pain, it stares at you wantonly from the top of the lid, giving you the 'come on, use me, you know you want to' look

and when you try, NO SUPPORT, blank cam. Oh, and the telly tuner doesn't work either, Avermedia M115 apparently is never, ever, not a million years even if it was the last tuner on the world, going to be supported. Although, there are some whispers and sneaky note exchanges going on in the forums regarding getting the thing working.

On the whole, I spend more time working with Linux now rather than getting it working. As a developer I can still write for .NET with Mono and Monodevelop, for java and everything else there's Eclipse (I was a Netbeans fan until I had to explore developing on OC4J, now it's Eclipse, I'm an app tart of the easiest order), MySQL is a good test bed for my db stuff and modifying scripts when moving to MS SQL is a doddle. Then there's always Kate and other editors of that ilk for perl and tcl whenever the urge takes me.

Entertainment wise, everything works. Mplayer, Amarok, blah blah blah, all work fine, even the iPod plug-ins (apart from the video side of it, but I see there that we got movement, we got signals on that? fingers crossed it'll be soon). Although one niggling problem is the size of the fonts in the Xine UI, they are HUGE! I've installed all the core fonts and then some and still nowt. Stuck as they are. I've had no time to trawl around looking for a fix yet as it really isn't a pressing issue.

Back on the bouncy train my thoughts followed a path that led to the question, why doesn't everyone use it? Then, thinking back on the number of installs and the amount of research and reading I had to go through to get it into this state I realised it is still too much effort and there are still too many hardware support issues to get it accepted by the masses. Microsoft is good at what it does, Noddyware. Stick a disk in the drive, click one button and there you go, everything working. They've even got the hardware manufacturers locked in a half-nelson and producing electronic gadgetry that says, "designed for XP". Not everyone has the patience or the absolute stubborn streak you need to get Linux up and running to a point where you are more or less happy with it and not too bothered about the things you don't have. There's that damn web cam whispering, "use me" again. Don't get me wrong, the distro's are going the right way and tempus definitely fugit where technology is concerned (having gone through the "I'll just install?" at 6 pm and getting ready for work at 6 am having just realised you've done an all nighter and still 1 hour from getting it working, always 1 hour more!). Personally, with Vista looming on the horizon and all it's associated tie me ups and tie me downs I think we'll see the figures rise slightly on distrowatch. What it really needs though is some good press and a few rather good ad campaigns, get those flyers out, spread the word, sandwich board man it isn't the end of the world that is nigh, it is Linux so don your board and waddle penguin style down the high street! Spread the word! Vox populi.

Had a good chrimbo though, over ate, over drank and went over there (to Moscow). Expecting some good snow? was I wrong? It snowed for 3 days then went to +4 degrees, it all melted and turned to this black stuff all over the roads, cars so dirty they didn't need tinted windows or any high tech gadgets for number plate masking, thick black goo everywhere. We did try ice-skating and what did I learn? I learned that ice hurts and children are cruel! Also, that you shouldn't really go in the Banya (sauna type place) full of alcohol because you dehydrate even quicker and the hangover is atomic. Oh, it also gets you drunk at light speed and that brings the false bravado and feeling of invincibility that leads you straight from Banya to plunging into a partially frozen river. The freezing cold water makes the head numb and everything shrink. You roll in the snow to WARM up! Meetings involve toasting to everyone and everything that moves or is stood still, animate or inanimate, with a bottle of Chivas Regal and Russia's finest white spirit, and it all makes for a few very bad mornings. I did manage to sober up for a few hours to attend a ballet at the Bolshoi. Whilst the initial thoughts and feelings of "sell the tickets" gnawed at me, we persevered and thoroughly enjoyed the show. We had to stay with my Wife's parents and in typical Russian hospitality fashion, had to suffer dish after dish of food. Even when you just want to sit at the table and enjoy a cup of tea (yes, I'm british!), there is a whoosh, a flash of light and the entire contents of the fridge have miraculously appeared on the table. Please, no more piroshki, I'm drowning in bullion and borsch! I'm about to burst and of course, the in-laws no speaka da inglis, so more food appears followed by more and some more. Wherever you go, whoever you visit, the food and drink are constant and in a bountiful, never ending supply. I can tell you the gym really hurt this week and the belt is out at least two notches.

