

Discovering Linux - The Experiences of a Linux Newbie

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I have been using computers for years, mostly for gaming and Office apps, and I've been faithful to Microsoft all this time. I had heard a lot about linux, and had tried some of the opensource software on my XP-laptop, such as OpenOffice. The thought of a free alternative to Microsofts costly products really appeals to me, and I decided to find out for myself what the fuzz was all about.

A few words about me and what I was looking for in my OS. I am from Norway, in my mid-twenties and I study at the University (not computer science). I have very limited technical knowledge, and I was looking for an Easy-to-use distro. My test computer is not exactly brand new; Pentium III 533 MHz, 128 MB RAM, 12 GB HD, ATI Rage 128. Also, it does not have an internet connection, so every time I need isos, software or support, I have to use the other computer, a newer model with XP.

I downloaded several distros on my XP computer and made installation discs. At first words like partitioning, swap drive, root drive and bootloader meant nothing to me, but after some time and some failures I sort of got hold of the installation process. The biggest shock for a Windows user like myself was how painfully frustrating software installation was. Compiling from source and keeping track of dozens of dependencies is a bit more challenging than simply double-clicking the setup-icon in windows. From browsing various Linux forums, I get the impression that some regard this as a good thing. Due to security reasons, it seems. I strongly disagree so far. It seems that software installation is made a lot easier with tools like apt-get etc., but all these seem to require an internet connection.

This is what happened when I tried to setup a distro on my own. I really liked the look and feel of ubuntu, and decided to make an effort to make it work like I wanted (restricted formats etc). I tried to compile gstreamer-files I had downloaded, but was unable to do this. It seemed Ubuntu didn't have a compiler preinstalled (what is a compiler?). I browsed the web, and was able to install gcc from the install CD, but still I couldn't install gstreamer. Seems I lacked dependencies. I downloaded all the dependencies that was listed, but when I tried to install these, it seems I lacked dependencies for the dependencies. It was at this time I uninstalled ubuntu.

Because I found it difficult to add software, it was very important to me that the distro worked out-of-the-box. Also, I don't even know what a config file is, so no manual editing of config files, please. What I ideally want from a distro is:

A good looking, clean and tidy, functional desktop.

It needs to work reasonably fast on my rather old computer.

It needs to play MP3, AVI and other popular formats out-of-the box.

A few games and a lot of preinstalled software.

I prefer if it has AbiWord. OO is very slow on my PC (This is not a big issue).

gcc should be installed by default.

Perfect hardware detection.

A working sound recorder (there was a problem with a surprisingly high number of the distros)

Distro by Distro

1. Xandros (open edition)

+ Easy installation

+ Good looks. Easy to navigate for a Windows user.

+ Plays all formats by default.

+ Working sound recorder

- A bit too windows-ish.

- Free edition lacks features, such as speedy CD-burning.

- Too many ads, too few apps.

- No Live-CD

2. Linspire (5.0)

- The liveCD is way too heavy for my system. No installation possible.

3. Mandriva (One)

+ Looks and feels great. Very intuitive.

+ Plays restricted formats.

+ The easiest installer and partitioning tool I have seen.

+ A lot of preinstalled software.

- Sound recorder won't work on my system.

- No games.

4. PCLinuxOS

- Boring look.

- Graphical installer barely works on my system.

- When installed, X won't work. Somthing to do with ATI 128 Rage?

5. Ubuntu (6.06)

+ No. 1 when it comes to look and feel.

+ Good software selection by default. Nice games.

+ Great community support.

- Graphical installer don't work on my system

- MP3, AVI etc. don't work by default.

- Sound recorder won't work.

6. Fedora (5)

+ Looks and feels nice

+ A lot of good software installed.

- Text-based installer uses three hours to install the system-

- MP3, AVI etc. don't work by default.

- No sound recorder.

- Very slow on my sys.

7. SUSE (10.1)

- Won't work on my system.

8. Mepis

- Crappy looks. Menus need cleaning up.

- Difficult installation.

Conclusion

The concept of open-source, free software is very appealing. Many of the Linux-distros are very good, but I still haven't found one that fits my needs perfectly. Also, my needs will propably change as I become more acquainted to Linux. At this time, my favourite distro is propably Mandriva One, though it would've been Ubuntu if they had had support for restricted formats.

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Links:

[1] <http://www.tuxmachines.org/taxonomy/term/57>