

Ubuntu? Ubetcha!

Dave Helmer

Yeah, yeah, corny title. Wiegel has been after me for a while to write something for the Random Access, and since I am currently playing around with the Ubuntu (a Linux version) Operating System, I figured I'd tell you a little bit about my experiences with it. I would propose that some of you may also want to check out Linux in some form. A quick aside - you are already using Linux without knowing it. Linux powers most of the Internet infrastructure you use every day, and if you use an Android phone, the OS is a Linux variant.

I first encountered Unix (precursor to Linux) as an Operating System back in the early 80's, when we used 300bps modems to dial into UNC's Blue server to access what would eventually become the Internet we all know and love today. At that time, you had to use the CLI (Command Line Interface) commands to do anything with it...navigating to different databases, uploading or downloading files, posting on message boards etc. - we were pretty limited back then. Anyone who has ever used a CLI, whether the DOS one most of you are familiar (maybe?) with, or Unix or any version of Linux, will understand when I tell you, it is NOT for the faint of heart. And that is the attitude I have carried forward with me through the years every time someone told me to "try Linux, you might like it". To be honest, I did try Linux several times over the past 30ish years, but never really liked it. Let's say rather that I found it too much to mess with, and too big a step backwards into the CLI that no one really enjoys. Someone is going to give me hell for that statement, but very, very few people "enjoy" the CLI. Most of us have simply gotten too comfortable with the GUI (Graphic User Interface) that either Windows or Mac have given us to ever want to go back, even as some of us have lamented the loss of flexibility and utility that we enjoyed with the CLI. Various flavors of Linux have offered GUI's in the past, but they were always pretty anemic when compared to the richness of Windows or Mac. This has changed, dramatically.

If you have looked at the Linux OS at all, you have to have noticed that there are many, many versions of Linux out there, and they seem to add a few every year. This is primarily due to the nature of Linux as an "open-source" operating system. Meaning no one really owns it.

The strength of Linux, and oddly enough the "weakness" (if you will) of Linux, has always been the fact that it is open-source software. The basic code (the kernel) is freely available and open to anyone that wants to use it to compile their own "flavor" of Linux. And many, many people want to do just that. They then bundle that code with other kinds of open-source software and call it a "Distribution" or Distro for short. Each distro generally tries to offer something unique, or to focus on one aspect of computing over another. Primarily interested in a secure system? Try the Parrot or Tails distros. Mostly interested in a system for entertainment purposes? Try Maui Linux. Need an Enterprise solution? ClearOS Enterprise might fit your needs. Trying to run it on an older computer with limited resources? Try Puppy. The number of unique distros available is, well, mind-boggling.

This ability to manipulate the kernel and create your own distributions is key to the success of Linux. With so many people, literally all over the world, inspecting and massaging the code daily; flaws and bugs are quickly found and corrected. Standard distro's are uniquely resistant to malware (compared to Windows at any rate), and as long as you get your distro from a reliable source (heh) you will never encounter issues with hacked code. Also, the online forums and available help systems are freakin phenomenal. Linux users tend to be problem solvers, and they LOVE helping you solve a Linux problem. Usually. That's not to say there aren't bad Distro's out there, and hackers are moving to Linux as it's use becomes more widespread in the general population.

But therein also lies the "weakness" of Linux, because you don't just pop down to the computer shop and buy a computer with Linux already installed and ready to go, because there is no one "real" or "ready for prime-time" distro. Not in most computer shops anyway. And with a frightening (literally) number of distro's available, who can know which one is the right one for any given user? Readers of Mercedes Lackey might recognize the quote "There is no one true way", and that definitely applies to Linux.

Most users just want to be able to turn their computer on and have it do what they are accustomed to doing. Generally that involves browsing the Internet, reading and sending emails, maybe binge watching some videos, whatever. And this is where distro's such as Ubuntu shine. There are others (Debian, Fedora, Red Hat), but Ubuntu is the one Cruz introduced to me years back, and I have always kinda followed it from a distance. Not anymore.

Understand that I spend a great deal of my time on the computer gaming, and let me warn you right off the bat, if big-time commercial type games are your thing, forget Linux now. Most of them require being able to massage code at the CLI level in order to get them to run, and every time the game updates, or Linux updates, you can almost bet the game is going to be "broken" until someone comes up with a work-around. My gaming computers run Windows 10, and that is never (probably) going to change. Most big commercial games aren't specifically programmed to run on Linux because the user base is so small they don't find it economically worthwhile to do so. Their loss.

Ubuntu is one of the better known, more popular distros of Linux, and with good reason in my opinion. Like most versions of Linux, it is hard to find hardware that it will not recognize and install properly when you setup your Linux system. It comes with a version of LibreOffice (OpenOffice), a Firefox browser and several other nice features. The box I put it on is an older Dell OptiPlex with an Intel Core I5-2400 CPU, 8 G of RAM and a 250G HD, generic mouse and keyboard, with an onboard AMD video card, and the Ubuntu version I am running is 16.04 LTS (Long Term Service).

The install was pretty simple, but yes, you will have to download and install it yourself unless you can bribe someone in the group to do it for you. I downloaded Ubuntu from their main software repository with my Windows laptop, set it up on a flash drive and then booted that flashdrive on the Dell system to initiate setup. Overall it took maybe 30 minutes for the initial setup, and another 45 or so minutes for updates to download and install. I had zero problems with the install, every bit of hardware was recognized and the appropriate drivers were downloaded and installed as it went along, and in less than 2 hours I had a functioning Ubuntu system up and running. It is possible to set up a computer to dual-boot into either Windows or Linux, but I've read too many horror stories about lost data, so I'm not planning to play with that any time soon.

The Interface is a GUI, not the familiar Windows one of course, but easily navigated by any veteran user. I have used it straight off to browse the internet, check Facebook and draft this article. I have installed programs that let me use the system as a DVD player to binge-watch TV shows in the background as I game on my other systems, and most recently I have been attempting to set up a VPN following the instructions in a recent copy of Linux User & Developer magazine. I've hit a snag with that, but I'll keep playing with it. That last thing is admittedly a little geeky for most users, and I'm just doing it for the

fun of learning how. From my perspective, Linux is great if you want to get under the hood of your operating system and learn, but not something to do on a computer that you require the real use of.

I'll be doing more playing around with Linux, and I already have several projects in mind. With any luck (good or bad, you decide), I'll remember to write them up and share with you.