



MARKETING INSIGHTS

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13 Reasons why Linux should be on your desktop

In [13 Reasons why Linux won't make it to a desktop near you](#), we reviewed Linux as a marketing case study. In this piece, we take a good look at the product to find out why it has thrived despite its troubled childhood.

A couple of years ago, Linux Desktop was a pimply adolescent with half-baked ideas. Today we see a handsome, well-dressed grown-up who handles a range of tasks with confidence and even performs fancy tricks. No longer need we make allowances for his dress sense or his strange habits.



The timing couldn't be better since Vista is a Wagner Opera that is usually late to start, takes too long to finish and is spoilt by floorboards creaking under the weight of the cast. Mac OS X Leopard is the late show in an exclusive nightclub where the drinks are always too expensive. Linux Desktop is the free show in the park across the street – it imposes some discomforts on the audience but provides plenty of entertainment.

The first challenge is getting hold of tickets, since you can't just choose your new PC and then tick the Linux box in the list of software options. The good news is that installing Linux is no longer a challenge that rivals splitting the atom. With a handful of mature distros designed for simple users, the benefits Linux offers are much easier to verify. And there are plenty:

1. Cost

Linux is free, and that includes all the apps. Microsoft is greedy. Vista Home Premium and Ultimate cost hundreds of dollars, even when upgrading from Windows XP. Moving up to Office 2007 means handing over hundreds more.

2. Resources

Even the most lavishly equipped Linux distros demand no more resources than Windows XP. Vista is greedy: a single-user PC operating system that needs 2mb of RAM to run at acceptable speed, and 15gb of hard disk space, is grossly obese.

3. Performance

Linux worked faster on my Dell Inspiron Core Duo than XP, at least the way XP worked out of the box. After cleaning out the bloatware and trading McAfee's Abrams Tank for the lightweight NOD32, XP and Linux (with Guarddog and Clam-AV) perform at similar speed.

4. No Bloatware

Linux is free from adware, trialware, shovelware and bloatware. Running Linux is like watching the public TV network.

5. Security

Last year, 48,000 new virus signatures were documented for Windows, compared to 40 for Linux. Still, most distros come with firewalls and AV-software. Programs like Guarddog and Clam-AV are free, of course.

6. Dual Booting

The best Linux distros make Dual Booting a simple affair, along with the required disk partitioning (so you don't need to buy partitioning software). Windows on my Dell laptop is still intact after installing and uninstalling a dozen distros.

7. Installation

Anyone who's done it once knows that installing Windows from scratch takes hours or even days by the time you get all your apps up and running. With Linux, it can take as little as half an hour to install the operating system, utilities and a full set of applications. No registration or activation is required, no paperwork and no excruciating pack drill.

8. Reinstalling the OS

You can't just download an updated version of Windows. You have to use the CD that came with your PC and download all the patches Microsoft has issued since the CD was made. With Linux, you simply download the latest version of your distro (no questions asked) and, since your data files live in a separate disk partition, there's no need to reinstall them. You only need to re-install the extra programs you added to the ones that came with the distro.

9. Keeping track of software

Like most Windows users, I have a shelf full of software CDs and keep a little book with serial numbers under my bed in case I have to reinstall the lot. With Linux, there are no serial numbers or passwords to lose or worry about. Not a single one.

10. Updating Software

Linux updates all the software on your system whenever updates are available online, including all applications programs. Microsoft does that for Windows software but you have to update each program you've added from other sources. That's about 60 on each of my PCs.

More icing on the Linux cake is that it doesn't ask you to reboot after updates. XP nags you every ten minutes until you curse and reboot your machine. If you choose 'custom install' to select only the updates you want, XP hounds you like a mangy neighbourhood dog until you give in.

11. More Security

These days, operating systems are less vulnerable than the applications that run on them. Therefore a vital aspect of PC security is keeping your apps up-to-date with the latest security patches. That's hard manual labour in Windows, but with Linux it's automatic.

12. No need to defrag disks

Linux uses different file systems that don't need defragging. NTFS was going to be replaced in Vista but Microsoft's new file system didn't make the final cut. Instead, Vista does scheduled disk defragging by default, but the defrag utility is a sad affair.

13. A Wealth of built-in Utilities

The utilities supplied with Windows are pretty ordinary on the whole, that's why so many small software firms have made a nice living writing better ones. Linux programs are comparable with the best Windows freeware, from CD burners to photo managers, memory monitors and disk utilities. PDF conversion is built-in, both into OpenOffice Writer and into the DTP application Scribus. All you do is click a button on the task bar.

Spoilt for Choice

Of the distros designed for users who're not up to command line acrobatics, *SimplyMepis* impressed me the most. It crept up on me over time, since it's not as popular as Ubuntu, as showy as *Mandriva*, as fast as *LinuxMint* or as well-upholstered as *Novell's SLED 10*. The install is swift and well-done, the partitioning as clear as a spring day, and hardware recognition automatic. The apps are a well-judged collection and everything else is where you'd expect to find it and, unlike *Ubuntu*, it comes with the essential multimedia codecs pre-installed.

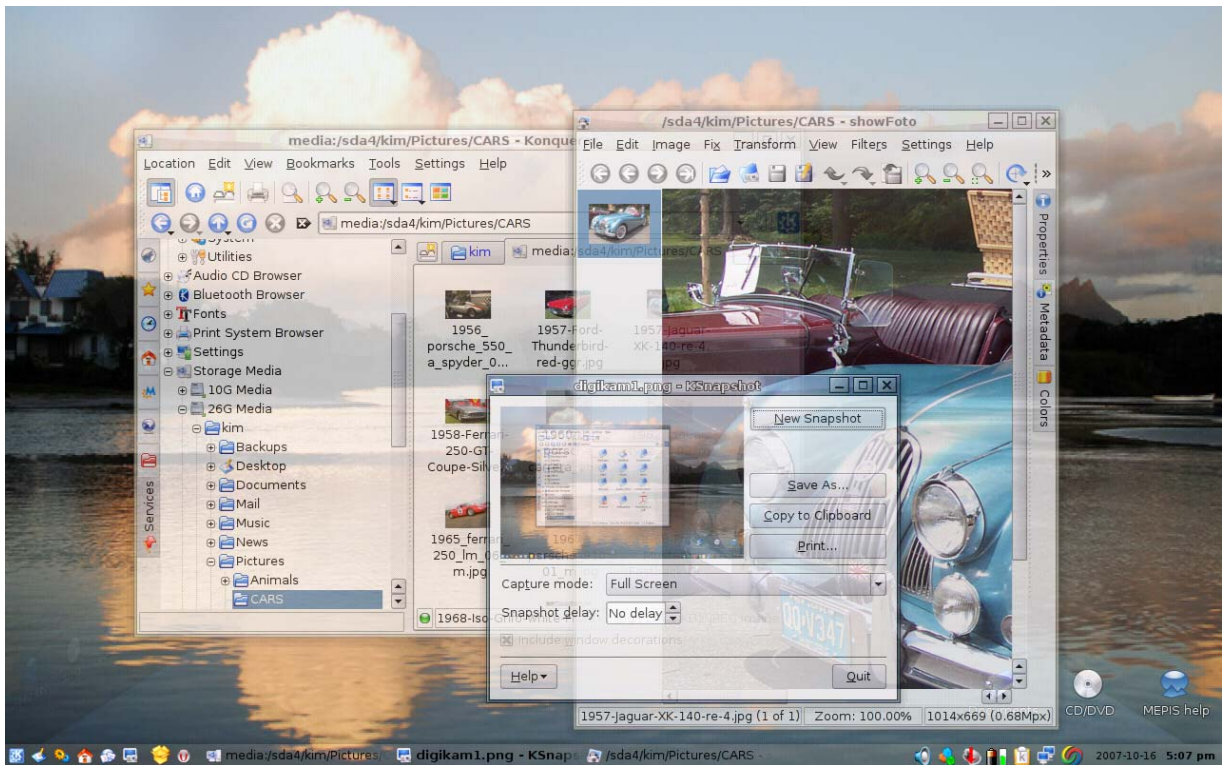
SimplyMEPIS

The first install I did was 6.5 RC4, a few weeks before the final version was released. After the download and CD burning ritual were done, I had the 6.5 final release up and running in half an hour with my data preserved in their separate Home partition. I know that you can set up Windows XP that way but Linux makes it easy as pie.

Hardware

Everything works out of the box here – for those new to Linux it's like the line in that poem 'May the road rise to meet you ...'. Mepis picked up the ADSL connection by itself and got the wide-screen on my Dell Inspiron set right, something Ubuntu only did after a lot of pleading. 3D worked fast even on the old Intel 945 all-in-one graphics card. The folks at Mepis have managed to make the moody Beryl behave herself (she handles the 3D stuff), and Emerald provides extra gloss for those who want more make-up than KDE offers. You want aeroglass? How much and how often?

My HP 3110 all-in-one printer was ready to work in minutes. A couple of mouse clicks and the Mepis assistant raced off to install the HPLIP toolbox, which takes care of printing, scanning and faxing. CDs and video clips played right out of the box, with no need to chase after the right codecs. And when you slip a CD or a USB flash drive into your PC, Mepis 'mounts' them automatically just as Windows does.



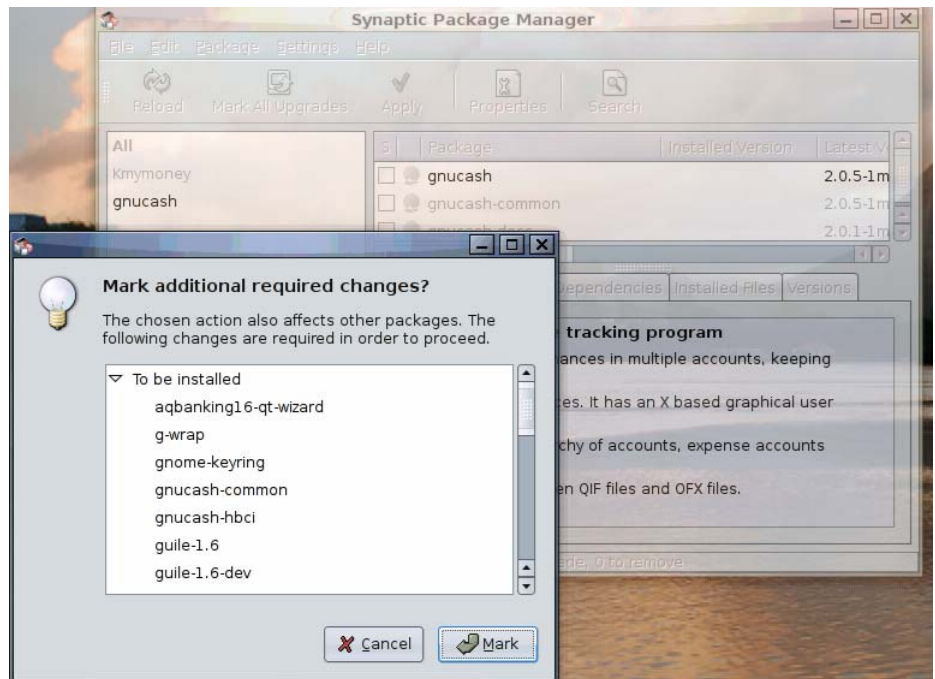
Software

The package manager Synaptic makes adding more apps a breeze. Just tick the boxes and Mepis fetches and installs what you've chosen, along with any dependent software needed. Updates are even easier: the little yellow Synaptic box in the taskbar shows a green arrow when updates are available. All you have to do is mark them and click 'Apply.'

The same applies to installing additional applications. The process is a lot easier and faster than with Novell's SLED 10 and Mandriva, and the choice of 'official' apps is greater since Mepis is based on Ubuntu and has access to its vast repositories (sources of software).

There's no need to hunt around for more repositories, which some distros turn into an obstacle race that is best left to Linux athletes.

Since Mepis is a quality conveyance equipped with most creature comforts, there's little else to hanker for.



In addition to KDE utilities like Konqueror, KSnapshot and KD3 Burner, there's OpenOffice, Firefox and Thunderbird, Guarddog and Klam-AV, Keep for backup, Gimp and Scribus and Xara Xtreme, Amarok and Mplayer, Java, Skype and Gaim, bittorrent and Bluetooth support, showFoto and digiKam (a great photo organiser). I don't know how they fit all of these apps fit on a single CD.

Most Linux distros are assembled from the same pool of raw materials, and the differences are either cosmetic or found in the choice of programs. Some of the software that comes with Mepis is not the latest but it will be the most stable version. That won't appeal to the geeks dying to savour the latest creations from the Linux kitchen, but Mepis isn't for thrill-seekers. Mepis is made for workers, and everything here works like the gearwheels in a Swiss chronometer. (If you want to learn more about the thrill-seeking side of Linux, check out [Is Linux Desktop really ready for Simple Users?](#))

Once the gloss wears off, it's about applications

The road from Windows to Linux is now mostly sealed, with only a few rough patches left. You can see your Windows partition in Home>Storage Media, open Windows files and even write back to them. The sound of glass shattering when Mepis can't open something is a change from the dull red cross signs Windows throws at you. These Linux dudes have a sense of humour: when Kb3 finishes burning a CD, it burst into a bugle sound that makes you look for the cavalry coming over the hill.

For most users, OpenOffice is compatible enough with Word, Excel and Powerpoint. The font set in the Writer is pretty mean but can be made more generous by installing MS core fonts with Synaptic. Still, fonts are the elephant in the Linux room, admittedly. More work needs to be done here.

Compatibility stops with Desktop Publishing since Scribus can't open Publisher files. Other than that, Scribus will do most of the things Publisher does, Evolution is more than a match for Outlook, and Firefox makes Internet Explorer 7 look stale. ShowFoto is as slick as any photo editor I've used on XP, digikam is a great photo organiser and the Linux multi-media apps lack nothing.

If you prefer Opera to Firefox, or XnView for working with photos, you just tick the box in Synaptic and it will provide. More specialized apps like Inkscape or Blender are just a few Synaptic clicks away. The Gimp is already installed; it has a reputation for being hard to use but who'd argue that Adobe Photoshop isn't?

Google now offers Picasa and Desktop Search for Linux, so there's enough here to keep most PC users happy. There's WINE for those who can't do without their favourite Windows programs (that's how Google made Picasa work on Linux). For those who can't live without their Windows games, Cedega makes them playable for a modest cost (a rare exception in this realm).

There are 15,000 apps that run on Linux. That they're generally free doesn't mean they're not up-to-scratch but, like the thousands of apps available for Windows, the quality varies.

Summary

SimplyMepis makes it easy to travel through this unfamiliar terrain. Mepis doesn't do any single thing better than the other distros designed for simple users, yet it doesn't lack anything in comparison either.



What won me over to Mepis was the whole experience, from the seamless way everything fits together to the astute selection of apps and dozens of nifty utilities, supported by rock solid performance. It's the kind of performance that would easily win more PC users over to Linux, if only they knew.

By the time Vista's Service pack 1 is released late this year, version 7 of SimplyMepis will be ready. I know that the new operating system will take about as long to install as the set of fixes supplied by Microsoft to make Vista behave. It's that good, and it's that simple.

