



THE OUTER EDGE

Tall Tales from the
Brink of Sanity

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LINUX LABOURS

Is LINUX really ready for Simple Users?

PART 1 – IN SEARCH OF FREEDOM

A New Vista

Murmurs of revolt spread through the taverns in the Kingdom of Windows. The flashy new Vista model King William had promised the people had taken 5 years to put into production, and the price matched its splendour. During those five years, the Apple Opera Company had staged several new productions of impressive polish. The upstarts from Google were giving people free software and email services, and there were rumours that Desktop Linux was mature enough to rival Vista.

In the rugged mountains of Mozilla, far from the Court at Redmond, fiercely independent tribes had held out against King William. Long ago their artisans had sworn an oath to share their ideas and inventions freely. Their creations were built on open platforms like UNIX and Linux, with liberal use of arcane tools. Now there was talk that they'd produced a Linux desktop of great beauty.

The once loyal-to-the-royal media began asking if King William was losing the steely resolve of old. Would people balk at the outrageous price of Vista and do the unthinkable: rebel and buy a Mac, or replace their Windows with Linux? Was this the autumn of King William's reign and would Vista become his elaborate tomb? And who would reign after King William? Would it be Big Jobs and Apple or would it be the rebels from Mozilla? Would 2007 be the year of Linux?

A journey into the Mountains

One can easily get lost in Mozilla: many paths lead to distant villages, and every village offers its own version of Linux. The language takes some getting used to in these parts: 'grub' is nothing to do with food, and 'root' is not a vegetable or a crude word for sex (nor is mount'). These words aren't all that is unfamiliar here: daemons and gnomes live side by side with penguins and drakes, not always in peace.

Hundreds of villages produce hundreds of distros, as they call their Linux platforms, and thousands of artisans have fashioned thousands of software packages, utilities and tools that run on Linux. For the newcomer, it's like entering a shop in a foreign country where all the wares are labelled in a language he can't read.

I bought a tourist guide (Get Started with Linux – all you need) to make things the artisans supply their wares on DVDs or as ISO images you can burn to CDs and boot from, and many are 'Live' CDs that let you play with them (by rebooting from the CD) before you install these creations.

Windows has an infuriating trait that has made some users leap from high balconies in despair: it will try to boot from anything left in one of your PC's slots – a CD, a USB stick, an external hard drive and even your shoelace if it's nearby. Next morning when you boot up, you shudder as a black and white screen declares that all the system-32 files are missing. First you panic, then you try everything you know to coax the thing into life, but Safe Mode refuses to come up and you can't even get at the dreaded Recovery Console. As you drink your third coffee from trembling hands, it dawns on you that you left the USB stick in the slot at the back of the PC.

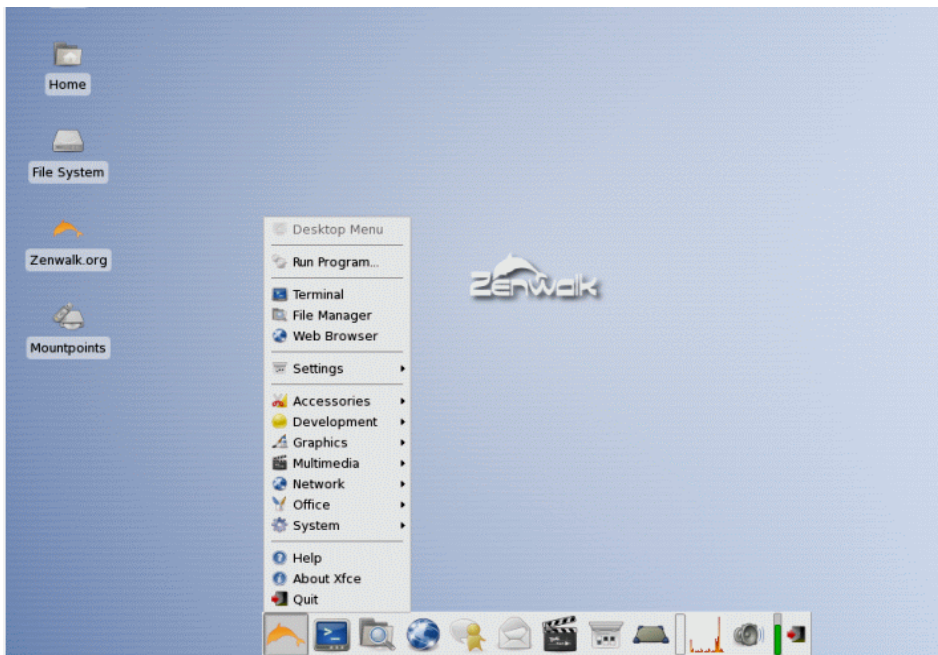
Zen and the Art of Motorbike Maintenance

So getting Windows to boot up from a Linux CD is a cinch. My tourist guide said: 'You're about an hour away from having a working Linux system' but, after my first

hour with **Ubuntu**, I was staring at a blank screen and a hung installation. To be on the safe side, I'd chosen my old IBM Thinkpad as the vehicle for this journey, and the climb up this mountain was too much for it. The engine is a meagre 300Mz Pentium with 192mb of RAM but lots of people say that's enough to run Linux.

Little brother **Xubuntu** was my next attempt. It took 20 minutes to reach the install option, and another 20 for the map of the world to come up that lets you select your city and time zone. When I clicked on Sydney, I witnessed the strangest thing I've ever seen a PC do: continental drift in slow motion. Yes, the continents began to float away, Australia cuddling up to Indonesia and both of them heading for India, with Africa floating across to join them. **Xubuntu** just drifted away from me.

Zenwalk was said to be an easier road with its lightweight GUI and simple apps. The install was more of a marathon than a walk but we made it to the finish line. It came up in a pretty blue, ready to accept my user name and password.



I keyed in 'root', but the word in the panel said 'r66t'. I thought it was my tired eyes but, after more careful attempts, it was clear that too much Zen had scrambled the TP's keyboard. I felt like a man who'd built a new house and couldn't get in the front door.

After playing with num locks, caps locks and various key combinations, I struck it lucky: if I held down the 'Fn' key while typing, the problem went away but now I was playing piano with one hand tied behind my back. I didn't persevere for long because **Zenwalk** performed like an arthritic waiter on tranquilizers. At least I'd managed to get a Linux distro installed, which did a lot for my self-esteem.

Smaller than Lite

Next I tried **Slax**, a mini version of **Slackware**. It came up with a promising cloverleaf but, after a few false starts, it went all droopy and left me staring at a blank screen.

Further down the list was **Damn Small Linux**. True to its name, DSL is a 50mb download that will run from a USB stick. It installed in a relative flash but came up in colours that made my eyes water: lime green on a light yellow screen. I couldn't read a thing even when using two sets of glasses, trying different angles or turning the room lights off. Somewhere in there was a setting that could make DSL intelligible but it only a Guild Navigator from the planet Dune could've found it.

They say Linux can give older PCs a new lease of life but so far, it looked more like the kiss of death. As it happened, there were more villages offering small, light or tiny versions. **Puppy Linux** sounded cute and supposedly bounced into life straight from the CD, but it refused to wag its tail on the old TP.

My next stop was the village of *Beatrix* but the people there said the artisan had gone to New Orleans a couple of years back and had not been heard of since Hurricane Katrina. Stories like these are legend in the mountains. They said a man in the next village had built on *Beatrix* to make *BFX*, an even better Linux Lite. *BFX* put up an epic struggle to install itself on the TP: rows and rows of lines kept flashing up the screen and among them I saw the curious message '*irq15. Nobody cared. Try booting with 'irqpoll'*'. I stared at the passing code like an archaeologist trying to decipher the Dead Sea Scrolls, until I saw that the lines on the screen were repeating themselves - this puppy was chasing its own tail and would drop dead if I didn't stop it.

Taking Risks

I'd learnt my first lesson about life in the mountains: Don't believe everything the guides tell you. If I wanted to play with serious Linux distros - *Ubuntu*, *SUSE*, *Fedora*, *Mandriva*, *Slackware*, *SimplyMepis* and *PCLinuxOS* - it was clear that I'd have to install them on my mobile workhorse, a Dell laptop (Intel Core Duo, 1mb RAM). The only hitch was that I'd have to create a separate partition for them, and I knew nothing about that except that my Windows would shatter if I messed up the partitioning thing.

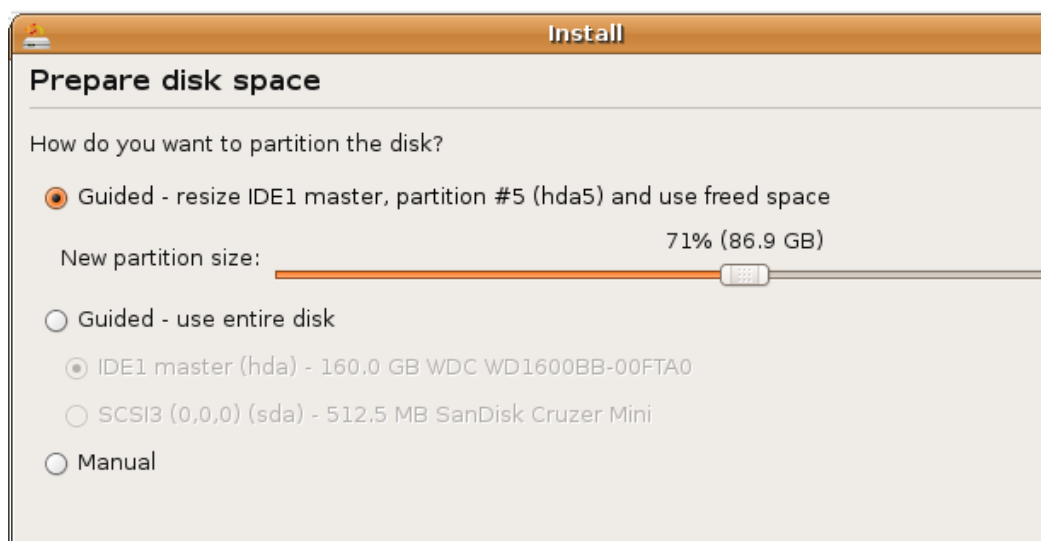
Some checking up on the Net revealed that Ubuntu can create a partition for you and leave Windows XP intact. More checking revealed that this doesn't always work. I checked with the guide I'd hired. He said: 'You need to use a program such as Partition Magic to shrink the Windows installation.'

After a full back-up, I installed *Paragon Partition Manager* from a PC magazine CD. The Help file said: 'Partition Manager does not provide a function like 'pick-up free space from existing partition(s) and create one more partition ... [you must] manually define a sequence of resize/move operations on existing partitions in order to free disk space and collect it into a single block of unpartitioned space.'

Follow the drumbeat

I was lost in the wilderness with no option but to trust *Ubuntu*. The 6.10 'Edgy Eft' CD offered me a quick tour of South Africa's highveld in its red-brown colours, but I declined and clicked the install icon. The installer took a while to sort himself out and wasn't very communicative - like a clerk in a bank, he kept disappearing into a backroom for ages, leaving me to stare at the closed door. Eventually *Ubuntu* came up and started asking the usual questions.

I had my guide with me, just in case. I was also sitting on the edge of my seat (is that why it's called Edgy?), worried about the partitioning ordeal. I relaxed a little when *Ubuntu* offered to shrink the Windows NTFS partition and even let me select the size.



Then it created 3 new partitions and asked me if I was happy to go ahead. I double-checked the settings, closed my eyes and said YES.

It was all over in a flash, and it couldn't have been simpler. After a few more questions about

location, local time (the map of the world didn't dissolve this time) the installer copied the files across, then asked me to reboot. When I did, the boot screen offered several options with Windows at the bottom (I'm sure the King wouldn't be happy about this). It came up fine with everything in its usual place.

Back to the Stone Age

A second reboot opened the dusty highveld, but the pleasant welcome music struck a sour note: the letters on the screen looked like they'd been borrowed from a Flintstones cartoon, and the pictures were stretched like those on a T-shirt that's too tight across a beer gut. **Ubuntu** offered no help, prodding me to download updates instead. How did it expect me to do that without setting up a connection first? I plugged the laptop into the broadband modem and looked for a set-up screen, then watched **Ubuntu** load down the updates with my mouth wide open.

If only it could've taken care of my widescreen just like that. The default GUI is **Gnome**, and I found this little guy hard to follow. They say **KDE** (another GUI) is more intuitive, so **Kubuntu** might've been a better choice. When I found the Display panel, it was set on 1024 x 768. An arrow down the side hinted at a drop-down list of better choices, except that there weren't any. Worse, it wasn't even showing me what it promised, but plain and ugly old 800x600.

The internet revealed that I wasn't the only dummy looking for a resolution to the widescreen problem. The geeks who inhabit the forums offered fixes involving command line acrobatics and driver hacks that were beyond this fresh-faced penguin. The short version went something like: 'Use Kernel 2.6.12+ (compile in AGP/DRI support) and Xorg 6.8.99.10+ (use i810 driver, change /etc/X11/xorg.conf to 1280x800).'

My mission was to check if Linux was ready for users of average skill. **Ubuntu** failed the test, at least on a widescreen laptop. It's a shame because so much is laid on here: all kinds of applications that would take days to install on Windows. And I'd read that installing more apps was a breeze with **Ubuntu**. But what was the point? I had to find a distro I could bear to look at.

SUSE with the Open Smile

At the newsagent in the next village, I found a magazine with a **Fedora Core 6** DVD and an **Open SUSE** 10.1 package, complete with manual. As they're number 2 and 3 on the Linux hit parade, I bought both. A review in the magazine said that **Fedora Core 6** was 'lumbered with' Pirut and Yum for software management. By now I'd learnt enough of the local dialect to know that this meant arduous treks deep into the mountains to get hold of additional software.

SUSE seemed like a better bet, given that it came with a manual, even if I needed a magnifying glass to read it in the dim light of the midnight oil. The author said it was best to install SUSE on a 'fresh' hard disk and added the useful advice that they were quite cheap these days. He skipped over partitioning and dual booting, claiming that these details were beyond the scope of the manual. I flung it on top of the growing pile of CDs that had had failed to work.

Since **Ubuntu** had created more partitions, I wondered if **SUSE** could see them, and she did: sd2/dev, sd3/dev and so on. The NTFS tag in sd1/dev gave me a hint where Windows lived, so I clicked on sd3 to install **SUSE** and took a deep breath.

SUSE asked many more questions than **Ubuntu** and the install took an hour. After the reboot, a bright blue screen showed that Windows was still an option and I relaxed. Like **Ubuntu**, **SUSE** took her time to offer her services, and once again I found myself staring at a scene from the Flintstones. Everything else was where and how it should be, except for **Gnome** – I'd been so worried about the partitioning that I'd missed the **KDE** option.

Screens and Screams

SUSE's list of screen options seemed to cover all the screens made in the last twenty years. Picking a Dell screen with a 1280 x 800 resolution and the Intel G945 driver brought up a panel that said: 1024 x 768 - Accept or Refuse. I refused and went through this loop another dozen times with different choices before I gave up for fear of going mad. We're not talking about some obscure screen and weird driver here – Intel G915/G945 cards are as common as weeds.

A quick check on the internet revealed that **SUSE** had a problem with Intel graphics cards as well. The ever-helpful geeks that populate these mountains offered the usual command line hacks but I soon lost interest. Yes, I can see the wise heads shake and hear the voices that say: you can do anything you want with Linux, but you have to learn a little about it first. I'm not averse to learning more, but command line stuff makes me as jittery as editing the Windows Registry – with my clumsy paws, it's too easy to mess things up.

I rebooted to check that XP was still intact. It came up with a black and white screen and asked if I'd care to reboot or try Safe Mode. With paws trembling, I restarted the laptop and this time Windows came up, but all the letters were squashed together like sardines in a narrow tin. I delved into Windows to reset the screen resolution. At least I knew my way around XP, so this was easy. It occurred to me that I never thought I'd say anything was easy in Windows.

PART 2 – [ON A CLEAR DAY ...](#)

Screenshots courtesy of <http://shots.osdir.com/> , <http://knolinux.com/> and <http://www.tuxmachines.org/node/337>