



## THE OUTER EDGE

Tall Tales from the  
Brink of Sanity

These are BRIARD's own  
opinions and may not reflect the  
views of TECHNOLEDGE.

Contact BRIARD @  
[briardpuppy@gmail.com](mailto:briardpuppy@gmail.com)  
[www.technoledge.com.au](http://www.technoledge.com.au)

## LINUX LABOURS

### Is LINUX really ready for Simple Users?

#### PART 4 – TAKING STOCK

##### Perspective

I've treated these Linux systems as if they were commercial products, comparing them with Windows XP and Vista. These are the products of a company with unlimited manpower and funds, while the bulk of Linux is the work of unpaid enthusiasts. That the results are comparable is astonishing; that some Linux distros offer a genuine alternative to Windows is wonderful news.

This was an exciting journey for me and, like someone who's travelled through India or China and avoided staying at five star hotels, I've come back overwhelmed by the experience. The colour, variety and wealth of ideas I've seen makes the familiar Kingdom of Windows look pretty dull.

##### Hitches and Glitches

There were obstacles like strange customs, odd dialects and foreign currencies. By contrast, Windows XP is as familiar as the local shopping centre, but it took many frustrating trips to those shops to find my way around. Why should Linux be different?

It's detractors say it's not ready to put in front of your favourite auntie. Come on, would you really give her a Windows PC and leave her to it? No chance. There's lots of stuff that doesn't work on my Windows PCs: Outlook just clams up and refuses to send emails for no reason, six times a day. Media Player 11 won't install on either of my machines, nor will the .net platform and some Windows updates. IE7 has mislaid McAfee's Site Advisor, windows keep losing their memory, various settings keep dropping out and some days it doesn't recognize my USB stick. We've paid lots of money to Windows gurus to sort these things out, with mixed returns.

You'll remember the joke: If your operating system were an airline ... Microsoft Airways' planes take off with no problems but sometimes explode in mid-air for no reason at all. These days, XP is pretty stable but let's not forget that it took Microsoft a good three years (and two major updates) to stop Windows XP crashing for no reason. Stable it may be, but I'd probably give Auntie Nell a Mac, and I sure wouldn't buy her a new PC with Vista unless I was trying to make her life a misery – chances are she'd slip on the Aero Glass and break a hip.

##### Freedom comes at a Price

That old joke has a line about Linux Air too: everyone brings a piece of the plane along when they gather at the airport. Out on the runway, they put the plane together piece by piece arguing about what kind of plane they're supposed to build. This isn't strictly true - they actually build lots of different planes, and therein lies a problem for the Windows refugee: it's not a simple choice between airlines.

The biggest issue with switching platforms is application portability. Granted, the average user's needs are pretty simple: email, internet, Instant Messaging, photo editors, audio and video players, and a word processor. For office users, add a spreadsheet and maybe DTP and a few other tools. The litmus test is that they can open their files with Linux and run the kinds of programs they're used to.

Whether it's **Ubuntu**, **OpenSuse**, **Mandriva**, **SimplyMepis** or Novell's **SLED**, everything the average user needs on her desktop is part of the package. Laptop users are more limited in their choices, at least in the short term. Both will have to come to grips with either KDE or Gnome, but neither has any reason to get lost in

the mountains looking for extra applications.

## Where Linux shines

**Installation** -Linux is streets ahead of Windows here, installing an operating system and entire suites of applications in less time than it takes to install XP and its meagre accoutrements.

**Cost of ownership**—There's no contest here, even if you buy a commercial version or donate to the people who provide the distro you end up choosing.

**Wealth of applications**— This is the touted a the big plus for Windows, but there's just as much on offer in the Linux mountains. Here's a list of equivalents:

<http://www.linuxrsp.ru/win-lin-soft/table-eng.html#43>

**Resources**— Linux needs about the same hardware as Windows XP to run well, and less than Vista by a big margin.

**No interference** - no need for MS licence validation and intrusive probing.

**Security** – no need for all that anti-malware, but if you really don't feel safe without it, there are free add-ons like ClamAV - <http://www.clamav.net/>

### Nifty Stuff.

Setting up the internet connection - automatically (in most cases).

Disk partitioning done for you in a flash – no lengthy re-formatting of drives.

3D out of the box, easy as pie.

Choice of GUIs.

Restoring sessions after shutdown.

Inbuilt backup and restore facilities. Easy backup to a file server on the network via FTP.

Lots more stuff I don't yet know about.

## Where Linux has to deliver more

**Standards.** People have trouble dealing with too much freedom of choice. Two GUIs are justifiable (and there are more), but the current grab bag of package managers is ludicrous and the arcane workings of several resemble witchcraft. The installation routines of some distros aren't far behind.

**Documentation.** The smaller distros rely too much on their forums. They're helpful but a user's guide would be easier. The problem is that most of the authors build distros in their spare time, and there's none left for user guides.

An **idiot's guide** to Linux desktop managers, package managers and file systems would be a great help.

**Graphics.** Many potential converts to Linux will try it out on their second machines, which are often laptops. Many newer laptops have wide screens and they're becoming common on desktops too, so it was a surprise to run into all those dramas with wide screens and the humble Intel G915/G945.

**Look and Presentation.** Apps that look fine on Windows (Firefox, OpenOffice, Thunderbird) don't look as good in their Linux attire. They resemble templates that aren't fully coloured in or lack effects like raised buttons. I fiddled with all the Firefox settings to no avail. Also, fonts didn't look smooth a lot of the time. This lack of fine polish will put people off.

**Bewildering Choices.** Linux needs to present a more united front to fresh penguins and give them sensible directions: if you want Linux easy, go to this group of distros over here; if you're into command line stuff, come this way; if you're a developer, this is where you should go.

**A slip of the drill.** Some distros aren't stable enough for everyday use. They should be clearly marked: beta, use at your own risk.

## So, is Linux ready for the masses?

The answer is that Linux isn't but that some of the major distros are.

My top choice was Novell's **SLED 10**, with **Mandriva 2007** a close second. Widescreen issues and lack of 3D effects aside, **Ubuntu** is the most popular choice and **Open SUSE** is right up there with it. **Xandros** is a polished system for those who just want to get away from Windows.

What impressed me most was that none of the distros I installed trashed my Windows installation, which I'd fully expected to happen. And most of the smaller glitches I found wouldn't exist, I suspect, if more Linux developers joined forces. Ubuntu and Linspire have done so and more should follow. The perfect Linux system would be a distro like **SLED 10** or **Mandriva 2007** with Ubuntu's package manager and Linux Mint's speed and hardware recognition. But we're drifting into Nirvana again.

That you can get these distros for nothing or next to nothing is Nirvana.