



THE OUTER EDGE

Tall Tales from the
Brink of Sanity

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LINUX LABOURS

Is LINUX really ready for Simple Users?

PART 5 – ECHOES FROM THE MOUNTAINS

1. Spitting the Pips

Bouquets and Brickbats

Many citizens of the Windows Kingdom wrote that, in their search for an escape route, they'd struck similar obstacles to the ones I'd stumbled over. It seems many have tried to leave the kingdom but found it hard to survive in the rugged mountains.

I also received mail from the people in Mozilla, some of it agreeable and some of it less so. Many confessed they'd also found it hard to come to grips with Linux, but urged me to persevere. One said: 'I have argued for Linux for 8 years now. You managed to point out all of the things I have trained myself to ignore. After your article I realized it really is not ready for the masses.'

Some said the problem was Intel and its poor driver support for Linux, while others claimed that direct comparisons with Windows were unfair since Linux doesn't come preinstalled on PCs like Windows, ready to rock and roll.

On their bulletin boards, a few mountain dwellers accused me of being thick because I couldn't tell a BIOS from a bootstrap, or because I wasn't prepared to pour more blood and sweat into learning the ins and outs of Linux.

A couple even accused me of being a vassal from the Court at Redmond, sent to scare citizens of the kingdom away from the mountains by exaggerating the dangers they faced there. To support these allegations, they argued that I'd made sure of choosing the least suitable vehicles for my journey. Putting the boot in harder, they added that I'd probably never installed Windows XP and therefore had no reference point.

Just telling it as it is

My previous pieces on Windows (<http://www.technoledge.com.au/resources-outer-edge.htm>) make clear that I'm no lover of the King and the yoke he has imposed on us, the heavy taxes and the secret police and the rest. I went to the mountains to get a taste of freedom. I put in more than a few hours studying maps and learning the lingo but I refuse to learn console commands, just as I refuse to learn how to hack the Windows Registry. These aren't safe places for old dogs or simple users.

The vehicles I used were the only ones I had. How was I to know that an old Thinkpad wasn't suitable for this terrain, or that a modern laptop would distort the magnificent views? How was I to know that an older distro with an older kernel was a better choice for old hardware?

And how was my approach to these tests not logical? Before I tried any Linux distros, I installed XP on the Thinkpad to test its lung capacity. It took a couple of hours and worked alright, if not at blinding speed. When **Ubuntu** refused to install, I figured it was too hefty a load and tried its smaller brother **Xubuntu**. I even checked the hardware specs - the website said 192mb of RAM was fine.

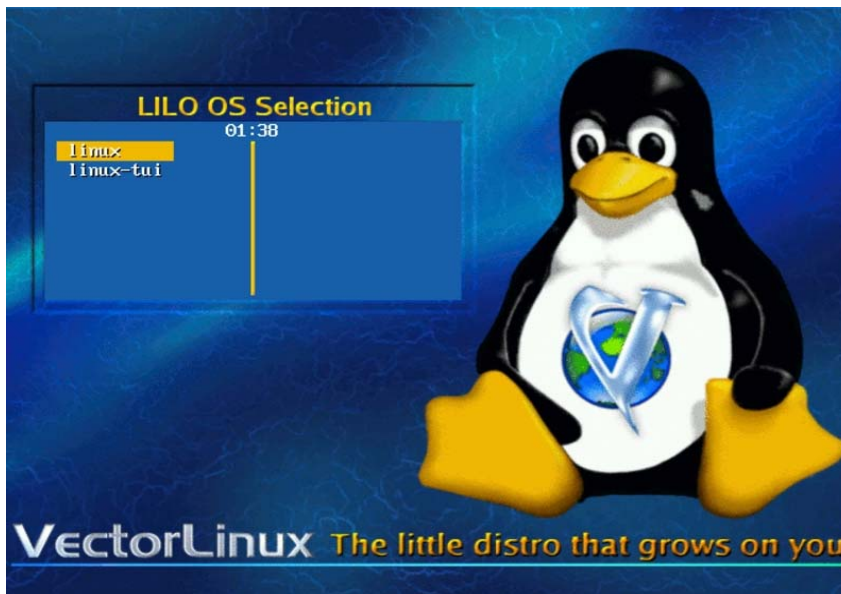
Trying

Reading up on other distros that would suit old hardware lead me to several based

on **Slackware**. **Zenwalk** made it to the start line but the keyboard problem was beyond my ability to solve. And it wasn't the numlock, as some suggested (I'm not that thick). Then I tried some mini-distros in the hope of striking it lucky.

One of our readers wrote: 'Setting up Linux on old hardware needs a certain amount of know-how, and is not suitable for a beginner. However, once set up ... it will run with perfect reliability - which is more than can be said for Windows. I work at a charity where the main computer is a Dell Inspiron 500 with 128 MB RAM. This also runs **Vector Linux** 5.1. Three people use it. IT JUST WORKS.'

He wasn't the only one suggesting Vector 5.1, so I burnt the CD and ran the old Thinkpad up once more. The install was ponderous (a feature of Slackware-based distros) but Vector came up after an hour or so and worked alright in a leisurely kind of way.



Vector's default GUI is Xfce, an easier load on wheezy engines than KDE or Gnome. You get Abiword, MPlayer and Firefox thrown in, plus email, instant messaging, audio players, photo viewers, PDF viewers – more than enough for most users.

Vector couldn't get my broadband connection (I think that's a ThinkPad problem), but there's dial-up support for common PC modems.

I love just that happy penguin - thanks to those who suggested this distro.

Is Vista Ready for the Masses?

I could've chosen that question as the title for my piece. Recently the BBC answered that question this way: No - wait another six months for the driver issues to get sorted out. USA Today said Vista wasn't ready for prime time, and forbes.com described Vista as 'woefully out of tune.' Think of a mother-of-pearl encrusted piano in a run-down bar in a Wild West town.

The blogosphere is full of stories ranging from install problems to frequent crashes caused by applications that don't like working with Vista. It seems to object to you installing more software or drivers, going into a huff and telling you that your licence is no longer valid.

PC User wrote that there were no Vista drivers for basic things like graphics cards, sound cards, a Logitech mouse/keyboard and a Canon Printer. How's the average Windows user going to cope with that? Check Microsoft's technical bulletins? Stop laughing – this is serious.

The extra security offered by UAC is as heavy-handed as the WGA's digital rectal exams are humiliating. The anti-malware tools Microsoft has thrown in are mediocre and the back-up software is, by some accounts, even harder to use than the feeble offering in XP.

Vista clearly isn't ready, but my piece was about Linux. Like many XP users, I'm looking at alternatives to Vista because of its high price and the hardware upgrade required to run a full-blown version. And of course I'm comparing Linux to Windows – what else would I compare it to but the desktop market leader?

2. Is Linux desktop ready for the Window of opportunity?

Getting ready for battle

On my trip to the mountains, I saw many villages bustling with what seemed like preparations for a major battle. Young men were training on sports fields and open squares, with women and children cheering them on. After dark, the elders sat around tables in the taverns discussing their plans in hushed voices, while the night air carried the sounds of blacksmiths hammering steel by their furnaces.

It was clear that they'd seen the cracks in the walls of the kingdom below and were working day and night to ready their latest weapons. There was a buzz of excitement wherever I went, and the craftsmen I watched were pushing ahead at a pace the architects of the Windows realm have no hope of matching.

One thing they don't have is money, a commodity they largely do without, so they can't launch lavish PR campaigns like the Applegrowers have. Another hurdle is convincing the big PC Makers of the kingdom to offer Linux pre-installed. Just now, Dell appears ready to defy the King who recently signed a peace pact with Novell.

That caused much bad blood in the mountains, and now there's talk of treason: the latest rumours say that Novell is about to join the Kingdom of Windows. If that happened, the King's architects would get their hands on some of the finest weapons made in the mountains. Is Dell another part of the King's plan to seize these weapons? Is that why he's done nothing to pull Dell into line?

No equal opportunity

The rebels know they're not a match for the King's forces unless they attract more fighting men. Right now, their credo appeals only to curious and disenchanting Windows followers who know their way around XP. 9 out of 10 Windows users have never heard of Linux, and most of those have long ago traded their curiosity for an easy life.

The remaining 1 in 10 won't be put off by the need to download and install Linux, nor will she object to learning a new language. Like me, others will take certain things for granted and be disappointed when they're not, and they'll be amazed by the surprises Linux holds in store.

The distros I tried are promoted as easy meat for the non-technical, a small detail some of the folks who took a shot at me overlooked. 'Linux for Humans', **Ubuntu** claims; 'Radically Simple', says **PCLinuxOS**; 'pre-configured for simplicity and ease of use' is the message from **Mepis**. I took these claims at face value, put their products to the test and reported what I found.

Those who made the point on Linux forums that I wasn't savvy with PC stuff missed that this was the point – didn't the title make that clear? Those who bemoan that Linux doesn't come pre-installed on new PCs have a point, but it's a fact of life. The authors of distros aimed at fresh penguins accept it, and it shows in effort they've put into making their wares easy to install.

A few succeed brilliantly and others come very close. The widescreen tripped many distros up, which still puzzles me: if some distros can detect the screen and activate 915resolution, why can't others? After all, the driver I had so much trouble with is freely available in the mountains.

Reality Check

A review of Open **SUSE 10.2** on Linuxforums.com gave my self-esteem an unexpected boost: **SUSE's** poor hardware recognition took the reviewer by surprise, his 1280x768 laptop screen being one of the issues. The reviewer happened to be Clem Lefebvre, the creator of **Linux Mint**. That a man of his calibre had this problem put a smile on my face, as did the fix offered by one of the forum's gurus:

```
'execute this in console: 915resolution -l  
then look for a mode that you don't use, in my case, I used &quot;5c&quot;  
so, I inserted this: 915resolution 5c 1280 800 in /etc/init.d/boot.local  
where 1280 800 is the resolution. this will load 915resolution for i810'
```

Aside from a few glitches with certain kinds of hardware, installing Linux is no more difficult than installing Windows. In fact it can be much easier: the best Linux distros will have you up and working in an hour, while you're still trying to connect to the Net with Windows and have yet to begin the mud-wrestle with activation and the bigger one of installing an AV, anti-spyware and a firewall. And you're still a long way from getting the apps you need installed and running, plus the three dozen third-party tools and utilities that make Windows work properly.

If the tools made by the King's architects were any good, there wouldn't be thousands of toolmakers selling add-ons for Windows, from tuning forks and disk defraggers to back-up and security software. The rebels have a huge advantage here but, with their troops divided by old tribal allegiances, aren't in a position to capitalise on it.

3. What was the question again?

It was: Is Linux ready for plain old ordinary PC users? My answer was: No it's not, but a few distros are. I'm confident that a few more will join them when their next releases are ready: **Ubuntu**, **Fedora**, **PCLinuxOS**, **SimplyMepis** and others have new versions going through testing that will be finished in the coming months.

The secondary question about running Linux on old hardware has a similar answer: quite a few distros will run on that old PC you have lying around, but to find the right distro for that old laptop requires careful preparation. Clearly, any distro using KDE or Gnome and OpenOffice will be a challenge for old hardware, and it's probably asking a lot of 'live' install CDs to run in less than 256mb of RAM.

Exclusions

I intentionally steered clear of top-ten names like **Debian**, **Slackware**, **Red Hat** and **Gentoo**, which aren't designed to appeal to newcomers. These are the foundation stones other distros are built on and tend to be the domain of serious Linux users.

I ruled out **Knoppix** as it's designed primarily for use as a Live CD, but one of Gizmo's readers sang its praises. I checked the usual Linux sites, where the consensus was that a derivative of **Knoppix** called **Kanotix** is a better choice for hard disk install. The same reader made the point that **Knoppix** served as a rescue-disk that allowed him to fix trashed Windows machines. I'd love to know more about that.

They say Linux requires effort and persistence but rewards those who persist. I admit that it became easier to find my way around the mountains with every day I spent there. I found the fresh air easy to breathe and the colours of the markets exciting. And I developed a taste for the spicy food, along with some admiration for the free spirit that burnt like an Olympic torch being carried from village to village.

It's appealing to live in a free society with real choices, rather than a world where the ruling party always gets more than 90% of the vote and the people are offered dull products made by state-owned conglomerates. That's why I plan to return to the mountains first chance I get – the pull is too strong to resist.

4. Nirvana, with Barriers to Entry

Package Managers

Understanding how to install software on Linux was the toughest challenge, due to the variety of package managers (mostly APT or RPM) and front-ends/installers (Synaptic, YaST, YUM, URPMI). Going from one distro to another compounded my confusion, as did switching from GUI to GUI. It was too much to learn, too soon.

Installing applications tends to be straightforward on Windows, unless the software comes from the big three AV vendors or the Court at Redmond, or depends on some other item made there. More than once a newly installed Windows application would tell me after the event that I needed another piece of software to run it, mostly the .Net platform from MS. For reasons beyond my simple mind, every attempt to install any version of .Net on my desktop or laptop has met with sullen failure.

By contrast, the best Linux packaging systems tell you what dependent programs you need to install as soon as you mark a package for installation, then fetch all the bits and pieces and install them for you. Synaptic makes it that easy and, with software updates, the Windows user is in for an even bigger treat: the package manager lists all the updates available for all the software running on the Linux system – OS, GUI, tools, apps – and installs them in one seamless session.

Once again, Nirvana is in sight, but then it clouds over. Clement Lefebvre wrote this about **Open SUSE**: '... the package manager doesn't know where and how to find its sources and repositories. You have to find that information and set it yourself. There are also too many choices and not enough default values in YaST to configure this. If you're not used to **SUSE** you'll probably be lost.'

I struck the same problem with **Mandriva**, which required trips to URPMI and the PLF to add repositories. One of their wrote and said: 'You can install the entire range of free / open source applications for Mandriva from our public mirrors without paying a dime.' I'm happy to stand corrected - here's the link he provided for the instructions:
http://wiki.mandriva.com/en/Docs/Installing_and_removing_software

A guide like this is helpful but my bet is that most simple users will give up after the first few paragraphs.

Wanted: New Management

At first you can avoid these traps by choosing a distro that comes loaded with plenty of applications but, sooner or later, you'll want to install a couple more. This is where **Ubuntu** shines with its easy Add/Remove utility that includes icons and star ratings – without those, it's not hard to get lost in the alphabet soup. The credit goes to Synaptic/APT, and the folks in the mountains would do well to point newcomers toward distros that use this combo - fewer would get lost that way.

Mark Shuttleworth, the father of **Ubuntu**, wrote in his blog:
'... that there are so many divergent packaging systems in the free software world is a waste of time and energy. We want to focus the collective brainpower of the community on features and bugs, not on packaging ... [this] is one area where we can definitively improve on the real user experience for most people who treat computers as a job not a passion.'

That's where I'm coming from, so I couldn't agree more, but Mark's next statement is a little harder to follow: 'I often think that the proprietary software world's way of distributing software is one of its biggest weaknesses - an Achilles Heel that we should be exploiting to the full extent possible. I'm often asked why Linux can't make it easy to "write something like Microsoft Installer, or Installshield". That's the wrong rabbit hole, Alice. Linux can make it so when you dream of databases, PostgreSQL or MySQL are "just there" and "just work". That's a much nicer experience - we should make the most of it.'

In my experience, the Achilles Heel is mostly a feature of Microsoft programs that refuse to install properly or give you the run-around. Late last year I installed IE 7 (the finished version) on my laptop. What should've been a short walk around the block turned into a tense drama on the scale of crossing into East Berlin during the Cold War, with endless check points, body searches and pointless questions.

By contrast, Firefox 2 installed in minutes, checked my plugins and extensions, updated some of them, turned off those that weren't compatible and said: off you go.
I knew that Firefox came from Mozilla and that made me more curious about the mountains. Now I can't wait to get back there.

PART 6 – [RETURN TO THE MOUNTAINS](#)

Screenshots courtesy of:

<http://shots.osdir.com/>

<http://knolinux.com/>

<http://www.tuxmachines.org/node/337>