



THE OUTER EDGE

Tall Tales from the
Brink of Sanity

These are BRIARD's own
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LINUX LABOURS

Is LINUX really ready for Simple Users?

PART 7—NOTES FROM THE SECOND TRIP

Just after I'd tested **Ubuntu** 7.04 beta, the final version was released to vigorous applause and rave reviews. *Feisty Fawn Herd* was widely hailed as the answer to those who said Linux wasn't ready for the masses. At last they would see that the emperor wore clothes of impeccable quality.

I didn't see the clothes quite that way, even if I put my mishaps with **Ubuntu** down to my clumsy paws or my laptop not cooperating. Had Feisty changed that much in a week? I downloaded the final version, booted from the live CD and promptly ran into the old screen resolution issue, and there was no way I could fix it in that mode. I know how to fix it after installing **Ubuntu**, but how many others checking out the live CD on their widescreen laptops will decide not to take the plunge after that introduction?

Since I'm still not at home in this terrain, I check my bearings often to make sure I'm not reading the map upside down, and I was relieved to find that someone more savvy had struck the same problems with Feisty's screen resolution and multimedia codecs – a techie at a PC magazine

http://apcmag.com/5981/hands_on_with_ubuntu_7_04_part_1

Then came the news that Dell would ship **Ubuntu** on some of its laptops and desktops, and the bonfires were lit in the mountains to celebrate the great event. I suspect that Dell is only out to capture an emerging market before one of its competitors does, but the decision will be seen as a huge stamp of approval that Linux desktop is ready for the masses. No doubt **Ubuntu** will quickly lose its last rough edges once it goes mainstream.

Questions and Answers

My answer to the question I asked in my first piece remains the same: Linux isn't ready for plain old ordinary users, but a few distros are. The good news is that the list is growing:



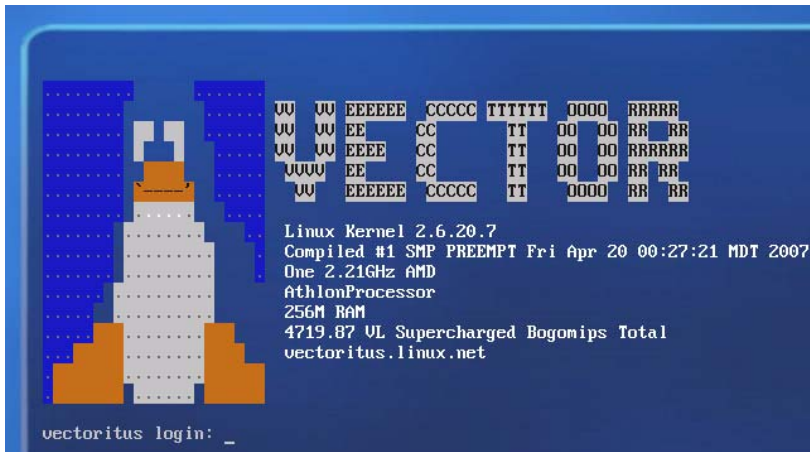
These distros will appeal to different audiences with specific needs: For serious MS Word and Excel users, the best choice is probably **SLED 10** due to the work Novell has put into making Open Office compatible with MS Office. **Mandriva** has a lot of sex appeal – a key ingredient for many users - but carries the handicap of URPMI.

Ubuntu clearly meets the needs of many users, as it is well-equipped, well-supported and on the whole pretty straightforward to install and use.

If you're just looking for an alternative to Windows that doesn't entail learning strange new customs, **Xandros** (and **Linspire/Freespire**) are good choices. **Vector Linux** is included because it won the Pike's Peak Old-Timers Prize for getting the vintage Thinkpad up there.

Vector Linux fans will ask: what about the current version, 5.8, the little distro that grows on you? It's based on Slackware and, whatever the strengths of this distro are, the install process will turn all but the most determined punters away. Windows 98-style boxes by the dozen aren't a good intro, nor are the stone age artefacts made up of black Xs on a white background.

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I persevered because Vector promised to make Linux work on the old Thinkpad. The result was much more polished than the intro suggested, or 'enlightend' in this case.



The Enlightenment Windows Manager is one of the options but how many travellers would get that far? The reward is 'Linux at the speed of light', or Linux devoid of ponderous, resource-hungry apps. There's a place for a distro like this, but I fear it's not a place newcomers will flock to.

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Spoilt for Choice

For me, **SimplyMepis** was the most exciting find on this trip, closely followed by **PCLinuxOS** (as long as the final edition delivers on the promise of TR3). **Linux Mint** Bianca was a favourite on my first trip and would be near the top of my list if it were more stable and looked more mature. That these three are based on **Ubuntu** says a lot for that distro, despite my mixed experiences.

SimplyMepis and **PCLinuxOS** make it easy for fresh penguins while remaining true to the open spirit of Linux. Another reason I'm leaning toward these two is their use of Synaptic. Package managers tend to cause heated debates in the taverns of the mountain villages, but virtually all the distros aimed at newcomers use **Synaptic: Ubuntu, SimplyMepis, PCLinuxOS, Xandros** and **Linspire**.

There's just as much debate about Linux desktop GUIs. The default for **Ubuntu** and Novell's **SLED** is Gnome, yet both offer KDE as an option if you insist (**Ubuntu** makes a different distro for KDE lovers: **Kubuntu**). **SimplyMepis, PCLinuxOS** and **Xandros** firmly embrace KDE, while **Vector** and others give you a choice of Xfce, Fluxbox, iceWM and Enlightenment. With so many routes to choose from, I settled on exploring the two most travelled.

KDE is said to be the easiest road for Windows users, but it comes down to preference: If you like a control panel that resembles the cockpit of a Boeing 747, you'll like KDE. If you prefer less frenetic surroundings, Gnome might suit you better. Of course it's not that simple: every distro is optimized for its GUI of choice and often the GUI is tweaked as well.

It's easy to get lost in the list of options here. I'd choose a distro that suits you and learn the ways of its default GUI. If you want a second opinion on this subject, Google will give you more than you bargained for. Here's a link to a fair comparison:

<http://www.tuxmachines.org/node/15348>

Listen to the Music

Whether you admire or loathe the Kingdom of Windows, I'm sure you'd like to live in a free society with plenty of choices, not in a dictatorship where the ruling party always gets over 90% of the vote and the people are offered dull products made by state-owned conglomerates.

Linux is not Windows, and that's as it should be. One of the **Mepis** developers likens Windows to a 3-in-1 sound system, adding that Linux is for music lovers who don't mind building a system from components to get the best result. That won't appeal to those who don't care about the quality of sound or those who can't tell the difference or aren't prepared to pay the price.

In the case of Linux, the price you pay is not measured in dollars but in the extra effort it requires to learn its ways. The best distros don't ask unreasonable questions from competent Windows users, only a little time to become familiar with the new terrain and new dialects. I suspect that also holds true when upgrading to **Vista**, as do issues with certain drivers and applications.

In any case it's astonishing that small bands of artisans have fashioned complete works like **Simply-Mepis 6.5** while a thousand architects in Redmond took five years to produce an OS that is giving many users migraines. Already there are stories that Service Pack 1 for **Vista** will be out in time for Christmas.

And now for an interesting comparison: which group of young hopefuls would you invest in?
This one or the next one?



They're a weird-looking bunch, the early Microsoft gang (circa 1978). The neat and clean youths above them work for Mandriva.

PART 8 – [THE FINAL SCORE](#)

Screenshots courtesy of:

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

<http://knolinux.com/>

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