



## THE OUTER EDGE

Tall Tales from the  
Brink of Sanity

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## LINUX LABOURS

### Is LINUX really ready for Simple Users?

#### PART 8 - THE FINAL SCORE

I've had plenty to say about the problems I had with Linux distros, so it's time to talk about some of the advantages I found after spending more time with them.

##### Cost

Down under, an upgrade from XP to Vista Home Premium would cost me US\$ 250, and an upgrade to Ultimate over \$400. Moving up to Office 2007 would cost the same again. For folks running a business with several servers and lots of desktops, a low cost alternative like Linux must be music to their ears.

##### Security

Citizens of the kingdom are fed up with all the crooks, spies and burglars who roam the highways. Most of them envy the folks in the mountain villages who leave their front doors unlocked, even at night.

##### Performance

Linux boot-up times seemed slow compared to my XP systems - 1 to 2 minutes versus 45 seconds. Linux makes up for that by being ready to use moments after the desktop opens, while XP takes another minute or two for all the start-up programs to get out of bed and for the AV to load down the latest updates. In other words, XP gets to the starting blocks faster but takes time to put its running shoes on. Once they're up and away, there's isn't much distance between them, but XP tends to run a little faster.

##### Optimisation

My XP systems are optimized for speed while the Linux distros I tested were not. I looked into this but soon retreated — a look at this link will explain why: <http://www.domain.com.au/Public/PropertyDetails.aspx?adid=5256600>. If I'd compared Linux with the Dell Inspiron Core Duo the way it worked out of the box, XP would've been a distant second at every stage of the race. The effort it took to get rid of Dell's bloatware and to free the laptop from McAfee's iron chains is another story. Linux doesn't come with bloatware, and that's a big bonus.

##### Resources

The distros I tested used between 200 and 250mb of RAM just ticking over, and double that with half a dozen apps running. A standard Linux install occupies around 3 to 4gb of hard disk space, including applications. It uses about the same resources as XP, leaving Vista unchallenged as the heavyweight champ (2mb of RAM, 15gb of disk space).

##### Dual Booting

Setting this up had me on the edge of my seat the first time but I needn't have fretted. Some time later I read that you must defrag your drive before you repartition it, so I'm even more surprised that My XP partition is still intact after dozens of installs.

##### Configuring hardware

Many distros set up internet connections automatically (on Ethernet at least) and install printers in a heartbeat. To install the Laserjet on XP was a 20 minute job using an HP CD; to get hooked up to broadband was a similar routine.

I moved house recently, and had to change my phone number. After ADSL was enabled by my ISP, XP wouldn't cooperate, saying there was a problem with the address of my laptop. I rebooted in Mepis, which had no issues with the connection, then rebooted in Windows and the problem had gone away.

##### 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's no need to worry about serial numbers or even losing your install CD – all you need is a fast internet connection. That's a lot of freedom.

#### **Losing track of software**

A workshop I took my PC to a while back managed to lose my XP install disk. When I called Microsoft, they wanted to charge me money for a replacement and insisted on proof of ownership. I asked them where the Advantage in the WGA was if I had to dig out the original invoice or photograph the sticker on the box. I never got an answer to that question.

#### **Updating Software**

Linux updates all the software on your system in one session, not just the OS. Microsoft updates are automatic but you have to update each program you've added from other sources (about 60 on each of my PCs), and that's a real pain.

My son wasn't impressed with this feature, saying Macs did this too. Of course they do – OS X is based on a version of Linux.

#### **No need to reboot**

That's the icing on the Linux cake. With XP, you're nagged every ten minutes until you curse and reboot your machine. And if you choose custom install to select only the updates you want, XP hounds you like a mangy neighbourhood dog until you give in. The penguin is much easier to get along with.

#### **Nothing's lost when you do**

You can shut down Linux with a bunch of programs open and they'll all come up ready to go next time you start up your PC, without a single complaint about abnormal termination.

#### **Re-installing the OS**

You can't just download an updated version of Windows. With Linux, you can download the latest version of your distro at any time and, if you created a separate partition for your home folder, your data will remain intact.

You can arrange to install Windows like that, if you're smarter than the average user, but it'd still takes hours to download all the patches issued by MS since your install CD was burnt.

#### **Applications**

There are 15,000 apps that run on Linux. That they're free doesn't mean they're not up-to-scratch. Open Office is a viable alternative to Microsoft Office and has some neat features, like a PDF creator in the Writer toolbar. Scribus will do most of the things Publisher does, Evolution is more than a match for Outlook, and Firefox makes IE7 look stale. ShowFoto is as slick any photo editor I've used on XP. The Gimp has a reputation for being hard to use but who'd argue that Adobe Photoshop is easy?

#### **Windows apps on Linux**

There's a utility called Wine that lets you run Windows apps on Linux, which I believe has its limitations, so does the commercial equivalent, Codeweaver's Crossover. I didn't try either but that's what the guides say.

#### **Migration**

Ubuntu's Feisty Fawn includes a Windows migration wizard that recognises Internet Explorer bookmarks, Firefox favourites, desktop wallpapers, AOL IM contacts and Yahoo IM contacts, and gives you the option of importing them during installation.

#### **Windows files on Linux**

I was surprised that I could not only access Windows docs with Open Office (on several distros), but even edit them and save them back into the NTFS partition in MS format.

#### **Freedom from Bloatware**

All you get with Linux is the software you need or want. There's no crap to get rid of.

#### **The Bottom Line**

Maybe the mountain air made me light-headed or perhaps it was the special brew they serve in the taverns, or the buzz of excitement in the villages. Whatever it was, I came away convinced that some of their weapons were ready for battle with the kingdom. Sadly, Weapons are not enough. The King has a vast army of mercenaries, while the rebels rely on bands of volunteers from the mountain villages. The best they can hope for is to take a few guard posts at the outer margins of the kingdom.

Of course they say they don't want war with the kingdom but merely reclaim some of their lost territories and attract more settlers. That is possible, given that the aging King is preoccupied with the upstarts from Google who have a war chest that seems to rival his own, and with the Apple growers who're beating at the gates again. To add to the King's woes, some PC makers have decided to offer XP as an alternative to Vista because many of their customers balk at the tax the King has placed on Vista.

Stealth is the best strategy for the rebels. They got their servers into many businesses who value lower cost, greater flexibility and better security. The same businesses will be drawn to Linux desktops for the same reasons. Employees will learn about Linux at work, as they did two decades ago about Windows. They'll take their knowledge home and then they'll think about buying Linux PCs for their own use.

But the early adopters will be people like you and me who find the kingdom a stale place. In the end, it's not about which is a better place to live, but which has the fresher air and more freedom of choice. Too much choice may be confusing, but it's a whole lot better than none at all.

### Beyond the Kingdom

There are realms that lie beyond the reach of the King, and others that have no assets for him to plunder – volunteer organisations and charities for example. People use Linux to teach older folks or kids from poor neighbourhoods who can't afford new PCs and fancy software. They simply use cast-off PCs and Linux.

One email I received was from a Linux user who'd worked on a project to rehabilitate the homeless by teaching them how to use PCs, again with discarded old PCs hardware and Linux software. Another said he worked for a charity where he'd installed Linux on donated old PCs and networked them, which is easy to do with Linux.

Outside the kingdom, you can buy various PCs with Linux pre-loaded - in China, Brazil and Russia for example, even from Dell and Intel. Spaniards are embracing Linux for use in businesses and in schools. Linux has become a popular choice for schools in Brazil and Argentina. In China, Dell has sold tens of thousands of Linux-based PCs to schools, running Sun Wah Linux, a distribution based on Debian. In South Africa, a foundation established by Mark Shuttleworth has set up computer labs in 100 schools. Kids will learn to use Linux and choose it when they grow up.

The King is alarmed by this trend and has offered some governments a stripped down bundle of Windows and Office for \$3, following the lead of the big pharma who offer cheap AIDS drugs to third-world countries. They haven't helped communities that have more basic needs like access to clean water and sufficient food, but that's another story.

Many communities don't have access to electric power or the internet either. Some school kids have never seen a PC, a situation the One Laptop Per Child project is addressing with a \$100 crank-handle operated device that runs Open Source software. Libya has bought a million of these for its schools.

Linux is catching on in India, too. According to Business Week, the Cotton Hill Girls High School in the South Indian city of Trivandrum has abandoned Windows altogether.

'We're using something called Linux,' 12-year-old Arya told BW as she 'worked with Tux Paint, a Linux drawing/painting application.'

'And Windows?' asks the reporter.

'Never heard of it,' she says.

No wonder King William has made several trips to India, accompanied by ships loaded with gold bullion. Despite his overtures, the government in New Delhi has decided that Open Source Software is the best way to tackle computer literacy in India.

No wonder the little penguin looks so happy. He comes from a different world, one that the King will never understand.



### A few Handy Resources for Fresh Penguins

Tips for Putting Linux on a Laptop <http://www.thejemreport.com/mambo/content/view/233/>

News and Articles about Linux on the Desktop  
<http://www.desktoplinux.com/>

Lots of reviews  
<http://www.tuxmachines.org/node/337>

Answers to many common Questions  
<http://www.linuxquestions.org/>

Everything you need to keep track of Linux and more  
<http://distrowatch.com/>

Useful site for choosing, comparing and installing common distros  
<http://polishlinux.org/>

Table of Windows-equivalent software for Linux  
<http://www.linuxeq.com/>