

Learning to love the penguin



GEOFF PALMER

I set out to use nothing but Linux for a month. Cold turkey.

To celebrate the release of the all-singing, all-dancing, all-invasive, almost-all-proprietary Windows XP later this month, I decided to install Linux.

This was more than just an installation exercise. What I actually set out to do was use nothing but Linux for a month. Whoa, heavy! It's one thing to throw it on your system from a magazine cover disk, tinker about a little, then reboot to

Windows. It's quite another to go cold turkey.

Suddenly I was a newbie again. Some of the most basic things — like cutting

out my personal preferences from the vast array of configuration options and applications on offer, once I'd set up my email accounts and address books, once I'd discovered Opera has a Linux incarnation (oh bliss!), once I'd got Seti running in the background and tweaked StarOffice so it was just the way I like it, it didn't seem so strange at all.

I have to tell you though that Linux is huge — way bigger than Texas. My modest three-CD set of Mandrake version 8.0 comes with almost 1800 applications. From humble little text viewers to state-of-the-art web server software, from scientific workstations to full-blown programming environments, from a comprehensive desktop publishing setup to The Gimp — essentially Photoshop without the four-figure price tag. Not bad for \$75. And that includes a 350-page printed manual. (Remember them?)

Actually, that price is now technically only \$37.50 since I also installed it on Bob, my elderly P-II laptop. (There was to be no sneaking off for a secret, portable hit.) Is that legal, you ask? The same software on two machines? Of course it is: it's Linux!

GIVING IN TO THE BIRD

The cute penguin that graces everything Linux (name's Tux, by the way) is the bogeyman incarnate to Microsoft execs. Witness their increasingly paranoid ravings. CEO

Steve Ballmer recently called it "a cancer", senior vice-president Craig Mundie reckons it's "a virus", and Gates himself has described it as "PacMan-like". This might be a sign he's getting a few gulps short of a high score.

What they're frothing about is the GNU Public License (GPL) and its multifarious offshoots that is at the heart of Linux. What the GPL says, in essence,

is that anyone creating a program using software licensed under it must publish that software free of charge, along with the source code, and allow anyone else to use and modify it as they see fit. In the words of the GPL itself, "...if you distribute copies of such a program, whether gratis or for a fee, you must give the recipients all the rights that you have. You must make sure that they, too, receive or can get the source code. And you must show them these terms so they know their rights."

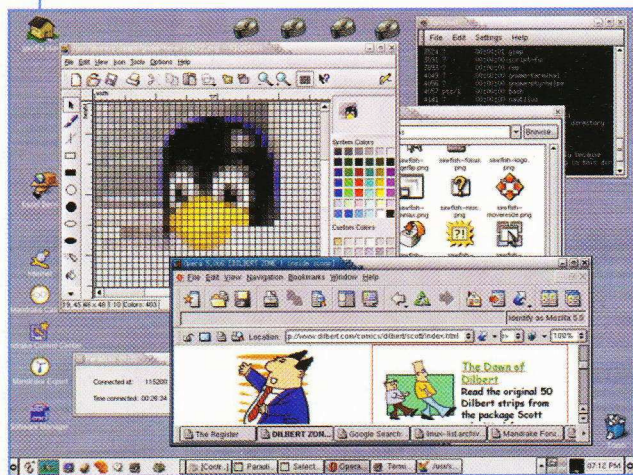
Give away your rights? Source code too? Aaaaarrggh! Linux is the anti-Christ!

Just how much Microsoft is taking fright can be seen by the licence for the second beta version of its Mobile Internet Toolkit — a set of tools that allows programmers to connect servers with handheld computers via the internet. It specifically prohibits the use of any products created under the GPL and its ilk, referring to them, not simply as open-source, but as "potentially viral software".

Interesting term. According to US intellectual property attorney Dana Hayter, the phraseology says more about Microsoft's worldview than anything else. "It's a pejorative and misleading term. To suggest that open-source software is somehow 'viral' is to confuse harm to your customers' machines and data with harm to Microsoft's profits."

And that's what it's all about. Profits. After a decade in the wilderness, Linux has reached a critical mass with a depth of sophistication that makes it both accessible and appealing to Joe Public. The irony is rich; after spending years and countless millions gobbling up or nobbling the competition, Microsoft are faced with an enemy that can't be bought.

Back in Penguin city there's no looking back. I kick off the Gnome desktop on Bob (in the la-la-land of Linux lingo that's pronounced *guh-nome*) and some



and pasting between applications — are just different. You see, I've been on "W" a long time — 10 years or so. There's not a lot I don't know about it. Hell, I can even remember version two. I've seen more crashes than a stockcar promoter and I've survived with, well, most of my sanity intact.

But once I'd given myself time to explore this strange new world and sort

passing geek asks if I'm running an XP beta. "Er, yeah," I say. "Cool!" he mutters.

Actually I prefer the KDE graphical environment — or do I? Three weeks in and I've not even looked at Enlightenment, Blackbox, FVWM2, WindowMaker, Wmnet or Xfce. That's the problem with Linux; there are just so many choices. I've only just discovered XWC, an Explorer/My Computer lookalike file manager. It might have been handy when I was still getting used to the system but it's not a patch on Nautilus or Konqueror or GMC or ...

I wonder idly why schools don't get into Linux (see story, page 33). It runs on anything from a 386 up and for the cost of a year's software licences they could train all their staff to a high degree of proficiency then forget about licensing costs forever. No doubt they've been sucked into the argument that certain brands of word processor and particular

web browsers are fundamentally different from all the rest, in the same way that using a Stanley hammer is quite different from handling a cheap one from The Warehouse.

You can see why Microsoft is worried. Linux has become so commonplace that the sheer audacity of the project tends to get overlooked. In one of the most relentlessly profit-driven periods in our history, a bunch of folk have got together to spend millions of hours producing something that is then given away.

More than 20 years ago in *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, Douglas Adams described humanity as being so primitive they still thought digital watches were neat. We've moved on a little from there. Neither digital watches nor digital calculators are considered neat any more. They're so commonplace, produced in such quantities, that they're virtually giveaway, disposable items. Who cares what chips are in them or who wrote the

code? They're just tools or fashion accessories.

The computer's heading the same way. It's an order of magnitude more sophisticated I grant you — that's why its honeymoon period has lasted so long — but at the end of the day it's just another piece of office equipment, a commodity as essential as a typewriter once was, but a commodity nonetheless. Free software simply accelerates that commoditisation process.

In its heart of hearts I believe Microsoft realises the inevitable. It's fighting hard — who wouldn't? — but at the end of the day it's ultimately doomed. That's why it's pushing .NET and Passport and using XP as a sales platform. Its days as an operating system and software tax-gatherer are numbered. It's moving instead to position itself as an internet tax gatherer. Whether it makes that transition depends to a large extent on how effectively it can demonise a cute, cuddly penguin called Tux.

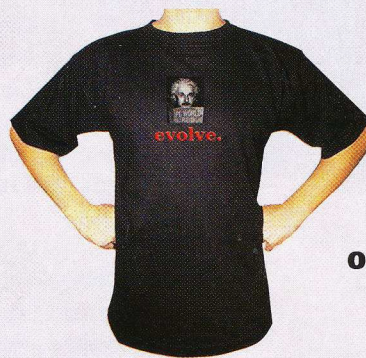
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