

# Is Linux Ready For Your PC?



**The free and open source operating system is no longer a geeks-only zone and is good to go for prime time**

- Prakash Advani

In the battle of the desktop operating systems (OS), there are only three dominant players left – Windows, Mac and Linux. At some point, Windows was cast as the platform for the common man, Mac as the one for the artist, and Linux as the geek's playground.

Linux found favour in powering servers, supercomputers, large businesses and even stock exchanges. And Google even used it as the platform to build its popular Android mobile operating system. But in the desktop and notebook space, it still failed to gain traction.

There's an image associated with Linux that can be frightening for a normal user, invoking pictures of command lines and terminal windows. But over the past 20 years, some massive steps have been taken to make the OS more accessible.

## **The Linux Desktop**

Linux comes in more flavours today than what you would find in an ice cream shop. Each flavour, called a 'distribution' or 'distro', is designed for a different set of users. Some of the most popular ones are Ubuntu, Fedora, Mint, OpenSUSE, Debian and CentOS.

Each distro has its own unique, intuitive and easy to use interface, designed following rigorous user testing. Developers have carefully studied what steps people take for common day-to-day tasks and have made significant improvements to simplify as well as speed up the user experience. Still, behind all the eyecandy lies the same stability and flexibility that makes Linux the OS of choice for companies like Google, Amazon and eBay.

Distros use different interfaces, giving a broad variety in look and feel. Popular ones are Unity, Gnome or KDE, which work best if your system has 512MB RAM or higher. If you are

running an older PC or desire faster speeds, interfaces like LXDE or Xfce are the way to go.

Each distro is open source and the applications are developed by a community of enthusiasts. This usually translates into a plethora of unique features and add-ons that make computing much easier. For example, if you have thousands of MP3 files on your hard drive, an application called Nautilus – a file explorer – lets you hold your mouse over the file for a few seconds to automatically play the track.

Similarly, those who love instant messengers and use multiple ones – Yahoo Messenger, ICQ, Windows Live or Google Talk – might sometimes be stormed by a flurry of messages popping up together. In Linux, if you receive five messages, they all sit in the message queue. The first one shows up in the notification area, fades out, and the next one fades in. The Empathy Instant Messaging client supports all the popular chat applications, including Facebook chat, so you need only one program to connect to all your favourite chat services.

## LOOKS FAMILIAR?



As the latest version of Linux Mint demonstrates, the Linux desktop experience is quite similar to what you have come to expect from Windows or Mac, making the transition to the new operating system a whole lot easier

## Apps: Work & Play

Initially, Linux users face a major problem in finding software for each distro, as well as installing it. But all that has changed recently. One of the things that mobile users enjoy most is the ability to discover and install applications from their phone's app store.

Similarly, Linux desktops also have app stores, such as the Ubuntu Software Center and Deepin Software Center, which offer thousands of free and paid software for gaming, education, productivity and development.

But will Linux be fine for your usual computing needs? On the work front, it's up to speed. For all office applications such as word processors, spreadsheets and presentations, most distros come with an office suite pre-loaded, such as LibreOffice, OpenOffice, or Calligra (or you can download them if not pre-installed). These can easily open most MS-Office files, be it one made in the latest MS Office 2010 or older versions. They can also save files to the same formats, as well as others such as PDF – perfect if you want to send an invoice to someone without allowing them to edit it.

The only thing missing is an email suite to take on the powerful Microsoft Outlook. But Mozilla's Thunderbird supports Linux and is more than capable of executing anything you would have done in Outlook.

There's no shortage of games available either. Popular titles such as Battle for Wesnoth or OpenArena will let you while away some time. And hey, what's a computer without Solitaire? The world's favourite digital card game and its twin FreeCell are both available on Linux, as well as Tux Math – a fun game to keep your mathematical skills sharp.

You can play music in the wide variety of music players available, and also edit your tracks

using Audacity. There's also the ability to edit videos with Shotwell, and the famous VLC player can play most audio or video files. And of course, the Gimp image editor will make you never miss Photoshop again.

In most cases, if you think you need a program for something, then chances are that it's available for Linux – and now it's easier than ever before to find it.

### **Secure and Updated**

One of the major attractions to Linux and open source is that the software has no viruses, eliminating the headache of your PC going down every few months, or of buying expensive antivirus software.

“There are about 60,000 viruses known for Windows, 40 or so for the Macintosh, about 5 for commercial Unix versions and perhaps 40 for Linux. Two-three of the Macintosh viruses were widespread enough to be of importance. None of the Unix or Linux viruses became widespread – most were confined to the laboratory,” write Dr. Nic Peeling and Dr Julian Satchell in their report titled Analysis of the Impact of Open Source Software.

Linux also doesn't slow down over time; it runs at the same speed as when it was first installed. And what's perhaps more important is that its applications theoretically won't hang your whole system. If some program misbehaves, only that application hangs without affecting other things.

Linux also gets rid of those constant pop-ups asking you to update a program or install drivers every time you run it. The system manages all updates centrally, so you only have one application that prompts you for the upgrade. And it's customizable enough that you can make it automatic, ask for a notification without a pop-up, and even turn it off entirely. It makes for a clutter-free and uninterrupted computer experience.

A major concern for computer users is the support for hardware. If you have used Linux in the past, it might have had trouble detecting your printer or a third-party device. Today, however, most of the devices work well without installing any drivers, as Linux now supports 3,000 printers, 1,000 digital cameras and 200 web cams. In fact, you can even sync your iPod/iPhone music with the Rhythmbox media player without installing iTunes.

### **Take the leap**

If you are now ready to try Linux on your computer, you don't need to uninstall your existing operating system. You can easily dual-boot Linux with Windows or Mac. What's more, Linux also has the ability to run as a full OS directly off a CD or a pen drive, letting you try it out before installing it. Be warned, though, the speeds would be a little slower than what you get if you were to install it on your hard disk.

The best part, of course, is that Linux is free. And this cost is usually passed on to the consumer, as PCs running Linux from Dell and Wipro cost about Rs. 3,000 lesser than the same model bundled with Windows. Considering the benefits, it might be worthwhile to give Linux a chance...

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