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THE JOURNAL REPORT: TECHNOLOGY

Consumer Technology Out the Window

Are Linux operating systems as easy as promised? We test them out.

By MARK GOLDEN May 15, 2006; Page R4

Can the ordinary computer user ditch Windows for Linux?

The question came up when I decided that my six-year-old version of Microsoft Corp.'s Windows operating system had to be replaced.

My Sony Vaio computer was still too young for the trash heap. And I was hesitant to spend \$200 on the Windows XP operating system, especially with Microsoft planning to launch XP's replacement, Vista, in January.

THE JOURNAL REPORT



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So, I decided to give the operating systems that run on Linux technology a try. The Linux-based operating systems are said to be faster and more secure than Windows -- and are usually available free. They also are said to

work well with older computers. And the publishers of the most popular systems say they can now be installed and used by anyone.

What I found was that for some people, Linux systems may do just fine. But they still are largely more appealing to computer hobbyists who would like to see Microsoft face more competition. Specifically, while the installation and simple functions worked well enough, the systems couldn't handle all the multimedia applications I needed. And getting some of the systems to work required more time and effort than I was willing to exert.

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Adding and Sharing

Linux was started in 1991 by a Finnish student, Linus Torvalds, who wanted to modify the Unix operating system to work on his PC. (Unix was a text-driven operating system running on big mainframe computers that could handle various tasks and users simultaneously.) The task proved too much for one person, so Mr. Torvalds asked for help from programmers around the world in a posting on a Web bulletin board -- and the Linux movement was born.

The Linux systems and related applications are open source, meaning users can modify the programs as long as they make their changes available to others. Mr. Torvalds, however, is still in charge of maintaining central Linux standards. Users are encouraged to pass their copies of open-source software on to others.

What has resulted is an array of operating systems -- or distributions, as they are called -- based on Linux technology, almost all of them available for downloading on the Web. Linux's primary success, however, has been as an operator of servers, not desktop computers.

Positive reviews of the latest Linux systems were what first piqued my interest. I searched the Web to see which distributions of Linux were compatible with my PC, its components and peripheral devices like my printer, digital camera and external DVD drive.

Compatibility with hardware can be a big problem for Linux. My computer's Pentium III processor from Intel Corp. appeared to be compatible, though I found no assurances about my computer's sound and graphics components, cordless mouse or peripherals.

Still, I purchased a copy of the book "Linux for Dummies," which comes with a DVD containing six of the most popular Linux distributions for home-PC use. The DVD also contains other software applications, including [OpenOffice.org](#), a competitor to Microsoft Office supported by [Sun Microsystems Inc.](#) of Santa Clara, Calif., and the Mozilla Internet browser. All for \$30. (Most of the software can be downloaded free at various Web sites, starting at [www.Linux.org](#).)

I decided to give the six Linux systems a spin to see how they got along with my PC. But there was a minor setback: The current edition of "Linux for Dummies" comes with older editions of the Linux distributions. I was able to download free



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the latest editions of all but one -- the Linspire operating system from San Diego-based Linspire Inc. The new, seventh edition of "Linux for Dummies" is due out this month, and its DVD has the updates of the Linux distributions.

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Installation went quickly and, for the most part, smoothly. All six systems recognized my disk drives, cable modem and wireless mouse. There's no need to dump Windows when putting in any of the Linux distributions, as long as there's enough room on the computer's hard drive. After installation, you simply select whether to launch Windows or Linux each time you start the computer.

Basic tasks like printing, email and Internet browsing worked easily. Even though none of the Linux versions recognized my particular model of Epson color printer, the device worked fine after I designated it as a similar Epson model. Setting up email to use my account with an Internet service provider required some configuration, as does setting up Microsoft Outlook email.

I was able to book an airline ticket online, reply to an invitation and look at satellite maps in the Google search engine. I also did some online banking, even though the bank's site sensed my PC was operating with a foreign system. The home page warned me that the site's full functionality required Windows or a Macintosh operating system, but my electronic bill payments went through just the same.

But most of the operating systems had problems with either my computer's graphics or sound or both. And the problems became more pronounced with multimedia applications, like viewing movie trailers and operating my digital camera and iPod. What's more, I couldn't transfer, via email or a disk, some complicated word-processor and spreadsheet files between my Linux system at home and Microsoft Windows on my work PC.

Two of the Linux operating systems -- Linspire and Fedora, which is run by [Red Hat Inc.](#) of Raleigh, N.C. -- didn't appear to be compatible with my graphics hardware. Suse, the system published by [Novell Inc.](#), of Waltham, Mass., had the same problem and didn't generate any sound despite attempts to fix it.

After the tests, representatives of Fedora, Linspire and Novell told me that Sony Vaios are known to have compatibility problems with Linux.

Greg Mancusi-Ungaro, Novell's director of marketing for Linux and open source, says other users of Linux on Sony desktops appeared to have developed solutions. But he agrees that chasing down and installing them would likely go beyond the abilities of a Linux novice.

Tom Welch, Linspire's chief technology officer, says the company's primary focus in selling its system is on new computers that come with Linspire already installed. He added that my inability to play Microsoft- and Apple-produced videos likely was due to hardware incompatibility. (Smaller manufacturers, like Microtel Computer

Systems and Systemax Manufacturing Inc., make computers with Linspire installed.)

Keep It Simple

The OpenOffice.org suite of word-processor, spreadsheet and presentation software was included with each Linux system I tested. The programs worked well in and of themselves -- similar to Office's programs. They opened and saved files more quickly and didn't get hung up processing the way Office does from time to time. I was able to send files back and forth between Word on my work computer and OpenOffice's word processor, Writer, on my home PC.

But OpenOffice's spreadsheet, Calc, didn't handle a Microsoft Excel file with lots of graphs. Even a moderately complicated Word document -- a ballot for an Academy Awards office pool -- lost page breaks and other formatting. Surprisingly, though, Writer was able to track changes made during the editing of a Word file and translate the file back into Word with the changes still tracked.

Louis Suarez-Potts, a spokesman for OpenOffice.org, says the more complicated files don't always transport well back to Office. "We readily confess that there are occasional problems," he says, adding that "these are much fewer in number with [the newest] version."

One possible solution for multimedia and file-transfer problems is CrossOver. The \$40 commercial program from CodeWeavers Inc., a software developer in St. Paul, Minn., is meant to run Windows applications from Linux. CrossOver can be downloaded for a free 30-day trial. It's also included in the current edition of the Xandros operating system from New York-based Xandros Inc.

CrossOver was able to operate Office software within Linux. But I couldn't get it to work with iTunes, Microsoft Media Player or Apple QuickTime.

Jeremy White, chief executive of CodeWeavers, says he wasn't surprised that I couldn't get CrossOver to run Media Player, but added that his program does work well with QuickTime. Had I purchased the program and then accessed the customer support, he says, I would have been able to get QuickTime to work.

As for iTunes? "Apple changes iTunes so frequently, we can't keep up with them," he says. "But my hope is that with our version 6.0, we'll support iTunes 6.0 and that we'll be able to more properly support the iPod."

Of the six Linux operating systems I tested, Xandros worked best on my PC. It installed the easiest and I didn't have the graphics or sound problems. While in Xandros, I was able to look at -- and in some cases open -- files on the Windows side of the computer more easily than while in the other Linux systems.

Like the other Linux distributions, though, Xandros had problems viewing some online video files, playing DVDs

and downloading pictures from my digital camera. I was able to see, delete and copy to my computer some of the songs on my iPod using Xandros's file manager, but I couldn't copy songs to the iPod.

The current version of Xandros doesn't work with iPods, says Kelly Fraiser, the product development manager for the new version of Xandros due out this summer. The new version, he adds, might work better.

Generally, open-source software can't legally play encrypted DVDs in the U.S., and most commercially produced DVDs these days are encrypted. Linspire, however, sells a program for \$40 that plays encrypted DVDs.

So after all my trials and errors, what have I concluded?

The Linux systems could make sense for users who just want to send and receive email and surf the Web without the need for multimedia programs, or to perform home-office tasks without a lot of interaction with Microsoft systems. But users should be prepared to spend a lot of time configuring their PCs. Also, people who are really bothered by viruses, spyware and hacking might want to take a look at Linux, since most viruses and spyware are aimed specifically at the widely used Windows systems.

For me, though, using the Linux systems didn't make sense. I often send documents and spreadsheets between my home PC and the one at work, which uses Microsoft Office. And the files are sometimes complex. Meanwhile, for both personal and professional computer use, I want access to all multimedia functions.

While solutions may exist to almost every problem I encountered, I was willing to invest only a limited amount of time as a system administrator. Claims by some Linux publishers that *anybody* can easily switch to Linux from Windows seem totally oversold.

In the end, I decided to buy an upgrade copy of Windows XP for \$100. That normally wouldn't be a good idea since it doesn't upgrade the file system. But it's a good solution until Vista arrives.

Meantime, I'll continue to toy with Xandros, and look at upgrades of other distributions to see if I can overcome the hurdles. In exchange for a reasonable amount of time, I'd jump at the chance to gain the speed, security and savings promised by Linux -- and to feel that Microsoft has a bit more competition.

--Mr. Golden is a reporter for Dow Jones Newswires in San Francisco.

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