



# The Realities of Running Linux

**S**o now that you've learned about the politics, history, and personalities behind Linux, only one question remains: what's Linux actually like when used day to day? What should the average user expect from the experience?

These are the questions we hope to answer in this brief chapter.

## Learning to Use Linux

What should you expect from Linux once you've installed it? Well, it's a little like running Windows, except there are no viruses, fewer crashes, and no inexplicable slowdowns.

In addition, you have complete control over the system. This doesn't mean Linux is necessarily complicated. It's just that you have the control if you wish to make use of it. We'll look into this in the later chapters of this book.

Most software you use under Windows has at least one equivalent under Ubuntu, installed by default. It's unlikely that you'll need to download or install any additional software and, even if you do, you'll probably find it's available for free.

In most cases, the Linux swap-ins are at least as powerful and easy to use as their Windows alternatives. Tabbed browsing in the Mozilla Firefox web browser lets you visit more than one site at once, for example, without needing to have a lot of browser instances running, as you do with Microsoft Internet Explorer. The Evolution program has a search routine that lets you look through your e-mail messages quickly for a variety of criteria, and it puts the features in a similar Microsoft product to shame.

Does this sound too good to be true? There is just one caveat. Linux isn't a clone of Windows and doesn't aim to be. It has its own way of doing certain things, and sometimes works differently from Windows. This means that many people experience a learning curve when they first begin using Linux.

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**Note** Several Linux distributions aim to mimic Windows pretty faithfully. For example, Xandros and Linspire copy the look and feel of Windows to the extent that (allegedly) some people are unable to tell the difference.

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But in just a few weeks after your move to Linux, everything will start to seem entirely normal. Most of the time, you won't even be aware you're running Linux. Of course, some patience is required during those initial few weeks. Linux can be illogical and frustrating; on the other hand, so can Windows. We simply got used to it.

## Who Uses Linux?

Who uses Linux? The myth from the old days is that it's only for techies and power users. When you needed to put everything together by hand, this was clearly true. But modern distributions make Linux accessible to all. It's no exaggeration to say that you could install Linux on a computer Luddite's PC and have that person use it in preference to Windows.

Up until quite recently, Linux was largely seen as a developer's tool and a server operating system. It was geared toward programmers or was destined for a life running backroom computers, serving data, and making other computer resources available to users.

To this end, Linux continues to run a sizable proportion of the computers that make the Internet work, largely because it provides an ideal platform for the Apache web server, as well as various databases and web-based programming languages. This has led to the LAMP acronym, which stands for Linux, Apache (a web server), MySQL (a database), and PHP, Python, or Perl (three programming languages that can be used in an online environment).

Despite its technical origins, recent years have seen a strong push for Linux on desktop computers. Linux has stepped out of the dark backrooms, with the goal of pushing aside Microsoft Windows and Mac OS in order to dominate the corporate workstation and home user market.

Running Linux on the desktop has always been possible, but the level of knowledge required was often prohibitively high, putting Linux out of the reach of most ordinary users. It's only comparatively recently that the companies behind the distributions of Linux have taken a long, hard look at Windows and attempted to mirror its user-friendly approach. In addition, the configuration software in distributions like Ubuntu has progressed in leaps and bounds. Now, it's no longer necessary to know arcane commands in order to do something as simple as switch the screen resolution. The situation has also been helped by the development of extremely powerful office software, such as OpenOffice.org and Koffice.

Is Linux for you? There's only one way of finding out, and that's to give it a go. Linux doesn't require much of you except an open mind and the will to learn new ways of doing things. You shouldn't see learning to use Linux as a chore. Instead, you should see it as an adventure—a way of finally getting the most from your PC and not having to worry about things going wrong for reasons outside your control.

Linux puts you in charge. You're the mechanic of the car as well as its driver, and you'll be expected to get your hands dirty every now and then. Unlike Windows, Linux doesn't hide any of its settings or stop you from doing things for your own protection; everything

is available to tweak. Using Linux requires commitment and the realization that there are probably going to be problems, and they're going to need to be overcome.

However, using Linux should be enjoyable. In his initial newsgroup posting announcing Linux back in 1992, Linus Torvalds said that he was creating Linux “just for fun.” This is what it should be for you.

## Getting Hold of Linux

Getting hold of Linux is easy. You'll already have spotted the version of Ubuntu packaged with this book. Ubuntu is the main focus of this book, and we consider it to be one of the very best versions of Linux out there. It's ideal for both beginners and power users, and it really does match the functionality offered in Windows. It includes several easy-to-use configuration tools, which makes changing your system settings a breeze. For example, a tool known as the Synaptic Package Manager can automate the download and installation of new software with just a few clicks.

Ubuntu is also a very good-looking distribution. You'll find your friends and colleagues “wowing” when they happen to pass by and glance at your PC!

Quite a number of Linux distributions are available. If you want to explore other Linux distributions as well as Ubuntu, by far the most fuss-free method of getting hold of Linux is to pop over to your local computer store (or online retailer) and buy a boxed copy. You can choose from Red Hat, SUSE, Mandrake, Libranet, TurboLinux (if you want foreign language support, although nearly all commercial distributions do a good job of supporting mainstream languages), and many others. Many distributions come on more than a single CD—typically up to four CDs at the moment. Some versions of Linux come on DVD.

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**Caution** Bearing in mind what we've said about the sharing nature of Linux, you might think it possible to buy a boxed copy of Linux and run off copies for friends, or even sell them for a profit. However, you shouldn't assume this is the case. A minority of distribution companies, such as Xandros and Linspire, incorporate copyrighted corporate logos into their distributions that place restrictions on redistribution. Sometimes they include proprietary software along with the Linux tools, which you cannot copy without prior permission. However, in many cases, reproducing the CDs in small volumes for friends or for use on workstations in a company environment is permitted.

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Many of the Linux distributions are also available to download free of charge. In fact, many community-run distributions—such as Slackware, Debian, Fedora, and Gentoo—are *only* available this way (although you can often buy “homemade” CDs from small retailers, who effectively burn the CDs for you and produce makeshift packaging). If your PC has a CD-R/RW drive and you have some CD-burning software under Windows (such as Nero), you can download an ISO image and make your own installation CD from it.

**Note** An *ISO image* is a very large file (typically 700MB for a CD or 4.3GB for a DVD), which you can burn to CD or DVD. This CD or DVD is then used to install Linux.

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## Using Ubuntu

Ubuntu is a relatively young Linux distribution. It is based on and is still closely allied with the Debian distribution ([www.debian.org](http://www.debian.org)), like many versions of Linux. Debian has been in existence since 1993—almost as long as the Linux kernel—and embraces the spirit and philosophy of Linux, which says software should be shared and made available to anyone who wants it.

Ubuntu takes this one step further. Its goal is to give anyone in the world access to an easy-to-use version of Linux, regardless of geographical location or physical abilities. Ubuntu supports a large number of languages, so it can be used in most countries around the world. In addition, it includes accessibility tools, so it can be used by partially sighted, deaf, or disabled people.

From the very start, Mark Shuttleworth, Ubuntu's creator, decided it would always be free of charge and would always be freely available. Unlike many versions of Linux, no commercial version of Ubuntu exists (although it is possible to pay for various services, such as support, if you wish).

But perhaps Ubuntu's greatest strength is its community, which extends across the world. If you have a question about Ubuntu, you'll find hundreds of people willing to help. Just as the software is designed to be shared, a strong belief within the Ubuntu community is that knowledge should be shared, too.

It might come as no surprise that *Ubuntu* is an ancient African word that roughly translates as "humanity to others." In Shuttleworth's native South Africa in particular, "Ubuntu" is a way of life that advocates acceptance and compassion toward others. The Ubuntu philosophy is one of the underpinnings of post-apartheid South Africa and spreads into political spheres as well as everyday life. The Ubuntu version of Linux is an attempt to bring this spirit to the world of computer software.

Ubuntu is primarily geared toward desktop users, although with a little adapting, it can also be used to run server computers.

Ubuntu is designed to be easy to use. Anyone who has used Windows or Mac OS will feel right at home. It features every piece of software you could wish for or would find within a well-equipped modern operating system. It includes a web browser, an e-mail client, instant messaging software, an office suite, a graphics editor, and much more. And don't think that these are cut-down versions designed to lure you into purchasing the full version later on. In every case, they're full-featured pieces of software that give proprietary programs a run for their money.

Perhaps more importantly, Ubuntu is very user-friendly. Updating the system can be done with just a few clicks of the mouse, as can downloading and installing new software.

## Summary

This chapter explained what you can realistically expect when using Linux every day. It also discussed the kind of company you'll be keeping in terms of fellow users.

You learned how people usually get hold of Linux. Of course, with this book, you already have a version of Linux, Ubuntu, which was introduced in this chapter.

This completes the general overview of the world of Linux. In the next part of the book, you'll move on to actually installing Linux on your hard disk. This sounds more daunting than it actually is. The next chapter gets you started by explaining a few basic preinstallation steps.