

Would You Prefer to be a Konqueror or an Explorer?

by Rodrigo Silva

In this article, I will describe the great experience that I had in my firm with Linux: the open-source operating system that is growing at an incredible pace. I believe this is a formidable choice for independent firms.

A Change in Philosophy

The driving force behind Linux is a dynamic community that believes that software should be open source. If you are able to put your hands on the software, it's yours, and therefore validating the authenticity of your license is not required. That doesn't mean that there are no licenses—in fact, you agree to open licenses and you're encouraged to use and share the software as you like. The price of this kind of software is not money, but the time that you invest in order for it to work. Some steps can be harder than others, but once something works—as with every thing else in computers—it works better and better as time passes and soon you master it.

If you become really expert, you can change and improve what you have. Sources are available that let you can create a whole new flavor if you wish. What is more, you should share your achievements. In the system that I use, one of the demo files is a video of Nelson Mandela explaining the concept of "Kubuntu." When a walker arrives in a village, he needs what any walker would need: water, food and shelter. The philosophy behind Kubuntu is that he doesn't need to ask for these obvious things, the people in the village will approach him and offer them. People don't look for any compensation other than to know that they have helped someone in the community.

The name of the game is open source, which together with the lack of license validation issues provides a very high efficiency. For office files I obtained a ratio of 4:1 between the sizes of the same document in the two offices. What is more, every six months there is a new stable version so you don't need to upgrade your machine. Open source in this case means that there are very few shells, and therefore all the resources are used in a much more efficient way.

It's Not Rocket Science

The first thing that you need to know in order to migrate to Linux is that instead of one standard, there are many "distributions" (Red Hat, Mandrake, Debian) that are different conceptions of this operating system for different computing objectives. For example, a graphical designer may have different needs than a calculations intensive user.

After you decide what distribution is suitable for your needs, you can download a CD image and install the operating system on your computer. The interfaces are graphical, so you only need to follow very carefully all the steps along the way. Linux respects what you already have; there is always an option for launching your computer using Linux without changing anything else in your computer. You can create a partition in your disk which gives you the option to use your usual Redmond operating system or Linux. This first step is the most critical one, because if you do it incorrectly, you cannot recover your original partition.

After this first step, you can begin to work in Linux. It usually recognizes your hardware and the basic applications are available. There could be issues with wireless drivers, as long as these are not fully

supported, and you may need an expert advice in order for this particular component to work. The keyword here is repositories. Different programs may share some common components, so a new program may just need an interface because all the other components could already be available.

The interfaces are very clean. They can be totally graphic and are fully customizable, and you can have different desktops: one for your work, another for Internet, one more for your music, etc. You can begin to use the basic applications (e-mail, spreadsheet, word processor) because they tend to work in the same way that you already know.

Be Ready for a Disaster

Once you have all the basics working, you will want to advance to the next level: networking, printing through the network, seeing other machines, etc. There is a nice application called “Samba” that allows you to see machines (computers, printers, etc.) that have the Redmond operating system. You may need more than a single trial in order for it to work. Unless you are very judicious and edit the file to set up the network using the appropriate parameters, when you use the graphical interface it “guesses” the parameters, almost always correctly. Wandering around and reading material from the Internet (available by the tons), you may download the drivers for your printers, compile them, and as a result move towards a full working system. In my case, I could not use network printers for a while, so I was able to download e-mails but could not read the information in another machine for the first week or so.

The distribution I use is "Kubuntu Feisty Fawn" from the Debian family, and the browser is called "Konqueror" (which indeed does much more than just explore). It has frames, so in a single window I can see local files as well as network files; in another tab I can open a Web page and in another one a PDF file. Printing to a PDF is natural; the “Open Office” allows you to create tagged PDFs. It also can read and write WORD and EXCEL files, so, the usual applications are fully compatible. Macros are not compatible, and databases are best implemented in other applications because the application that comes with “Open Office” is very slow. The graphical interfaces are very safe. There is no way to damage your system by configuring it to use them, and you can translate all your applications to a different language with a single customization. This was my first “wow” with Linux.

If you want more, you can have it. Linux is a Unix-like system, i.e., you may do the most powerful things using the console. This requires some expertise which can be acquired in slow and careful steps. With the Redmond operating system, one tends to believe that everything is done using the mouse, but the dark side of this approach is slowness and laziness. Don't you miss your old but solid DOS sometimes?

Because the most interesting things are done in the console (i.e., by typing commands), viruses are not a real issue. If you want to make a serious change you must log in as “root,” which cannot be done easily by an outside entity. In theory, a virus could be created, but as far as I know and for all practical purposes viruses do not exist in Linux.

Because everything is open, Linux may not be the best tool for a large company. But for small- to medium-sized companies, where platforms can be changed without too much disruption, it is a very good choice once a reasonable level of customization has been reached.

I encourage you to use open source software. Some applications are not as developed as in the Redmond operating system, but the pace of development is faster in Linux because the driving force—people around the world sharing achievements—is committed to the vision of a different way of computing.

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