

So what's this Linux thing anyway?

Linux (pronounced **lin-uks**) is an operating system that runs on inexpensive personal computers. Like Microsoft's Windows products, it runs in the background at all times and manages how ordinary programs use memory, access data and attached devices, and get precious time on the central processor. Unlike Windows, Linux is based on the design of Unix: a system known for decades as a stable, flexible platform designed to handle multiple users and multiple programs with ease. Also unlike Windows, Linux is Free Software.

Free, as in no cost?

Well, yes, usually, but that's just a side effect. Linux is Free, as in the freedom it gives you to run it whenever, wherever and however you want, with no legal restrictions and no “activation” required. Free Software (and its more-broadly defined cousin, Open Source software) is often developed jointly by programmers from all over the world, benefiting from a huge pool of expertise in development, debugging and security. The source code, the actual programming, for Free Software is always available, meaning that no one vendor can dictate terms to you or prevent new features from being added or bugs from being fixed. Expert-level support or customizations can be done by any enterprising company or individual without artificial constraints, allowing you maximum flexibility in how your systems run. And, oh yes, it can always be obtained, legally, free of charge.

Where did Linux come from?

In the early 1990s, a Finnish university student named Linus Torvalds got his hands on a speedy new computer with a 386 processor, and decided he needed a project to teach himself how the new processor worked. He'd used a Unix-like system called Minix and found it a bit limited, so he began to write his own. Rather than keep the project a secret, he shared the details, and even the actual programming code, with other programmers via the Internet. Those folks tried the software, reported bugs and better yet actually submitted fixes and improvements. Suddenly Linus had a programming team numbered in tens, then hundreds. Fortunately, Linus was as good a project manager as he was a programmer! Though it wasn't the first Open Source project, Linux proved the value of having a large, widely distributed, loosely organized team of contributors.

What about all of these “distributions”?

Linux itself is really just an operating system kernel, the nucleus of the whole system. To do useful work, you need lots of other utility programs such as compilers, shells, windowing systems, control panels – the list goes on and on. Fortunately, other Free Software and Open Source projects have developed these programs. (One of the oldest and most prolific of the projects is the GNU Project, associated with the Free Software Foundation.) You don't want to go hunting down and integrating all of these separate programs, just trust us on this. So, a number of companies and non-profit groups have created “distributions” (“distros” for short). A distribution is a collection of all the software you need to install and use Linux on your system. Some distributions are intended for backend servers, and others are designed for desktop use. Still others may

have a special purpose, such as acting as a firewall or router. Below, we've listed web addresses for many of the most popular distros, and some pretty obscure ones as well.

How easy is it to get started with Linux?

Well, that depends on your experience with Unix or with computers in general. If you're a newer computer user, you should probably stick with a branded, boxed distribution. It'll cost you a little money, but you will get an easy installer, a manual, and a support number to call if things go wrong. A more experienced user who doesn't mind doing some digging for answers on the Internet can do just fine by downloading one of the major distros and jumping right in. Already a Unix guru? Skip the easy stuff and grab one of the do-it-yourself flavors – you'll learn a lot in the process.

What about my Windows programs?

Well, the bad news is: they won't run under Linux without some fiddling. The good news is: for almost every program you've got, there're probably two or three Linux programs that will do the same thing – and most of them are free of charge and Free for any use. On the other hand, if you really need a particular Windows program, there are ways to keep running it. You can run many Windows packages under WINE or Crossover Office, or you can set up your machine to dual-boot into either operating system. Until you become a Linux True Believer, of course.

Where do I go for help?

The primary source for help is the Internet. Search engines are your friend! There are tons of web pages and newsgroup postings out there about every conceivable problem you'll run up against. Some of the best sources are listed below. Another great source of help is your local Linux User Group (or LUG). Check with the central listing, or ask around for one in your area. They will likely have an Installfest scheduled, where you can carry in your new Linux box for free, friendly help.

Distros

- Mandrake: <http://www.mandrakesoft.com>
- SUSE: <http://www.suse.com/us/index.html>
- Xandros: <http://www.xandros.com>
- Debian: <http://www.debian.org>
- Fedora Core: <http://fedora.redhat.com>
- Most popular distributions: <http://www.linuxiso.org>
- Lots of other distributions: <http://www.distrowatch.com>

Help

The Linux Documentation Project: <http://www.tldp.org/index.html>

JustLinux Help Files: <http://www.justlinux.com/nhf>

Linux Online!: <http://www.linux.org>

Amazon: <http://www.amazon.com> (search for “Linux”)

Linux user groups list: <http://www.linux.org/groups/>

Dayton Linux User Group: <http://www.dma.org/linuxsig/>