

Re: Which Linux distros would be best for me?

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On Fri, 31 Mar 2006 09:38:02 -0500, Walterius wrote:

When I ask which distros would be best, I mean ease of learning, community support and newsgroups, and availability of good, simple books.

I am retired from 20 years of aerospace software development. I live on a small fixed income. I have used Windows since 3.11 and Office since O97 and a myriad of other OS's ad computers before that. I like to learn from newsgroups and books. This is, however, my first post to any Linux ng.

I want to add one or more Linux systems to my multi-boot Windows 2000/Windows ME systems.

I think the choice of the distribution you start out with now is a lot less important than it was a few years ago. In the last 5 years, a lot of distributions have matured in terms of being friendly for new users.

Since others expressed their opinion, I'll express mine.

For new users, I recommend Debian. What you start with may well not be what you wind up running over the long term, but Debian is a good foundation to start learning about Linux. I find it to be a middle-of-the-road distribution in terms of difficulty. You can decide whether you want a higher level (Mandriva / SuSE), more graphical/desktop oriented distribution, or a more raw, lower-level distribution (Gentoo). Frankly, I find Debian to be less in the middle of these two, and more "a bit of everything." Debian has also been around a very long time, and has a fairly large community of users.

I actually run Gentoo on my primary desktop, but this is not ideal for older systems.

It's really mostly dependent on how you best like to learn. Do you like to wade in slowly, slowly peeling away the layers from the outside? Mandriva is more like this.

The other way of learning is immersion / sink or swim, learning from the

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bottom up. This is the way I learn. I started with Mandrake (Mandriva's earlier incarnation), but I found this to be unsatisfactory for my purposes, and three months later I wound up installing Gentoo, which was better for my own purposes. Gentoo is **definitely** not for everyone, whereas on the other hand, most anyone could **live** with Mandriva, even if it wasn't their first choice.

I think one important thing to keep in mind is that what you choose to start with isn't very important. Linux is Linux, so what you learn on one distro, or any data you create, should be easily portable to another distro.

So don't think of this a big choice you have to make outright. Since most Linux distributions are free, you can easily switch to another if you don't like the one you start with.

An even better alternative might be to burn a Knoppix CD. You can boot with this CD into a fully-working Linux environment, without touching your hard drive. This way, you're not reformatting or making any large commitments outright. Since it runs off of the CD, it will be a little slow, but will give you a pretty good idea of what to expect with Linux in general. When you've decided that you like it, then you can select a distribution and go through a normal install process.

For new users, the majority of recommendations I've heard seem to be these:

Mandriva
SuSE
Ubuntu

I would add Debian here because while its installer isn't gorgeous, it's certainly functional and easy to use.

Most people would consider Gentoo the definition of a distribution that is not suited for new users, but I think there is a certain kind of mentality that Gentoo could appeal to in a new user. Since the installation is a long, manual process (following well-written / easy to follow instructions), it gets the user acquainted with the command line in a fundamental and immersive way. Being comfortable tweaking configuration files without graphical wizards and so on is definitely a valuable mindset to have. So it's a bit like command-line boot camp; the instructions will even walk you through the kernel compilation process the first time you install. Compiling a kernel, while not completely trivial, is a fairly routine task you'll want to learn anyway. You can work toward it or learn it from the beginning with Gentoo.

So you'll have to decide if you're the kind of person who likes to learn about engines by starting with a fully assembled car, disassembling it slowly piece by piece to understand it...

Or whether you'd rather start with a pile of car parts and build a car,

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ground-up, with a well-written instruction guide.

As for learning Linux – I haven't found an end-to-end system for learning Linux that I love, but I do recommend you go right to the command line and get comfortable spending most of your day at it. There's a fairly good book called "Essential System Administration" which covers a variety of UNIX-like OSes that I recommend as a decent guide.

Mostly though you should use the Internet. Linux is definitely an Internet-oriented OS. All documentation that exists for anything on your Linux system can be found somewhere online.

Make a list of the things you want to accomplish on your new Linux system, then start with #1 on your list, and first, find out *what you need to know* to accomplish it. Then, go searching for the appropriate documentation, and be prepared to read.

(As for doing basic Word processing, browsing the web, and the like, that's something you'll be up and doing fairly quickly.)

As you read the docs, try to accomplish the task. If you get stuck, just ask. Linux users, probably more than most other OSes (with the exception of FreeBSD, Solaris, etc.), tend to understand the systems they run to a greater degree than the average Windows user, and you should have little problem finding help.

One other thing in favor of Gentoo is its vibrant, active support forums, which still strike me, personally, as the best concentrated support forum for Linux on the internet.

If you ask questions, be prepared for a "different" kind of reply. Simple questions are ordinarily answered, but questions like, "How do I set up a simple web server on my system?" are likely to elicit responses with pointers to tutorials, HOWTOs, and so on. One thing that has been fairly consistent in my experience, is the "Teach a man to fish..." philosophy. People are apt to give you pointers to information, rather than detailed answers. You'll be given suggestions as to where to look for documentation, or URLs pointing directly at tutorials, howtos, and system documentation.

This enforces the habit of reading for oneself, which will be necessary if you choose to do any tasks beyond the basic desktop ones (If you just want to do basic desktop stuff, you might not even need much support, given the maturity of most basic applications).

Good luck; I hope it will be fun for you. It was for me. There will be some frustrations along the way because there are many Windows habits, especially in the way you think of or conceive of the way something should work, that you'll have to unlearn. Hopefully you will find the differences compelling and interesting, rather than alien and off-putting.

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Good luck. Don't worry too much about where you start – just pick something and *start*. And ask questions if you get stuck.

Quag7

<http://www.computerrooms.org>