

Learning to love the penguin



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I set out to use nothing but Linux for a month. Cold turkey.

To celebrate the release of the all-singing, all-dancing, all-invasive, almost-all-proprietary Windows XP later this month, I decided to install Linux.

This was more than just an installation exercise. What I actually set out to do was use nothing but Linux for a month. Whoa, heavy! It's one thing to throw it on your system from a magazine cover disk, tinker about a little, then reboot to Windows. It's quite another to go cold turkey.

Suddenly I was a newbie again. Some of the most basic things — like cutting

out my personal preferences from the vast array of configuration options and applications on offer, once I'd set up my email accounts and address books, once I'd discovered Opera has a Linux incarnation (oh bliss!), once I'd got Seti running in the background and tweaked StarOffice so it was just the way I like it, it didn't seem so strange at all.

I have to tell you though that Linux is huge — way bigger than Texas. My modest three-CD set of Mandrake version 8.0 comes with almost 1800 applications. From humble little text viewers to state-of-the-art web server software, from scientific workstations to full-blown programming environments, from a comprehensive desktop publishing setup to The Gimp — essentially Photoshop without the four-figure price tag. Not bad for \$75. And that includes a 350-page printed manual. (Remember them?)

Actually, that price is now technically only \$37.50 since I also installed it on Bob, my elderly P-II laptop. (There was to be no sneaking off for a secret, portable hit.) Is that legal, you ask? The same software on two machines? Of course it is: it's Linux!

GIVING IN TO THE BIRD

The cute penguin that graces everything Linux (name's Tux, by the way) is the bogeyman incarnate to Microsoft execs. Witness their increasingly paranoid ravings. CEO Steve Ballmer recently called it "a cancer", senior vice-president Craig Mundie reckons it's "a virus", and Gates himself has described it as "PacMan-like". This might be a sign he's getting a few gulps short of a high score.

What they're frothing about is the GNU Public License (GPL) and its multifarious offshoots that is at the heart of Linux. What the GPL says, in essence,

is that anyone creating a program using software licensed under it must publish that software free of charge, along with the source code, and allow anyone else to use and modify it as they see fit. In the words of the GPL itself, "...if you distribute copies of such a program, whether gratis or for a fee, you must give the recipients all the rights that you have. You must make sure that they, too, receive or can get the source code. And you must show them these terms so they know their rights."

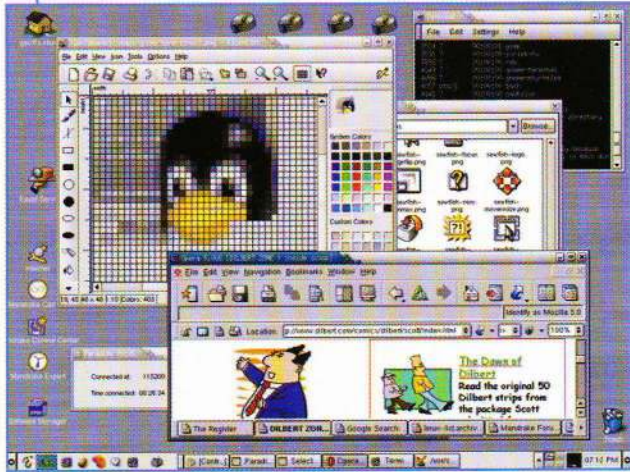
Give away your rights? Source code too? Aaaarrgggh! Linux is the anti-Christ!

Just how much Microsoft is taking fright can be seen by the licence for the second beta version of its Mobile Internet Toolkit — a set of tools that allows programmers to connect servers with handheld computers via the internet. It specifically prohibits the use of any products created under the GPL and its ilk, referring to them, not simply as open-source, but as "potentially viral software".

Interesting term. According to US intellectual property attorney Dana Hayter, the phraseology says more about Microsoft's worldview than anything else. "It's a pejorative and misleading term. To suggest that open-source software is somehow 'viral' is to confuse harm to your customers' machines and data with harm to Microsoft's profits."

And that's what it's all about. Profits. After a decade in the wilderness, Linux has reached a critical mass with a depth of sophistication that makes it both accessible and appealing to Joe Public. The irony is rich; after spending years and countless millions gobbling up or nobbling the competition, Microsoft are faced with an enemy that can't be bought.

Back in Penguin city there's no looking back. I kick off the Gnome desktop on Bob (in the la-la-land of Linux lingo that's pronounced *guh-nome*) and some



and pasting between applications — are just different. You see, I've been on "W" a long time — 10 years or so. There's not a lot I don't know about it. Hell, I can even remember version two. I've seen more crashes than a stockcar promoter and I've survived with, well, most of my sanity intact.

But once I'd given myself time to explore this strange new world and sort

