

Your Favourite Linux Distributions

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I've always been fascinated by Linux. When I was about fourteen or fifteen, in my quest to expand my computing knowledge, I attempted to install it for the first time. I think back then it was Red Hat Linux that I attempted to use. I can remember getting as far as the command prompt and typing *startx* and waiting for the X Window system to load. It never did, obviously because my graphics card at the time was not compatible. I had better luck on subsequent attempts using Corel Linux (yes, they made a version of Linux at one time) and Mandrake Linux (still around and now known as Majeia). But overall, it's been an on and off-again relationship between Linux and myself. In more recent years I've used versions such as Ubuntu and Linux Mint, but I've never really settled on a version, and I've never really settled on using Linux as my 'daily driver'.

Recently, perhaps bored by the enduring lockdown of Melbourne, I've decided to look more seriously at the feasibility of whether I could get by in the world of Linux on a more full-time basis. This time, out of the five computers that are in general use for the family, I've decided to switch two of them to Linux, while leaving two running Windows, and one running Mac OS. And in the quest to find the perfect version (or distribution or 'distro' as referred to in Linux parlance) and the reasons why I or anyone else thinking similarly might want to switch away from Windows, I once again turned to the good and knowledgeable members on Yammer (in the Linux Chat group) this month and asked them three questions:

1. What is your favourite Linux distro?
2. What is it about this particular distro that makes it your favourite?
3. What originally made you start using Linux and/or why would you recommend someone switch from Windows to Linux?

I got some really interesting personal reflections from members on why they have switched to Linux, what their favourite distribution is and why they think Linux is better suited to them than Windows. So interesting in fact, that I've published them all basically word for word later in this edition of PC Update. But in the meantime, for myself embarking on a greater use of Linux and for anyone else reading this who might be thinking similarly, I'll attempt to make sense of some of the information provided.

Firstly, what is Linux?

Linux is a personal computer operating system just like Windows or Mac OS is. In fact, it is remarkably similar to Windows and Mac OS, in terms of how it looks and how it operates. And 90% of the programs that you'd be familiar with using on Windows or Mac OS are also available on Linux. Programs like Firefox, Chrome, Thunderbird, Skype and Zoom are all available in Linux versions. Other commercial programs like Office and Adobe Creative Suite aren't available on Linux, but there are alternative programs such as LibreOffice, GIMP and Krita that will open their files and offer much of the functionality you'd be used to.

Why are there so many different versions of Linux?

Unlike Windows or Mac OS, there is no one single version of Linux, instead there are distributions. A Linux distribution or distro is the particular flavour of Linux that you choose to use. Whereas Windows comes in two flavours, Home and Professional, Linux comes in lots of different flavours. Many different organisations of all shapes and sizes (from multinational corporations to small groups of programmers who receive donations via PayPal) make these flavours of Linux. There are lots of similarities between the different flavours of Linux (just as there are between Windows Home and Windows Professional), but they will use different desktop environments by default and include different utilities. Fresh installs of Linux distributions are more feature-complete than clean Windows installs as they generally contain all the

major applications you'll need to use your computer on a day to day basis – web browser, email client, office suite, PDF reader and archive manager to name some of the common examples – so you won't have to go hunting around installing everything.

Why do some versions of Linux look different to others?

Unlike with Windows, where you can perform some light customisation to the graphical user interface, but on the whole it is the same for everyone, with Linux you have a plethora of choices of different graphical user interfaces, which are known as desktop environments. Common choices include Gnome, KDE, Cinnamon, XFCE, MATE and LXDE/LXQT. Member Greg Eden did a survey for me for this article, and Gnome was the most popular amongst the membership followed by Cinnamon and MATE. All these desktop environments have a slightly different take on the desktop-based graphical user interface. Some very closely resemble Windows, some will seem quite familiar to Mac users and others offer their own variation on the theme. No matter what distribution you use, you have the ability to switch to most other desktop environments if you find that the one you originally chose is not suitable.

How do I make the switch?

A good piece of advice that member Rob Brown offered was to firstly find an unused or seldom-used secondary computer and use this to initially install Linux on. This will take away the stress of suddenly switching your 'daily driver' to Linux and you can make an assessment of the suitability of it for your needs in a relaxed way.

The second thing you need to do is to choose a distribution (more on some of the choices below). The next thing you need to do is head to that particular distribution's website and download an ISO of it. An ISO is essentially an image of a USB stick in a file. Linux distributions are often close to 2GB in size, so you either need a fast NBN connection or else set it to download and then go away and do something else. Once you have downloaded it, on Windows you can then download a utility called Rufus which will write the ISO file to a blank USB stick for you (or overwrite a USB stick that isn't blank).

After this you can insert the blank USB stick in the computer you're going to use. On startup access the boot device menu, and select the USB stick and you'll launch into a live environment of the Linux distribution. Here you'll get to try out the Linux distribution for as long as you like until you're satisfied that you want to install it. Once you are satisfied, you'll find a shortcut (usually on the desktop) to launch the installer and then step through the options. After that you'll be prompted to reboot your computer and then you'll be setup with Linux.

So what do members think are the best Linux distros?

I got a variety of responses from members on their choice of favourite Linux distribution.

Ubuntu was one standout. This is a well-supported and easy to use distribution. It has a very easy to use installer, that is probably actually easier to use than the Windows installer. Its default desktop environment is Gnome, which is a nicely designed environment that is quite easy to use. Ubuntu is also a good choice for someone new to Linux because it is so widely used, and therefore most Linux software has a version for Ubuntu ready to download and install with one click.

Linux Mint was another. Linux Mint is based on Ubuntu, however, it has a different default desktop environment called Cinnamon (which closely resembles the Windows desktop) and some of its own utilities that are different to Ubuntu. It is another very good choice for beginners, and benefits from the fact that anything that can be installed on Ubuntu can be installed on Linux Mint.

Lubuntu was another common response. It is a variant of Ubuntu that uses the LXDE/LXQT desktop environment instead of Gnome. LXDE is much more lightweight than Gnome and so if you have older hardware or you just really care about performance, then Lubuntu can be a better choice. Everything else

mentioned above about Ubuntu applies to Lubuntu.

Manjaro was a response only from member Roger Brown. However, it is worth considering for anyone new to Linux because it is a rolling release. This means that it constantly updates itself (largely silently) and you are never required to do a major update to a new version. It has an easy to use installer, that only takes a few minutes to work through. By default it uses XFCE which is another lightweight desktop environment that closely resembles Windows, but you can also download it with Gnome.

Why do members think it's beneficial to switch from Windows to Linux?

In many experiences shared, members found that Linux gave them greater performance on their hardware than Windows did. This was apparent with all hardware as members noted the increased performance, but members particular cited the increased performance of older hardware. Members recounted having hardware that was well past it by Windows standard, but with a lightweight Linux distro installed (such as Lubuntu) the machine was suddenly rejuvenated and perfectly serviceable once again.

Many members cited Linux as a way of escaping from the nightmare of Windows updates. Most updates on Linux don't require a restart of the computer, they simply happen in the background. Whereas we've all had the frustration of starting up our computers, only to have to wait five minutes while a Windows update is applied.

Some members also mentioned the increased monetisation that Microsoft seems to be trying to extract from Windows. For example, advertisements are appearing directly in Windows programs, and Microsoft is making it harder and harder not to use a Microsoft account to sign in to Windows.

Another reason provided by members for the use of Linux over Windows was the better security offered by Linux. Although it has to be pointed out that Linux isn't immune from viruses or malware, for one thing, because it is less widely used than Windows it is less targeted and it is also designed in a different way to Windows that makes it more impenetrable to malicious software.

So there you have it – a brief primer on Linux, an explanation of distributions and desktop environments, and some reasons why you might want to make the switch from Windows. After this go and read each member's Linux story. You'll find them interesting, you'll find mention of some other distributions that are worthy of consideration and some other reasons why members have made the switch.

Remember that while this article is largely extolling the virtues of Linux, it isn't for everyone, and if you're perfectly happy with Windows then relax, it's a perfectly good operating system that I'll most likely continue to use for many years to come in some shape or form (whether through direct install or virtualisation) and many other members will too.

But if you do decide to make the switch, your first port of call should be the **Linux Chat group on Yammer**. There you'll find very knowledgeable members who've been using Linux for 20 years or more and are only too happy to answer any question you might have and even guide you through the entire process of getting setup with Linux.

As for me, for now, I've chosen Ubuntu for my two computers. However I am also interested to try Manjaro in more depth too, perhaps in a virtual machine for now. So far my switch has gone well. I have access to all the same major programs, so there's nothing I'm missing so far. Overall I'm enjoying the increased performance of my computers (which are both quite new laptops; one is an 8th generation i5 with 8GB RAM and an SSD, the other is a 10th generation i7 with 16GB RAM and an SSD), I like the better and more consistent interface design of the Gnome desktop environment in Ubuntu over Windows and I look forward to getting into some of the more advanced features of the Linux terminal in due course. Perhaps I'll have more on the topic in a future edition of PC Update.