

Is Ubuntu an Operating System?

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Is Ubuntu an operating system? Last week at EuroOSCON, Mark Shuttleworth gave the closing keynote outlining what he believes are the major struggles faced by the open-source/free-software community. During his talk, it became clear that Ubuntu is trying to achieve a radical shift in the software world. Ubuntu isn't trying to be a platform for mass-market application software: it is trying to be the primary provider of both the operating system and all the application software that a typical user would want to run on his machine. Most Linux distributions are like this, and I think it is a dangerous trend that will stifle innovation and usability, or even worse make the desktop irrelevant.

Mr. Shuttleworth's initial point was one that few people disagree with: that software installers are bad for users and usability. Indeed, the typical method of installing Windows software (downloading a setup.exe file from a website or running it from a CD) manages the software very poorly. Each vendor must construct its own scheme for where to install, how to update, and most of all how to manage dependencies between pieces of software. Of course, Windows has guidelines about installing to C:\Program Files\Vendor\Application Name, but even Microsoft does not consistently follow the rules. Everyone recognizes that installers are not good for users, even Microsoft, who in an effort to fix the mess invented the (complicated and poorly-tooled) MSI installer format. Apple uses disk images, application bundles, and relocatable software to avoid the problem. It is good to see a major Linux distribution thinking through the problems that installers present.

[Full Story](#) [2].

[Ubuntu](#)

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