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Fear and loathing at the command line

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Long ago, I lost any queasiness about the command line. I?m not one of those who think it?s the only way to interact with their computers, but it?s a rare day that I don?t use it three or four times on my GNU/Linux system. No big deal ? it?s just the easiest way to do some administration tasks. Yet I?m very much aware that my nonchalance is a minority reaction. To average users, the suggestion that they use the command line ? or the shell, or the terminal, or whatever else you want to call it is only slightly less welcome than the suggestion that they go out and deliberately contract AIDS. It?s a reaction that seems compounded of equal parts fear of the unknown, poor previous experiences, a terror of the arcane, and a wish for instant gratification.

Those of us who regularly try two or three operating systems every month can easily forget how habit-bound most computer users are. The early days of the personal computers, when users were explorers of new territory are long gone. Now, the permanent settlers have moved in. The average computer user is no longer interested in exploration, but in getting their daily tasks done with as little effort as possible. For many, changing word processors is a large step, let alone changing interfaces. And both Windows and OS X encourage this over-cautious clinging to the unknown by hiding the command line away and promoting the idea that everything you need to do you can do from the desktop. The truth, of course, is that you can almost always do less from a desktop application than its command line equivalent, but the average user has no experience that would help them understand that.

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