Windows Users Test Linux Waters

I have two careers. I am the owner of a pressure washing company in Austin Texas. No names or plugs; I'm not here for shameless publicity...it's simply what I do. My second job is selling Linux. When I say "sell", I am not talking about an exchange for financial gain. I am talking about selling the idea, the philosophy of Linux. I give away 10-15 disks a week to my customers and other people I meet. I keep them neatly stacked in my briefcase, ready for an opportunity to introduce someone to an alternative to Microsoft Windows.

Fifteen months ago, what I knew of Linux you could stuff in your front pocket, and most of that knowledge was wrong. I believed Linux to be some obscure programmers language, an unintelligible jumble of ones and zeros. Walking into my office on a warm summer's morning changed all of that. A nasty variant of bagle destroyed my network, hundreds of customer records and financial documents...my life. The pathetic part of this incident is that it was a self-inflicted wound. Poor backups, no wait; no backups or contingency plans, no preparation for disaster, I had nothing. What happened to Norton? Why didn't my anti-virus stop this? It's all a moot point now and there is no reason to lament or blame anyone but myself. The fact is a virus author beat my system and I was not prepared for it. It was that day I began looking at Linux and everything between then and now has led me to this keyboard at 6:00 AM on a Sunday morning. I not only use Linux but have become an ambassador of sorts. I want to take some time and report to you my experiences in introducing people to Linux and the reactions I receive in doing so.

Some would question my ability in this particular role. I am not anywhere near a Linux expert, in fact there is a cheat sheet taped to the side of my monitor with shell commands. I alternately lurk and participate in many forums and often am too embarrassed to ask the simple questions...I will allow others that humiliation. Sometimes that is what it comes down to. There are those "elite" who believe that if one cannot figure out the simplest things, then they have no business using the operating system. You've seen the responses I speak of I am sure. What I do have is a mixture of sales skills and idealism. A psychologist would have a field day dissecting my motivations for doing what I do. Their Nobel Prize will have to wait as I have no inclination to submit myself to their observation.

These are the things I am discovering about the every day computer user. I am not attempting to slander or create stereotypes of people, I simply want to tell you what I am seeing. The majority of people I approach concerning Linux believe as I did. Linux is too complex and unfriendly. Linux does not offer the user enough useful software or configuration options. Linux is for computer geeks who use it to communicate and write programs for other computer geeks. Suprisingly, a large number of people think Microsoft Windows is the only option they have. More than one person I have talked to believed that it was illegal to put anything on your computer that wasn't written or sanctioned by Microsoft. Still others believed that the operating system could not be removed from the computer nor could another system exist with it. Mostly though, I find the majority of people just to be apathetic or lazy when it comes to their

computers. If it can't be solved with a click or a reboot, they think it is too much trouble. I would estimate that only one out of twenty people I talk to actually has an interest in looking at Linux. The concept of a Live CD completely escapes them or they do not understand that they can boot a cd, explore or use it and then reboot into their World of Windows. This is what we face as we try to introduce others to Linux. So why bother? Because that one success, that one breakthrough makes it all worth it.

Now I'm not here as a shill or a fanboi for a particular distro, in fact at the age of 51, I find the term fanboi just a bit offensive but I will tell you what I have found to be successful. Early on, I used Kanotix for my demonstrations. Based on Knoppix, I had little to worry about when it came to hardware detection and I found that the debian-based distro was most stable. As well, the apt-get package system is the easiest for me to explain or teach. After six months I discovered that the package selection and grouping were confusing people. You know as well as I do that there are several redundant programs in most distros. I began looking for something simpler, thinking a mini-distro would work better. In that search I discovered PCLinuxOS.

Bingo!

My "job" became much easier with PCLOS. There are releases for ati or nvidia drivers, streaming video worked without installing or compiling anything and it looked better than any other distro release I had ever seen. Now the video card drivers are a big deal...not so much for Windows users, but for Linux users it is a minor miracle. Windows users EXPECT their 3d, all-in-one, do-everything-but-the-dishes video cards to work out of the box. Can you see your mom, dad, sister or whoever doing the kernel dance to install a video driver? That was a showstopper for me when trying to show off Linux. PCLOS took away that burden and let me concentrate on the positives. I am now able to show potential converts not only an amazing software choice, but a safe, secure means of operating their computers. However this is not about PCLOS, this is about Linux and where I think we need to go.

With 380-plus distros available, something is gonna give. There are those who think that the recent merger of Mandrake and Conectiva will be a major turning point in Linux development and marketing. Maybe it will. Some think that companies like Red Hat and Suse will survive in a capitalist market and the rest will die along the road. Maybe they will. One thing is certain...Until Linux simplifies system and software installation, its going to be an uphill fight. Whether you like it or not, Microsoft has set the standard for ease of use and convenience. Eric Raymond wrote an article titled "The Luxury of Ignorance", and it is my pleasure to provide you with a link to that work because he says so eloquently what I struggle to utter.
[HYPERLINK@www.catb.org]
Linux does not need to be as good as Microsoft Windows, it needs to be better, and it can be. Look at the technological advances Linux has made in 3 years. They have done in that time what it took Microsoft almost 15 to accomplish. I for one am excited about the future of Linux, but only if we as a community can come together and get this thing done. As it stands, we are a fragmented, quarrelsome family, but a family none the less. I do not have my tea leaves in front of me so I can not tell you how the evolution of Linux will boil down. I do know that this is a superior system on just about every level...we simply need to improve on one; The New User. Some have suggested that this will not happen until the "old school" developers go by the wayside...that those who worship at the CLI are holding us back. Maybe they are. You and I can help by encouraging our guru's to develop better and more effective gui's and documentation. My friends at PCLinuxOS have come a long way in getting this done. My sincere thanks to Texstar, Tom Kelly, the DevTeam and forum members of this fine project. You might want to bookmark [HYPERLINK@pclinuxonline.com.]

I predict PCLinuxOS will be awarded Distribution of the year in 2005.

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[Linux](#)

Links:

[1] http://www.tuxmachines.org/taxonomy/term/63