

Linux, Ready for Prime Time?

With all the hype on the Internet and in various computer magazines about Linux as an operating system alternative to Microsoft Windows, I decided to give it a try. I installed a distribution called Mint, which is supposed to be Linux for the everyday user. I loaded version 6 called *Felicia*, which is latest version. Linux Mint is an offshoot of a popular user friendly distribution called Ubuntu.

First, let me say, that upon first installation, I wasn't real impressed about all the fuss, but having tried it for a couple of months, I have changed my mind. I am suitably impressed. However, the question is "Is Linux ready for prime time?" That is the question the reader will have to decide after reading this article. Linux, in this instance, Mint, certainly has some advantages, but depending on what you want to do, it may not be for you.

First I have compiled a little table with the advantages and drawbacks that I have found so far:

Reasons for Switching to Linux	Reasons for not switching
Free (yes free!!) No licensing Fees	Too many different distributions which are not necessarily compatible and confusing
Very nice user interface	Software Drivers for older peripherals is limited
Easy to install*	Commercial software is limited to non-existent
Plenty of Free software	Software selection is limited in certain areas
Faster than XP or Vista	
Much more secure when browsing the Internet- to date, there are few known viruses targeting Linux	No phone customer or technical support. (but then, you have none with Microsoft either)
Free support forums that can answer most of your questions.	Software offered by one distribution of Linux may not be compatible with another distribution.
Free upgrades to latest version	
Can be used as a 'Portable' Operating System on a USB Drive	

Free-yes Mint & Ubuntu are a free operating systems. Not only are they free of monetary charges, they are also license/royalty free; they can be loaded on as many computers as you want. You can download them from their websites, www.linuxmint.com or www.ubuntu.com or, if you do not have high-speed or have bandwidth restrictions, you can order a cd for a nominal fee (\$2-\$10). I chose Linux Mint over Ubuntu because Mint comes better prepared to run mp3s and dvds right out of the box.

I placed an asterisk next to the Easy to install because it is easy to install on a clean system with no other operating system. However, if you want to load Mint on a computer with Windows and use both operating systems, then you do need some advanced knowledge. Having said that, the nice thing about Mint (Ubuntu) is that you don't have to install it on your computer to try it out. It will run off the install CD as a live installation so that you can try all its features before deciding if you would like to install it.

Running it off the CD does slow the system down considerably, but you can get a good 'feel' for its features and suitability. Mint (and Ubuntu) also comes with a Windows installation which allows you to install it under Windows, boot in either Windows or Mint, then uninstall it from Windows if you decide you no longer want it. (I also used Mint on my laptop with Vista Home Premium and everything went smoothly).

The first thing you are going to notice with Mint is the speed with which it boots. I have my version installed on an old Pent. III Dell computer with 320mb of RAM and a 450 mhz Intel processor. Linux Mint booted in 1/2 the time of XP. Your desktop is really nice and uncluttered. A tool bar at the bottom contains everything you need to work with. Really sharp and clean. Some of the desktop effects are really astounding, **if** you have the graphics card to support them. Mint is everything that Vista should have been, but isn't.

The installation immediately recognized my Ethernet connection and Hughes net Internet connection so all I had to do was click on the included Firefox web browser and I was on the Internet. Installation of my HP Color Laser jet 2600n on my network took a little longer, but once I gave it the right network information, Linux Mint had me printing. When I connected the 2600n through a direct connection, and used the Add Printer Wizard, Linux Mint recognized the printer right away.

Browsing the Internet is much more secure with Linux Mint because there are few known viruses, Trojans, or spyware that are targeting Linux. An easily installed firewall (Fire Starter) should suffice. I will be loading a free anti-virus program in the near future, just as a precaution for my network files. From my readings in the forums though, it does sound like Linux based systems are really safe from internet threats.

I disconnected my ethernet connection and plugged in a Trendnet USB wireless device into the old Pent III and tried to connect to my wireless network. Linux Mint didn't recognize the device, so I went online and the instructions were fairly simple to get the device connected, using a Windows driver and Mint's built in Windows Wireless Drivers utility. In about 10 minutes the Trendnet was up and working. Linux Mint recognized the built-in wireless connection on my Toshiba laptop immediately.

Speaking of Free software, everything you need for games, office work, home budgeting, Internet browsing, e-mail is included on the install CD and is free. You can also download more games, office software & utilities free of charge from the software on-line repository of Linux Mint. This is really easy to do using MintInstall from the tool bar-but to get these items, you need an active internet connection, preferably a broadband connection.

On the downside, and what keeps Linux from becoming more mainstream is that there are so many distributions available. Distributions arise because since Linux is open source, people are constantly modifying the core for their own particular use-hence software developed for Linux Mint may not run on a Red Hat distribution. This is why the software/hardware base is limited and manufacturers don't want to support Linux based operating systems. Although this is changing, there are just so many distributions that most would need a different driver! This is why Linux Mint does not support all printers, wireless network devices, sound cards, etc. I think that you will be safe with most popular, name-brand printers as Linux Mint does have a nice built in driver base, it is just not as extensive as Windows.

I have tried some of the free software. The office program Open Office (www.openoffice.org) is first rate. I have used the Windows version in place of Microsoft Office for the last few years. It loads and saves *.doc files easily and correctly, and has a Excel compatible spreadsheet, Power Point compatible presentation module, an excellent database and drawing programs. Firefox & Thunderbird Browsing

and e-mail clients are top notch, so for office work & Internet browsing, Linux Mint is excellent and certainly the price is right!

As an entertainment medium, it falls short. Although it comes with some nice basic games (solitaire, sudoku, tetris, etc), it really doesn't offer what I would call premium, graphics driven games. At this time I don't know of any vendors who are selling games for Linux Mint or other Linux distributions. A nice feature of Linux Mint over its cousin distributions, is it comes with software that plays commercial dvds and mp3s as well as other utilities, right out of the box .

So what is the final judgment by Rainy River Consulting?

For a small home or small business office just starting, consider Linux Mint. It will run like wildfire on an older machine with 256mg of Ram and a small 30 gb hard drive. The office software that comes with it is top notch and cheaper than MS Office and will serve you well. Some corporations have switched to Linux and/or Open Office, just because they are tired of paying licensing fees to Microsoft every few years to upgrade software and Operating Systems. In the long term, it was really cheaper to switch!

Linux Mint is really a good way for home users on a tight budget to get started in today's computer world. With Linux Mint or its smaller derivative Linux Mint-XCE , a home user can use an older used computer to enter into the computer age and still do home/office functions, play games, read/send e-mail, browse the Internet, all at very little or **no cost**. It would also be a good choice as a learning tool for youngsters or as an extra computer for the kids.

If, however, you are heavily invested and use a wide variety of Windows compatible software & hardware, or you are heavily into multimedia activities, you probably should not move over to a Linux based system at this time.

I personally like Linux Mint--a lot. However, I do website design, desktop publishing and multi-media productions and the alternatives in the open source market, are not to my liking or lacking entirely. So I have to keep Windows and all its miseries. However, I am going to keep Linux Mint on one of my desktops and play around with it some more. The more I use it, the more I like it and the more I realize its advantages. Even using the command line in the Linux Mint Terminal Utility (similar to the DOS command line) has definite advantages and allows more versatility in the OS, although, you really don't need to learn this unless you want to install some software not in the repository or a unusual hardware driver.

Last but not least, Linux Mint comes with a utility that allows you to install the complete operating system on a USB thumb drive (4g) so you can take the whole operating system and its software with you and use it on any computer that allows booting from a USB thumb drive.

Try the live CD, you just might like it and did I mention that its Free.

GWB
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