



## **Linux, growing pains and the coming of age**

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## Linux, growing pains and the coming of age

People who have been following the progress of Linux may remember the reports of the pain administrators would go through installing and configuring Linux. Linux was not for the faint of heart. The Linux administrator had to be at one with their hardware configuration and have a good understanding of the Linux kernel, startup process and file structure. For people who had graduated from the UNIX and/or Netware environment, there was a familiarity and comfort associated with working at command level. People graduating from the Microsoft and Macintosh arena may have struggled with the concept.

Knowing this system at such an intimate level and the stability associated with Linux made it an ideal candidate for the well-versed IT administrator looking to run applications like Apache web server and send mail SMTP e-mail server.

At this time, file and print sharing on Linux was a tricky business. There were several projects aimed at providing compatibility with Microsoft print and file sharing (SAMBAs GNU project), Novell print and file sharing (Caldera Linux distributions) and a set of tools for Apple print and file. Again the configuration of these systems was not for the easily deterred; Linux operators were busy telling the rest of the world that "real men work from the command line"

The same complexities could be attributed for database development. However, two candidates were on the GNU horizon; MySQL and PostgreSQL.

The Linux GNU projects FVWM and TWM made some attempts at providing a Graphical User Interface (GUI). While providing a few basic applications for the less experienced systems administrator and environments for some specialized GUI based applications, these GUI's fell a very long way short of the millions of dollars spent on Windows and Macintosh GUI's.

There was also the question of security and anti-virus. There were some very promising GNU projects aimed at security, but no real contenders for anti-virus.

Linux went through a few years of intense development, and slowly but surely started finding its way into corporations, running the corporate website and/or Intranet or acting as an e-mail gateway. There was however skepticism amongst IT analysts and IT consultants who told the Linux crowd "no one would take Linux the free operating system seriously" and "no one has ever been fired for buying IBM or Microsoft".

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On the other side of the fence were the die hard Linux administrators arguing "The Internet was a Linux/UNIX network that tolerated Microsoft, Novell and Macintosh" and than "95% of all e-mail transactions were performed by some flavour of Linux".

Novell started losing its market share due to some very poor marketing. Microsoft administrators were getting caught up with numerous security holes, endless performance issues and patches, and the Sun Microsystems were becoming outcompeted in its traditional market from a much cheaper alternative, Linux. Linux began finding its place into corporate server rooms and eventually system administrators openly admitted to using Linux. The buzz had started.

This progression coupled with several very good distributions, **Red Hat**, **SuSE**, **Caldera**, Debian and **Slackware**, and their associated documentation, training and certification were all preparing Linux for the main stream.

Companies such as Oracle and IBM decided to take the plunge and began providing support and main stream applications for Linux such as **Oracle** and **Lotus Dominos** and so, over a very short period of a year to a year and a half, everyone started taking note of Linux. More importantly CIOs and CFOs started to put Linux on the horizon as a positive strategy and a good long term investment.

Microsoft wised up to the versatility of Linux and produced a much more robust and stable platform with Windows 2000. However with the recent changes in licensing rules and a degree of ambiguity over their .net product, they left the floor wide open to Linux.

**Sun Microsystems** have changed their stance on Linux and are now shipping Linux for their hardware platforms in hope of winning back some of their lost business. However despite some very attractive hardware and some reasonably priced low end systems, it is doubtful that they will be able to compete with the Intel and Linux partnership. To this end they have started shipping Linux systems on Intel platforms.

The people at Macintosh have ported their OS over to a BSD Style (another Linux type alternative to UNIX), winning the admiration of their Linux counterparts and opening up some very interesting possibilities.

Security companies such as **Trip Wire** and **Trend Micro** have industry strength Security and anti-virus for the Linux platform, giving Linux some much needed credibility in this area. Linux is now the OS of choice behind many corporate firewalls and VPN's

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Owing to its versatility and the control over the kernel, Linux is also very big in the embedded OS industry. Appliances such as content filtering, VPN and firewalls can be found in abundance on the Internet, with Linux as their core OS.

Thanks to some good work by distributors such as Red Hat and SuSE, administration of Web services, print and file sharing and e-mail/groupware can be achieved through well-constructed interfaces, while still giving the die hard Linux administrator access to the command line.

All this maybe of interest to the IT administrators, but what about the end users, and the consumer market? Some very exciting projects have been brewing for a couple of years, which have made Linux ready and available as an alternative desktop.

The development of **KDE** and **GNOME** has given rise to a new sophisticated, feature rich Linux desktop. Applications can be found in abundance; namely **Open Office** (compatible with Microsoft office), **K-Office**, numerous development tools, Exchange compatible e-mail clients (**Ximan Evolution**), GIMP (powerful graphics manipulation), and the **Mozilla** browser. This, coupled with the fact that there is compatibility to existing Microsoft, Novell and Apple print and files sharing environments, makes Linux a good desktop candidate.

The people at **Lycoris** have produced the first real Linux alternative to Microsoft and the Macintosh. With a very simple installation routine, a very sharp desktop (based on the KDE desktop), is created. This is Linux's coming of age in the desktop arena. Lycoris has had excellent write ups in the Time magazine, and is now available to the general public at stores such as Wal-Mart.

For those needing to run windows-based applications in the Linux environment there is the **WINE** project, or the commercial development **CODEWEAVER**.

People and organizations seriously contemplating moving to a Linux platform should do so with considerable planning. Firstly start with a small test group and get feedback from the users. Then develop a migration strategy including a good level of training not only for the end user, but also the technical staff.

The Linux emblem is a penguin; when it arrived on the scene it was a youngster dwarfed by middle-aged operating systems. Now the Penguin has matured through adolescence and is rearing with confidence ready to take on the old men.

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