

linux - in search of the  
desktop

asa  
dotzler

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**linux not ready for  
the desktop**

f o u r   s u g g e s t i o n s   f o r  
w i n d o w s   u s e r s   w i n n i n g   o v e r

1. migration
2. stability
3. simplicity
4. comfort

feedback

my blog

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zdn et

nat torkington

b l o g

Over **300** comments

“you're an idiot.”

“ Well written Asa, I totally agree. Ubuntu Linux is going in that direction. ”

“ When linux becomes like windows it will be a sad day. ”

“ That's kinda funny, because I've always felt like Windows wasn't ready for the desktop... ”

“ Bravo. Finally a voice of reason in the world of geekdom! ”

“ Did Microsoft start sponsoring Mozilla or something? Because this is one of the biggest pieces of FUD I have seen in a long time. ”

“ Don't like it? OK, don't use it. Problem solved. ”

“ I wish everybody would drop the idea that Linux needs widespread desktop acceptance. ”

- you suck
- windows sucks
- firefox sucks
- you probably haven't used linux
- we don't need more users
- os x didn't need any of this
- autopackage fixes it
- lsb fixes it
- yum fixes it
- kde fixes it
- the real problem is drivers
- the real problem is oems
- the real problem is applications

# zdney

“Linux on the desktop is still a toy operating system for tinkerers.”

“Linux is not only tricky, but has the perception of being difficult (which is possibly the most damaging element).”

“linux have been ready for the desktop atleast one year.”

“Linux isn't quite there yet, but it's damn close.”

“LINUX is a very capable product with a very limited audience unless developers take heed.”

“If youre experienced desktop user ... then you can easily migrate (pick Gentoo linux)”

“You stick to Windows, it obviously is better suited to you - we stick to Linux, it's better suited to us.”

nat torkington

Hi, Asa. Would you be interested in updating your essay based on the comments you've received and giving it as a 30m keynote at OSCON on August 5th?

Nat Torkington  
OSCON Program Chair

# migration

The first point I covered in the original article was migration. I said "For 'Regular People' to adopt Linux (which usually means leaving Windows) Linux is going to need a serious migration plan. It will need to install on machines next to Windows, leaving that completely intact and easy to return to, and carry over all or nearly all of the user's data and settings."

- majority of potential users are on windows - don't threaten that!
- install next to, not on top of windows
- migrate as much as possible
  - Fonts
  - Printers
  - Timezone
  - desktop shortcuts
  - desktop wallpaper
  - Language
  - Files
  - Bookmarks
  - Cookies
  - History
  - Passwords
  - Email
  - Contacts
  - recently accessed file lists in apps
  - And more

# stability

In my original article about Linux on the desktop, the second major point I brought was API stability and an easy and uniform software installation story. I said, "The second problem that blocks massive Linux Desktop growth is stability. I don't mean the not crashing kind of stability, I'm talking about a stable API that doesn't require the user jump through hoops when they want to download a new application from download.com."

There are two basic methods of installing software on Linux, using the package system from your distribution, or downloading source and compiling.

- compiling is right out
- package repositories are too limited
- don't cut out the software vendor
- (stop breaking the application developers)
- cross-distro compatibility is a must

How do we make it better? Backward compatibility must be a real priority. This means doing whatever it takes to avoid breaking compatibility when revving libraries and carrying around specific compatibility libraries when compatibility has to be broken. Second, there needs to be a lot more cross-distro compatibility or a lot fewer distros. This will make it much easier for software vendors to target the Linux platform and will make it much easier for Regular People to "shop around" for software.

# simplicity

I posted, as part of my original article, that the third major problem hindering Linux adoption on the desktop was its lack of simplicity. I said

"Just because you can include a feature doesn't mean that you should. Just because you can provide a user preference doesn't mean you should."

# You and I are not Regular People and we don't interact with computers like Regular People. Complexity and choice frighten Regular People

- too many distro choices.
- too many "desktop" choices and other install time questions
- too many applications at the top
- applications have too many settings
- clipboard madness
- (open terminal still at the top of the desktop context menu!)

So how does Linux improve here. First, the user shouldn't have to answer more than a few basic questions to get through an install. Second, just because Linux can offer a feature or a service or a config option doesn't mean it deserves a position on the main menus. The things that most people don't need most of the time shouldn't be mingling on the menus with the things that most people need most of the time. Third, application developers need to make some of the hard choices and stop falling back on the "make it a user option" solution that seems to be all too popular in most software these days.

comfort

In my original article, I said that "Linux must feel comfortable to Windows users. Most people using computers today have been at it for a while now and they've been at it on Windows. Don't mess with their basic understanding of how things work."

- keyboard shortcuts
- button positions
- spatial nautilus?
- moving the panel to the top

How does Linux improve here? The challenge is to find those areas where it's valuable to change and make the transition as easy as possible (through good documentation, intuitive or easily learned UI, etc.) and to find those areas where change doesn't offer enough benefit and make those areas as comfortable as possible. It is not necessary to be a clone, but it's foolish to deviate from what Regular People expect when the value of that deviation isn't extremely high.

# Wrapping up

One of the common responses to my articles about Linux and the desktop has been that I'm wrong to want "Regular People" to move to Linux. The sentiment that Linux shouldn't become a desktop for Regular People really surprised me.

## Why do I want more Regular People on Linux

1. I care about Regular People
2. I care about software choice
3. I care about Linux

**Regular People are hurting.** Computers (by this I mean the Windows desktop) are increasingly painful because

1. cost
2. malware

When expensive upgrading is the only path to improved features, users suffer.

Malware - viruses, trojans, adware, spyware, and hidden process overload are driving people away from the benefits of computing and especially the web.

Software choice is important to all of us. Duh.

I want a choice and I look forward to the innovation and improvements across the industry as competition forces change.

I want a diverse ecosystem of software, open source and closed, that will help to defend against catastrophic failures that hit proprietary monopoly software with such frequency lately.

I believe in the open source model and would like to see more people using open source software.

# I like Linux and I care about Linux success

It's a programmer's friend. When I joined the Mozilla project I was using Windows and Mac and getting set up to build Mozilla on Windows or Mac was a total pain in the ass. It took me the better part of an afternoon every time I set up a new development environment on Windows. On Linux it takes me about 45 seconds. Linux will and should continue to be a developer's platform.

Linux is damn stable and I can't think of a time when I thought "I'll reboot and see if that fixes it." With Windows (and yes, Mac too) I find myself rebooting all of the time.

I like the user/security model that can help keep Regular People from screwing up their system too bad.

I like a lot of the people working on various pieces of Linux.

Final note:

I know that there has been and continues to be a lot of work in these areas. I certainly don't mean to discount that - just the opposite, I thank all of you working on applications, tools, and distributions for Regular People.

# Conclusion and Questions

(or “let the rotten vegetable throwing begin”)

Discussion is good.

I’m just a guy with a blog.

So what do you all think?