A dozen reasons to why Linux won't beat Windows

A worm's-eye view on desktop alternatives

Johnny Heikell | March 2014

Having used Lotus for five years, MS Office/Windows for over twenty years, and LibreOffice/Linux for thirty months, I decided to put down my views on the Linux vs. Windows competition in the desktop market place. Although I have a deep respect for Linux and the FOSS community in general, I dare say that there are major obstacles to overcome before Linux can become a serious alternative in desktops. The Snowden revelations on government spying could benefit Linux and the FOSS community, but I prefer not to discuss that subject.

1. Lack of marketing

Marketing – whether we love it or hate it – drives the behavior of people who have to select between options in a competitive world. Bill Gates became a multibillionaire by a smart marketing strategy that made people ready to, or forced them to, pay for a continuous flow of new versions. The rise of Apple to the highest valued company in the US was before all based on smart marketing, charismatic appearance of Steve Jobs, and a favorable press coverage.

How much do Linux distros spend on product promotion? I have no facts to go by, but I suspect that the answer is close to zero (I do not count the $2B that IBM is spending on promoting Linux for other purposes). So how do common folks learn about Linux? In most cases by chance through other people. They hear comments like "Linux is only for nerds," "not compatible with MS Office," and "the university tried Linux years ago but gave up." Then who or what brings the good news, the fact that Linux works and is a real alternative – be it a bit rough in the edges? To the average desktop user the source of such information is an occasional article in a newspaper or journal, or a chance web site.

A whisper in a tornado.

2. Stressful ownership

Go to a shop to buy a computer and what are you offered? Rows of desktops with preinstalled Windows and a 60-day trial version of an anti-malware program and other commercial bloatware. You only need to add a box of DVD-Rs to burn recovery disks and you are ready to go. The

holy alliance between Microsoft and desktop manufacturers has cleaned the shelves of competition – save for the small Apple bite – while giving the customer an easy start to computer ownership.

What does Linux offer in the same situation? Assume you can buy a computer void of Windows (or have an old XP laying in a corner). You immediately run into a long list of questions: Is the computer fully Linux compatible? Are your peripheral equipment compatible with Linux? Which Linux distro should you choose? How do you download and burn a live CD (not to speak of a bootable thumb drive)? How do you partition the hard drive and install the program? How do you install programs that cannot be found in the distro repository? etc., etc. Linux may come for free, but it comes with a lot of uncertainties and requirements on the user. And frankly, how many Windows owners even understand to ask questions like these?

Why the worry when there are alternatives?

3. Quarreling princes

Russian politics is dominated by Czar Putin and his Russian Unity party. The weak opposition is split between a number of quarreling parties that cannot agree on compromises that would make them stronger and a real alternative to the czar.

The Russian reality repeats in the Windows vs. Linux setting. Czar Gates and his Microsoft totally dominate the desktop market, home and enterprise alike. The minimal market share of Linux is split between numerous distros (distrowatch.com lists the popularity of the top 100, I understand there could be some 600 in all), desktop environments, apps, etc., whose developers refuse to unite to face the czar. Although it is not an open battle, the inability to form a strong Linux front is all too apparent.

Rather divided fall than united stand.

4. Linux is not Windows

"Linux is not Windows," a well-known blog contribution from 2006,[1] claims that Linux cannot be like Windows if it wants to develop and become better. I dare question the wisdom of that statement because differences raise obstacles for people who are used to Windows and who consider it good enough to pay for. It is not desire for superior performance that make people abandon XP for later Windows versions. Why skip something that is good enough unless your self-esteem has hit the bottom of the well and you must drag it up with the latest IT gadgets?

Is it even realistic to assume that the Linux community can come up with a product so superior to Windows that it motivates people to go through the trouble of learning a new operating system and new application programs? It is easy to guess that my answer to the question is: NO!

Good enough is good enough.

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1   http://linux.oneandoneis2.org/LNW.htm

5. Tinkerers vs. commoners

Linus said the following about desktops in an interview:[2] "People like using computers because it makes their work easier, but at the same time they are not really interested in the computer itself. They are not like me. I like using a computer because it is a big toy I can do things with."

Linus understands it, but hard-line geeks do not understand that the majority of people use computers for productive work, and to whom the tool is irrelevant providing it is efficient in its job. If you buy a hammer, do you care about how it was forged, how the handle was designed, which type of painting it has, etc.? Quite obviously not, you only want a hammer that lasts and is good at driving in nails with. But hardline geeks just want to tinker with the tool and scorn those who build a house.

A rift as wide as the Atlantic.

6. Too many choices

In a blog on desktop design Allen Boyles claims:[3] "...we Linux users may have flame wars over which DE is better (even Linus does that), but in the end it's what we want. We want to have choice." In a way I understand Allen, because I traded Ubuntu for Zorin since I disliked Unity. But that does not mean there must be a warehouse full of DEs – Windows is successful even if it offers just one alternative. It is geeks who like to play with one toy after another, and who demand the multitude of alternatives, we basic computer users do not do that.

For basic desktop users, a nice thing with Windows has been continuity. Be it 95, 98, 2000, ME, XP, Vista, or 7, the desktop environment has not changed much and one quickly feels at home with a new version. No big changes that lead to costly retraining for the new tool (OK, the change came with Windows 8 and it was no big success). Not so with Linux. Here the rule is a new version every sixth month. A version that has to be installed and endlessly debated.

Change for change's sake.

7. Free but not gratis

We often hear that Linux comes for free. No more costly license fees to Microsoft or Apple or for scores of application programs. That is true, but the cost of Linux "ownership" is certainly not zero. If it would be – in the ideal world – we would only need to get hold of a computer with an installed Linux distro and never have to worry about anything any more. No training would be needed, no IT support personnel, no worries with upgrades and installations, no more security concerns, etc.

But that Shangri La is not the here. Being a Linux owner means the same degree of ownership worries and costs as with Windows – perhaps more. Some may protest that with Linux one has a lot less viruses. That is true, but the risk is not zero and it must be addressed (mainly good luck and a minimal market share have saved Linux thus far). Others may say that

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2   http://www.muktware.com/news/2862
3   http://www.osnews.com/story/25303/ Simplicity_vs_Customizability_in_Desktop_Design

defragmenting is not needed with Linux. That is also true, but Windows defragments automatically these days. Linux requires before all time from its owner.

And time is money.

8. The horrendous terminal

"Warum etwas einfach machen, wenn es auch kompliziert geht?" ("Why make it simple when it can be complicated?") is the best description of the philosophy behind the terminal. GUIs were introduced with the Xerox Alto personal computer in 1973 and they later made Apple a success story (even if Apple Lisa a failed due to greed on Steve's part). So why does Linux retain the command line monster in it's terminal 40 years later? Linux may be a Unix clone, but some improvements over the original should have been introduced by now.

Geeks may love the terminal, but they are out of their collective mind if they ask the grandma who wants to download her grandson's surfing video from YouTube to type a command like

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grandma@computer:~/Downloads$ ./youtube-dl http://www.youtube.com/
watch?v=dyBzYCEyUlE&feature=topvideos_sports
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Downloading and installing, to mention one example, should be smooth processes that only ask for two clicks on the mouse: "download" and "install" – interrupted only by a virus scan.

Just in case somebody wants to remind me that Windows does have a command terminal: Yes, I am aware of it but have not needed it after Windows copied Apple's DE ideas back in the early 90s.

That was Linux, now back to knitting.

9. Lack of continuity

Ubuntu did groundbreaking work in bringing Linux closer to basic users, but with Unity it turned its back on us. As a result Linux users are shifting from Ubuntu to distros with more traditional DEs like KDE and MATE. Canonical's Unity gambling on benefits that are too obscure to understand is not paying off. Users have voted with their feet and moved to Mint.

Continuity means user friendliness, higher productivity, and lower ownership costs. It does not exclude changes that improve those attributes, but it certainly means that changes for change's sake should be done in a different forum and addressing those who like to play with the tool. When a mature incremental solution is found it can be given to productive people.

But Zorin gives that good old Windows feeling.

10. Bugs & other issues

Back in the 90s Windows was known for its frequent crashes. Not so any more, it looks like this questionable honor has shifted to Linux. I cannot say how many lockups and crashes I have experienced with Ubuntu (and its Zorin fork): "Sorry, Ubuntu/Zorin has experienced an internal error...." The rate must be an order of magnitude higher than for Windows 7. Firefox seems to be a particular culprit and has forced me to use Chrome more than I like to. For some reason Firefox works much better on Windows.

Those who refurbish their old Windows PC with a brand new Linux distro may be up for an unpleasant surprise when everything does not run as expected. Compatibility issues with old CD/DVD drives is a common problem and hoped-for savings with Linux go down the drain if one buys a new CD/DVD drive.

Of course, the geek may ask me if I have done this, or that, or still something else to install, configure, customize or whatever to improve the situation. My answer is no, I am a basic computer user who just wants a tool to use, not to play with. Why do you ask me to spend my retirement years surfing for information on Linux? Monthly updates should be enough.

I don't try to fix the electronics of my car either.

11. Lack & cost of business software

Next month Microsoft will stop supporting XP. There are still millions of XP desktops out there and the door is still partly open for alternative solutions. The question is, who will grab this market? The hardware may still be useable, but security concerns and dwindling support for XP makes it obsolete. Is Linux been up to the challenge?

For reasons mentioned above, millions of us senior citizens and other basic home users will not shift from Bill to Linus (and besides, how many XP users have heard of Zorin and its Windows-like DE?). So what about enterprise users like self-employed plumbers, doctors, farmers, lawyers, shopkeepers, etc., who need user-friendly programs for bookkeeping, billing, customer records, inventories, salary records, production, and so on. Are there Linux-based solutions to those needs? I have not investigating it, but suspect that off-the-shelf solutions are limited; particularly if we consider that professional application programs should be available in a multitude of languages, and tailored to national regulations, in order to satisfy a global demand. And who can afford custom-designed software?

Users may not be geeks but they are not stupid, you know.

12. Naïve sense of security

The Linux community constantly touts about the inherent security of Linux; a proof is the low number of Linux-specific viruses. Being a combined Windows/Linux user I am at unease with this flamboyant

approach to security. As I claimed earlier, it is mainly good luck and a minimal market share in desktops that have saved Linux thus far. As soon as criminals and secretive government agencies see an incentive in focusing resources of their murky trade on Linux, they will do so – and then its hidden weaknesses will become apparent. We can see that with Android, the by far most popular Linux-based OS.

And don't forget that laziness was the undoing of "Sabu" of LulzSec and laziness will make people surf the internet as Linux superusers, and click on the wrong links. Social engineering has emptied many bank accounts and Linux will not change that – besides, the money has mostly vanished over Linux-powered servers.

The memory of Staog, Bliss, BadBunny, and more lives on.

Conclusion

The outlook for Linux in desktops is either good or bad, it depends on what you are asking for. Most likely it will remain in the fringe, the way it is now. Geeks having fun developing software they can share with equals. They are happy with their toy.

One of the earlier mentioned blogs urges us to ask: "Why should Linux want me?" My answer is: of course Linux wants basic users like me. We come by the millions and making us shift from Bill to Linus would make Linux a success story in the desktop market. But a lot would have to change for that to happen. Particularly the mindset of the Linux community must change: The community would have to unite and form a single real alternative to Windows and MS Office – to mature past the "it's my way or no way"-attitude. It would have to shift its focus from geek-mindedness to user-mindedness. It would have to suppress its taste for experimenting to giving users a feeling of solid continuity. It would have to aim for a market share that is big enough for support activities to bring satisfactory revenues, while the basic FOSS product is given away for free. And finally, it must find means by which to bring out the good news to basic computer users who may not even have heard the name Linux.

No wonder Bill said Linus isn't a competitor.

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