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# What's a GNU/Linux distribution?

## Some tips for beginners

By Matt Barton

By now, almost everyone who has a computer has heard about something called “Linux”. Usually, what they hear goes something like this—“Well, Linux is free, but it’s very difficult to use. Don’t try it unless you’re a computer expert”. There is also generally talk about how “Linux” is incompatible with equipment like digital cameras, printers, and games. In short, “Linux” is generally thought to be a free but experts-only operating system. Fortunately for those of us who aren’t computer experts, almost all of these “facts” about “Linux” are completely wrong.

## Free as in what?

First, I’ll talk about the “free” part. You may have wondered why I’ve been putting quotation marks around the word “Linux”. The reason is that folks working on this operating system have a different idea about how they should be rewarded for their work. It’s hard work making a program as complicated as an operating system, and a great many talented people have put years of their lives into building, refining, and expanding this code. One of these individuals was Linus Torvalds, who created a kernel named *Linux*. A kernel is what helps your computer’s hardware (hard drives, motherboards, memory, and so on) communicate with your software (word processors, spreadsheets, and games). Without a kernel, your computer and all of your software would just be a pile of junk. However, a kernel by itself isn’t very useful, either. What Linus and other folks were able to do with the Linux kernel was combine it with a bunch of other very useful free software created for a planned operating system called *GNU* (Gnu’s Not Unix). In short, what people generally mean by the word “Linux” is Linus’ kernel combined with all of the GNU programs, which together function as an operating system. Now, for the same reason that Torvalds likes people to know the role he played in creating his kernel, Richard Stallman and all the GNU folks don’t want people to forget their work. After all, free software programmers, unlike their Microsoft counterparts, don’t get paid when people buy their code. Instead, they make money by trading their skills. In short, if people use “Linux” and really enjoy it and find it useful, they might decide to hire the programmers who worked on it to help them develop new applications. For this reason, many of us insist on calling this operating system “GNU/Linux” rather than just “Linux”, because leaving off the “GNU” is, in effect, ripping off the people who gave us all this great software. In short, for the same reason that Microsoft doesn’t like it when you copy their software without paying for it, free software advocates don’t like it when you refuse to “pay” the GNU folks by refusing to acknowledge their hard work with three letters and a slash!

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Now, there’s more to this “free” concept than just not having to pay anything. If a piece of software is legal to copy without having to pay anyone, we call it “zero cost”. If you see a box of mints at your favorite restaurant, and a little sign beside them reads, “Free, Take One”, that’s zero cost. On the other hand, if you hear someone saying things you disagree with, but still respect his freedom of speech, then you’re closer to what the “free” in “free software” is all about. To make a long story short, a piece of “free software” has a built-in “Bill of Rights” that gives the folks who use the program a lot more rights than they’d ever get from a proprietary

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program—and, by “proprietary”, I mean software that comes with a whole bunch of stipulations about how it can legally be used. In a great many cases (such as Microsoft *Windows*), one of these stipulations is that people who buy the software can't make copies for their friends and neighbors. Those friends and neighbors will have to buy their own copies from Microsoft. However, while there are a whole host of other rules and restrictions, the main point to keep in mind is that free software gives more power to the user of the software, whereas proprietary software gives more power to the maker or copyright holder of the software. On the other hand, not all “free software” is available for zero cost. You might very well find a free software developer selling all sorts of free software. If this sounds like a contradiction in terms, just remember that “free speech” doesn't mean that you can walk into Barnes & Noble and take whatever books and magazines you want without paying for them. What it does mean is that the government can't tell Barnes & Noble which books they can and can't sell, or publishers which books they can or can't publish.

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## GNU/Linux for ordinary folks

Okay, so I've talked a bit about one of the misconceptions. The other misconception that we should talk about is the one about GNU/Linux being suitable only for computer experts. This may have been true a few years ago, but now it's just as easy to run GNU/Linux on your computer as it is to run Microsoft *Windows* or Apple's *Mac OS X*. Of course, if you stop and think about it, neither of these proprietary operating systems are necessarily easy to install, either. Many of us just use the operating system (or, OS) that came with our computers—the ones that were pre-installed by companies like Gateway, Dell, or Apple. If you're happy with your OS, you may feel little desire to try something else. On the other hand, if you're tired of having to pay for upgrades, need to install an OS on a new computer, or are just fed up with “DRM” and all the user-unfriendly licensing agreements that go with proprietary software—well, you're a great candidate for GNU/Linux.

**There are many more people just like you who would be running GNU/Linux on their computers instead of Microsoft `_Windows_` if they just knew about these “easy-bake” distros**

Now, when I said that GNU/Linux was as easy as a proprietary OS, I had in mind one of a few “distros” intended to be easy for non-computer experts to install and operate. No doubt, there are many more people just like you who would be running GNU/Linux on their computers instead of Microsoft *Windows* if they just knew about these “easy-bake” distros. First, let me tell you what I mean by “distro”.

The word “distro” is short for “distribution”, which, more or less, means the particular package of software you get from a particular vendor or company. Although all GNU/Linux distros include the kernel and a few important programs, others are tailored to meet the needs of different groups. Obviously, someone installing GNU/Linux to use on a powerful server has different needs than someone who just wants to surf the net, play games, use a word processor, and so on. In short, there are distros that are definitely more suited to experts—*Debian*, for instance—but there are plenty of others that are excellent for ordinary folks. The most popular of these easy-bake distros are *Ubuntu*, *SimplyMEPIS*, and *Xandros*. Anyone who has ever successfully installed a new program on their computer can install these distros. Furthermore, anyone who is comfortable using *Windows* or a *Macintosh* will be right at home.

## Ubuntu

Of these three, *Ubuntu* is the most popular at the time of writing. The word “Ubuntu” is an African term meaning “humanity to others”, and that's exactly what the folks behind this distro are all about. Essentially,

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with Ubuntu you get everything you'll probably ever need to run on your computer with one simple download (or CD). The installer is just as easy to use as any "wizard" you'll find on *Windows*, and you'll soon have a free OS and a whole host of very useful programs such as Sun's *OpenOffice* suite, which includes a word processor, spreadsheet, database, and presentation slide-show maker. Also, *Ubuntu* has an automatic update system just like Microsoft's. Every so often you'll be notified that a new update is available for your computer. With just a few clicks, you're good to go with the latest patches and fixes. What could be easier? Furthermore, *Ubuntu* is a very colorful and stylish interface with a charming personality. Read up on Ubuntu at the [official web site](#) and see for yourself!

## SimplyMEPIS

*SimplyMEPIS* is another distro that makes it hard to mess up. One of the best things about this distro is that you can try it out before actually installing it to your machine. That way, if you don't like what you see, no problem—just take out the CD and go back to business as usual. *SimplyMEPIS* is managed by a smaller team than *Ubuntu*, but they're very committed to offering a stable and "no frills" OS that is easy as possible for new users to operate. Furthermore, if you have lots of devices connected to your computer (cameras, scanners, external drives, etc.), then you'll find that this distro allows you to use them without any trouble. If your main concern is finding an OS that won't have you bent over a manual or searching the net for hints on how to get something done, then you ought to give *SimplyMEPIS* a chance to impress you. Check out the [website](#) and see what this distro has to offer.

## Xandros Desktop

If you've been using *Windows XP* for a while and don't care to have to learn a bunch of new tricks, then you'll probably find *Xandros Desktop* the easiest way to slip into GNU/Linux. This distro is aimed at both businesses and regular users, and is available in both zero cost and premium versions. However, *Xandros* is also the least free distro, with certain stipulations. You aren't allowed to legally install the software however you please, but only as the Xandros Corporation permits. This restriction is what Xandros hopes will keep people buying their premium version. The zero-cost version, called *Xandros Open Circulation Edition*, is limited to non-commercial use, which means anyone who isn't using the computer as part of a business. To put it simply, although the bulk of software included with the *Xandros Desktop* distro is free software, there are also several key non-free (proprietary) programs included in the mix. For this reason, I wouldn't advise trying this distro unless you've tried the others and just aren't satisfied. Compared to purchasing *Windows*, *Xandros* is much cheaper (only \$40 for the basic and \$75 for premium editions), and there's no arguing with the simplicity and sleekness of the interface. To learn more about *Xandros Desktop*, visit their [product homepage](#).

**One thing is for sure: You no longer have to be a "computer geek" to run GNU/Linux on your home computer**

## What now?

One thing is for sure: You no longer have to be a "computer geek" to run GNU/Linux on your home computer. With *Ubuntu*, *SimplyMEPIS*, or *Xandros Desktop*, you can be up and running a great operating system with no fuss. Furthermore, if you choose *Ubuntu* or *SimplyMEPIS*, you will have entered the world of free software, which is far more democratic and user-friendly than any proprietary OS. Not only will you save big money on software, you'll also have more freedoms to use the software the way you want to, including making copies for your neighbors. Finally, you don't have to take a big risk with any of these products. With the "Live CD" option, you don't have to install anything on your hard drive until you've had a chance to give

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the OS a thorough test and made 100% sure it meets your expectations.

There was a point when installing GNU/Linux was a major step—a step over a cliff for most of us ordinary folks. You needed a heap of technical knowledge and expertise to install and operate this OS. Nowadays, this isn't the case. Anyone with even the most basic skills can make the switch to GNU/Linux. It's easy, inexpensive, and the best thing you could do for the future of software. Don't let the nay-sayers, ignoramuses, or wily salesmen con you into parting with your hard earned money to buy software that dictates how you should use it! Use your common sense and give one of these distros a try—see for yourself what the free OS has to offer.

### Biography

[Matt Barton](#) (/user/29" title="View user profile.): Matt Barton is an English professor at St. Cloud State University in Minnesota. He is an advocate of free software, wikis, and the Creative Commons. He also studies and writes about videogames and computing history. Matt also has blogs at [Armchair Arcade](http://armchairarcade.com/neo/blog/4) (<http://armchairarcade.com/neo/blog/4>), [Gameology](http://www.gameology.org/) (<http://www.gameology.org/>), and [Kairosnews](http://kairosnews.org/user/195) (<http://kairosnews.org/user/195>).

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