

# Ubuntu - Outside the Sandbox

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I've used [[Ubuntu Linux]] now for the better part of a year; there have been some stumbles along the way, but for the most part, I'm sold. I find myself having to do a bit more maintenance than I would with Windows, but I also like the flexibility that it affords me, along with knowing that I'm not being forced into using software in ways I don't want to (DRM), and not having to pay multiple hundreds of dollars to use it. That said, I am not the average computer user. I am a power-user+. I boot three different OS's ([[Windows XP]], [[MacOS X]], Ubuntu 7.10). The first thing I did when I installed Ubuntu 6.10 was to figure how to get Beryl (now [[Compiz-Fusion]]) and [[Avant Window Navigator]] installed. I've destroyed and re-installed OS's more times than I care to remember. Basically, when and if there is a problem, I will figure it out.

But I'm not the average user. The average user will take their computer to [[Best Buy]] when they get spyware, who will then proceed to format their computer. At best, they will have a relative that knows something about computers who will fix it. These people cannot fix the problems they run into on their own. Ideally, they would never run into problems, but unfortunately, that's just not the reality of the situation. My Dad is an average computer user. He doesn't crave learning how to push the operating system until it breaks. He wants to browse the Web. He wants to listen to music. He writes e-mails. Occasionally he watches some [[YouTube]] videos, and this is what 90% of home computer users do. With those basic tasks, does it really matter what OS you use? You can do all of those things on Windows, MacOS, and Linux. The presentation may vary to certain degrees, but for the most part, these are pretty basic tasks. I was interested in finding out first-hand if that was indeed true. I asked my Dad if he would mind if I swapped his [[Dell]] computer with Windows XP out for a computer with Ubuntu Linux on it. He agreed, and I did just that. I installed the OS (which I would do no matter if it was Windows or Linux), and set the computer up for him. I installed all of the software I thought he would need, make the requisite shortcuts, etc. Again, these are all things that I would do regardless of what operating system he is using. I had him answer a few questions, which I will post at the end (being an average computer user, who sees the computer as a tool, and not a passion, his answers were fairly concise and to the point). From what I talked to him about during the course of the week that he used it, my impression was that he was still able to accomplish all of his everyday tasks. At some point, the display messed up (I never saw it, but he described it as the screen being squished), but fixed itself after a restart (and then broke later, and fixed itself again). These are the types of nitzy little problems that just can't happen in Linux if the hope is that average computer users will be able to use the system. I know that this is not the Linux community's fault (it is the hardware manufacturers not releasing specs to build open drivers that work), but none the less, it is an impediment. Other than that, everything worked fine. Here are the questions I asked him to answer followed immediately afterwards with his response:

Question One: Overall, did you enjoy using Ubuntu Linux?  
 "Yes."  
 Question Two: What did you like most about using Ubuntu Linux?  
 "I didn't really find it to be any different than using Windows."  
 Question Three: What did you like least about using Ubuntu?  
 "At times, I found it a bit slow to boot up." (Note: this computer is slightly slower than the Dell with Windows XP, and also has Compiz-Fusion effects and AWN enabled at boot, so that could be a factor)  
 Question Four: Did you have any problems occur while using Ubuntu?  
 "I wouldn't say that I had any more or less problems than when using Windows." (Note: he left out the display problem, but I know that was an issue because he brought it up a few times)  
 Question Five: What would you change about Ubuntu, so that it would provide you with a better experience?  
 "I can't really think of anything that I would change."  
 Question Six: Upon your initial use of Ubuntu, do you feel there was much of a learning curve?  
 "I was able to start using it right away. I used it for my online banking, as well as checking my investments online without any problems."  
 Question Seven: Would you consider using Ubuntu as a replacement to Windows?  
 "I'm not sure. I would need to use it a bit more, probably."

So those are the answers to the questions I asked. What I draw from that, is that basically, he doesn't really notice much of a difference. I know that most people reading this article can instantly notice the difference between using MacOS X, or Ubuntu, or Windows XP, but the reality of the situation is that most people just notice the "start menu" has moved, but other than that, the difference doesn't really affect them. They don't get into the registry, or do a lot of file navigation, etc. Everything that they do is at application level, and as long as that is what they expect, then they don't notice much of a difference. With that in mind, I think that desktop Linux (at least Ubuntu, the distro I have the most experience with) is on a good track. Applications like (especially) [[Firefox]] and (slightly less) [[OpenOffice]] have really helped the situation, because they have forced a standard at the application level, which lets the average user walk from system to system without much interruption. I guess my two recommendations for the community, after conducting this small test, would be: 1. Put LARGE amounts of effort into making open community software that can be a drop-in replacement to the normal software that Windows users use. Firefox is of course the glowing example here because it is so good that it is actually starting to remove Internet Explorer's dominance from the market. Average users that use Firefox on Windows are right at home on Linux with it. This needs to happen everywhere, including the office suites, media players, etc. 2. Hardware support. QUALITY hardware support. Little display problems like what happened in this example simply CANNOT happen. Average users don't know how to fix this. Again, I know not having open hardware specs makes this very hard, but the community needs to keep driving and driving this issue. Large corporations like Dell and HP including Linux, and large hardware developers like [[Intel]] and [[AMD]] opening specs, has really helped this issue (just five years ago, Linux was UNUSABLE for desktop users because of all the inherent problems here). This has always been a hard issue for Linux, but I think driving this home, year after year after year has really started to gain momentum. Now is not the time to rest, now is the time to give the final push. In summary, like most people generally say at this point, I think Linux (in this case, the Ubuntu variety) \*CAN\* be ready for

the average desktop computer user. That might also include having someone that can support them, when the occasional issue arises though. Hopefully, if more software is developed and refined to the point where it is a drop-in replacement, more users will be able to transition over. As more users come, Dell and HP (and others) sell more computers with Linux, and they will only use hardware that is known to work well enough that they can support it, which should force hardware developers to open up the necessary specs for their hardware, so that hopefully proper drivers can be written. Linux is at a crossroads right now, and it is up to the community to collectively decide what to do at this point. Hopefully, there is enough energy left out there to get a few more quality applications polished up, and in a few years, I think that measuring user-base in the double-digits would certainly not be a wild and fictional scenario.