

Replacing Windows with Linux

Working with a neighbour's XP machine this week trying to sort out the endless uninvited pop-ups, strange freezes and disappearing devices that seem to define the Windows world, reminded me how nice it is to see that Linux is becoming respectable at last. Although I am a computer scientist and therefore in possession of a complete set of nerd genes, it was with some trepidation that we first looked at Linux five years ago as a viable alternative for MS who were already driving my company witless with indifferent quality and depressingly restrictive practices. Worst of all for someone who basically writes for a living, frequent changes of application file format meant that if I didn't keep up I couldn't read my colleague's documents and if I did keep up, my older writing fell off the end and become unreadable because of dwindling support in the 'newest' products. Clearly this couldn't continue.

However, changing operating system is not a step to be taken lightly so I started experimenting dual-booting a laptop in 1996. Linux even then was astonishingly reliable, (about 1000 times more reliable than its Windows 95 Siamese twin). Unfortunately, applications were non-existent for other than program development so we switched to Linux for that and kept Windows machines for office kind of things. In 1999, I decided that Star Office was good enough to replace our writing, spreadsheet and other needs so we took the plunge. It was a little premature but we battled along. Today we have three main servers all running different versions of the Linux kernel accumulating more than 12 server years with no OS failures. The servers use Samba to network flawlessly with a couple of Windows machines we use for software testing and have required almost no maintenance.

The applications have also improved. We use KDE as the main environment and the diary handling, mailers and office software with Open Office are perfectly acceptable. Open Office can handle just about all MS documents we get sent but, most importantly, the file formats are open source so we can't lose access to valuable writing or data assets in the future. Web handling through PHP and MySQL is extremely sophisticated allowing us to integrate our software processes tightly with our business processes, an essential element of the higher levels of the CMM software process model. We have automatic scripts of just a few lines which mirror disc volumes round the network making backup almost invisible and we can now develop our own products entirely under Linux and simply port the results for our Windows customers, a matter of a half day's work because all of our regression tests are written in portable scripting languages which run equally well on Windows.

Perhaps the most satisfying thing is the ability to be able to buy a few components for £200 and a couple of hours later have a secure server up and running SuSE Linux and already integrated into the network. The time we used to spend 'maintaining' Windows, for example trying unsuccessfully to harden machines or endlessly reloading operating systems to cure odd quirks is now donated to open source projects to put something back into the system.

Do we have any regrets ? No. Would we go back ? Not on your nelly.

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