

Which Linux Distribution Should I Install?

Written by Tim Black

Friday, 03 December 2010 23:22 -

A friend asked,

I am trying to put a Linux OS on a [friend's] computer, and I have found that there are 3 different versions: Linux Mint, Ubuntu, and Fedora. Which one are you running, and what do you like about it?

There are many (600?) versions ("distributions") of Linux. I'm using Ubuntu, and recommend it highly. This site can help you pick a distribution that is right for you: <http://www.zegeniestudios.net/ldc>. I tried Redhat, which became Fedora, from 1999 to about 2006, and always found it either wasn't compatible with my hardware, or I had problems configuring it correctly. Then I tried Ubuntu, and found it installed easily without as many hardware/configuration problems, and I was able to be productive on it. Ubuntu is the most popular distribution (which means better stability & features, and more support from other users), it focuses on being easy to use, and it's known for its broad hardware support. Though I've never tried it, Mint appears to be Ubuntu plus some media codecs and a few other niceties to improve the user experience, so it might be easier to use than Ubuntu. I've installed some of those media codecs myself along the way (by adding the Medibuntu & proprietary hardware drivers repositories), so it might be nice to get them from the outset in Mint. However, I've found that Ubuntu makes it very easy to install those extras when you need them--it prompts you with a popup asking if you want to install what you need. So it's a minor judgment call for you to decide between Ubuntu & Mint; I'd just install Ubuntu since I've had such a good experience with it. As a more major judgment call, I recommend you don't try Fedora, since I only had trouble with it.

I have to say, the design of linuxmint.com (ads, blog layout) vs. ubuntu.com makes me think Mint doesn't have nearly as many users as Ubuntu.

One key way to avoid hardware driver problems is to buy computer hardware that is already known to work fine with Ubuntu (or whatever distribution you're planning to use.) Another way around hardware driver problems is to try out your sound, high screen resolutions, bluetooth, wifi, etc., with your preferred distribution's "Live CD"--just run Linux directly from the CD (or flash drive, which is a bit more convenient).

Another issue in comparing Ubuntu & Fedora is that Fedora's emphasis is on bringing out new versions quickly to push new application features out quickly, and so it leans toward being unstable--things might break when you upgrade, and you might have to fix them. New features are fun, but broken computers aren't. Ubuntu's emphasis is on making Linux easy to use on the desktop, so it's devoted to guaranteeing new versions are stable, and its new versions are more

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stable than Fedora's. Both Fedora & Ubuntu are on a 6 month release cycle, but the difference is Fedora only maintains old versions for 13 months, while Ubuntu distinguishes some releases (every 2 years) as "Long Term Support" (LTS) versions which are especially stable and supported for 3 years. The underlying reason for this is that Ubuntu is based on Debian, which has a 2 year release cycle, and is divided into three distributions: stable, testing, and unstable (named "sid" after the destructive boy in Toy Story! sid will break your toys.) Regular 6 month Ubuntu versions are based on the previous Ubuntu version and Debian unstable, with enough stability, security, and usability fixes to make it stable. Ubuntu LTS versions are based on the previous version and Debian testing. This creates a blend of new features and stability that I've come to like very much. By way of contrast, Fedora's new features slowly find their way into Redhat Enterprise Linux (RHEL/CentOS), which is released less frequently, is very stable, but also ends up giving you out of date software. Some other distributions (e.g., SUSE, I think) focus on stability & the enterprise users who want it, and I'd avoid that kind of distribution, because I do want new features too. But more than that, I want it to "just work," and normally Ubuntu does just work for me.

Why I like Linux in general--it provides me all the software I need, for free, and automatically updates it all in one shot.