

Open source gives new life to old Windows XP machines

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Saving your old Windows XP. Credit: Flickr/MBK Marjie , CC BY-NC-SA

As the sun sets on Microsoft's [support for Windows XP](#) this may be a great time to think about trying out a [Free](#) and [Open Source Software](#) (FOSS) operating system for your still-working PC.

This is especially the case when older hardware cannot run newer versions of Windows (such as 7, 8 or [8.1](#)). Your only other option then is to either dispose of the old XP machine or keep it running and face potential security threats.

But many software developers, both hobbyists and professionals alike,

have contributed to a growing body of FOSS programs that now numbers in the tens of thousands. These software programs are licensed for anyone to freely download and use.

To simplify the downloading and installing, collections of these many software components, called "[distributions](#)", are available ready for users to download and start using straight away.

Go Linux

Many of these distributions are based on the [Linux kernel](#), which is highly regarded due to its robustness, performance, security, broad support and low cost.

Linux has become the dominant [operating system](#) for internet sites, powering Google, Facebook, YouTube and many others. It is also the dominant operating system powering Android phones and tablets, televisions, home routers and many other devices.

Over the years, Linux-based distributions have become more and more popular and any machine capable of running Windows XP is a good candidate for running a Linux distribution such as:

- [Ubuntu](#)
- [Fedora](#)
- [OpenSUSE](#)
- [Debian](#)
- [LinuxMint](#).

That's just to name a few – there are many more available.

Anything Windows can do Linux can do ... mostly

These package together a suite of standard programs which enable you to do the types of things you would do in Windows XP, such as search the web, send and receive emails, edit and print documents.

For the most part the user interface and experience is very similar to what you would have experienced in Windows XP and typical alternatives to Microsoft software include:

- [Mozilla Firefox](#), [Google Chrome](#), [KDE Konqueror](#) and many more instead of Microsoft's Internet Explorer for browsing the web
- [Mozilla Thunderbird](#), [Evolution](#) and others instead of Microsoft's Outlook or Outlook Express for email
- [LibreOffice](#) instead of Microsoft Office
- [VLC media player](#) to play your movies and music instead of Windows Media Player
- [GIMP](#) for editing photos and other images instead of Microsoft Photo Editor or Adobe Photoshop.

More software options are available too with many included in the [Free Software Directory](#).

Easy to install

In the early days installing and running Linux on a computer required considerable technical abilities but over the years this has become a lot simpler. Users can now install and configure the system desktop by following a few onscreen prompts without the need for any technical command-line interaction.

But before trying out any new operating system software, it is very important to backup your files to external media such as a USB device, and also to test that your backup works.

To install a new operating system you need to create a bootable USB device, CD-ROM, or DVD of the distribution you would like to give a go. Instructions on how to do this are available on the website of each distribution. Once you have this you simply restart the computer and during the first few seconds of the computer turning on you instruct the computer to boot off the media you created.

Try out the "live" Linux system for a while without installing it on your computer. When you are happy with what you see, there is normally an icon on the desktop that you can use to install the operating system onto your hard disk. Click on the icon and follow the instructions.

You then have the option of installing it either alongside your existing operating system, or overwriting the old system with the new.

Once installed, updates and bug fixes of the operating system and the [software](#) you run are easily downloaded and incorporated into your system, much the same as they were with your use of Windows XP.

Linux has long been extensively used for servers and so security has always been a key part of its design. Known security issues would normally be quickly fixed and updates made available and there are far fewer viruses or cyberthreats.

Although there are a large number of FOSS games available you may not be able run your favourite Windows game on Linux. There are some ways around this, such as [Play on Linux](#), which lets you run some Windows games on Linux but the latest blockbuster games will probably not work.

What about help?

If you are worried about support then there is a large community of users

for Linux in Australia and around the world. Many local user groups exist, such as the [Canberra Linux User Group](#), which has monthly meetings held at the ANU.

Linux Australia has a list of other local [Linux user groups](#). They are generally friendly and happy to help out new comers to Linux. There are also numerous online forums which provide help for working through problems.

So when Windows XP support ends rather than throwing out that old box give Linux a go – you may be pleasantly surprised!

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