Linux is the quiet revolution that will leave Microsoft eating dust

June 27 2014, by Andrew Smith

Linux is already at your party. Credit: John Vetterli, CC BY

Linux, the most widely used open source operating system in the world, has scored a major publicity coup in the revelation that it is used on 94% of the world's top 500 supercomputers.

Every operating system has technical issues and Linux has not been faultless. But some key technological milestones have been passed in

recent years that have made it possible for Linux to quietly assert dominance in the fight for popularity and custom.

Apart from the fact that it is free and has been since its creation in 1991 by Linus Torvalds, Linux has many technological advantages that mean other operating systems just can't beat it.

Millions of people all over the world use Microsoft operating systems but how many describe themselves as enthusiasts? Linux users are often really passionate about the open source cause and this is boosting uptake. They argue that it is more secure than main rivals Apple and Microsoft, with technical features that win hands down. The fact that the most powerful and expensive computers in the world are using it is potentially the best reference you could want.

Quiet revolution

It's easy to see why Linux appeals to the people who operate supercomputers. Linux can support multiple processors and large clusters of computers, unlike IBM, VMware and Microsoft who prefer to charge per processor on many of their products. As long as you are capable of writing the software to solve the problem, Linux will allow you to create your own complex supercomputer or cluster system for free. As organisations who host these types of systems have the financial power to pay for the personnel, the supercomputers themselves become very powerful, efficient systems used to solve many computational problems.

But the fact is, even if you think you are bound to Windows or some other proprietary operating system, you are probably already a Linux user too. When you visit a website, the chances are that it is using an Apache2 webserver. This is free and designed to integrate with the security and operating system features of Linux. Currently more than

60% of webservers are known to be hosting via Apache.

Android, developed by Google, is based on a Linux kernel and is now the most dominant smartphone and tablet computer platform. Android is more vulnerable to malware than Apple's OS but you are safe as long as you act sensibly.

Of course, it remains to be seen whether Android can hold on to its 80% market share in the face of stiff competition. Amazon and Microsoft are getting in on the territory, which could be a threat. But at least Ubuntu, another big rival, is also very much grounded in the open source movement. Used on many desktop systems around the world, this free and easy to use version of Linux has extended the life of many computers after Windows had folded under pressure.

And at home, embedded devices, like your broadband wireless router and cable television set top box are often using specifically designed versions of Linux. Linux is highly likely to be an integral part of your household – it just doesn't shout about it like Apple.

Clinging on

While I am an enthusiastic Linux user, I also have Microsoft at work and use Apple products too. The fact that Linux is based on the same Unix system from which the Max OSX system is derived means that it should be seen more as a cousin than a radical alternative to Apple offerings. And if the two are comparable, are you more likely to choose one that comes with a shiny laptop or one that is more functional but less chic? Some would continue to opt for the design features of a Mac.

And even though Microsoft's star often seems to be fading, its dominance of the market in the 1990s and early 2000s means that it is still a tough one to beat. Windows 8 has had many detractors but

Microsoft is adept at learning from its mistakes and tends to rally with a better version the next time.

All that said, Linux is free and much more pervasive than the average computer user might think. You can easily install Linux on any home computer, many tablets and even your own private supercomputer, so you should think about switching. And if you think you never could, think about how much of your online life already depends on this quiet contender.

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