

# GNU/Linux in 2003 \*

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No, that’s not a typo. I know 2002 is the year that’s going to start right after midnight, December 31. But 2003 is the year Microsoft is going to stop full support for Windows 98 and NT, and generally slow down patch and bugfix activity for all pre-XP Windows versions. In 2003 an awful lot of Windows users are going to be faced with the choice of either buying new hardware that will run XP or moving away from Windows. And at least some of these people (and companies) are going to look at [GNU/Linux] as an alternative.

## 1 When Potential New Users Look at GNU/Linux in 2003, What Will They See?

To begin with, they’re almost certainly going to see easier installations and more hardware drivers. Commercial Linux distribution publishers are racing to see who can come up with the simplest and most complete GUI-based install utilities. So far, the winner is . . . users.

Advances in GNU/Linux installation ease over the past two or three years have been nothing short of fantastic. Those who complain about too much diversity in GNU/Linux, and wish there was only one “main” GNU/Linux distribution and one GNU/Linux desktop GUI choice — à la Windows — overlook the benefits of competition. This competition has driven, and is still driving, the rapid pace of GNU/Linux usability improvement.

Another major advance, at least on the “ordinary user” usability front, is the increasing acceptance of commercial software for GNU/Linux.

I know this flat statement is going to cause some howls, but companies like Red Hat, Mandrake-Soft, and SuSE are asking users and potential users, “What do you want from us?” more often than the early, fragmented groups of Open Source itch-scratching developers ever did. Someone who has no commercial interest in a program’s success can say, “It’s free. Don’t expect us to make it easy, too.” A for-profit software company can’t afford to do this. If it wants to make money, it must accommodate customers’ needs. If potential customers say, “We need a word processor that does thus and so before we can switch to GNU/Linux,” a commercial GNU/Linux software publisher had better either develop that word processor or throw some support toward developers who are already working on something similar.

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The marketplace — the Bazaar, if you will — dictates this behavior. Those who see GNU/Linux as a Cathedral only Software Priests should be allowed to enter can say, “We already have Emacs and vi, and everyone should learn to use these existing tools instead of wanting someone else,” as loudly as they want, but they are going to find themselves preaching to a smaller percentage of the population every year while the Bazaar thrives and continues to grow in all its messy, mercantile splendor.

Some of the Software Priests will catch on to this new order and will descend into the bazaar; Ximian Gnome, for example, is actively reaching out to the masses. They are still locked in some hacker-to-hacker thought patterns, but this will change — or else Ximian will disappear, replaced or marginalized by more market-oriented companies that offer products and services similar to the ones Ximian is trying to offer today.

So far, KDE developers, many of whom work for commercial GNU/Linux publishers, seem more “in touch” with the marketplace than Gnome developers, which may be why KDE is the most popular GNU/Linux desktop among people who use GNU/Linux as a “work” operating system rather than as a hobby. We seem to be moving toward a split, with KDE becoming the standard “ordinary user” GNU/Linux desktop, with Gnome as the leading GUI desktop choice among GNU/Linux cognoscenti. There is room for many GNU/Linux GUIs and window managers — as long as new users are presented with an obvious choice for their first GNU/Linux exposure so that they don’t get confused while they are still in the beginning phases of their GNU/Linux experience.

## 2 Productivity applications

Some of the biggest news on the “GNU/Linux for the masses” front is coming from OpenOffice/StarOffice and theKompany. StarOffice 5.2 — the current version — can work with documents generated by Microsoft Office or WordPerfect, but has too many flaws to become truly popular. OpenOffice and its close relative, StarOffice 6 (now in beta), seem to have eliminated most of StarOffice’s famous deficiencies. A well-publicized free (or very low cost) professional level office suite that can run on either Windows or GNU/Linux, backed by a well-known IT company like Sun, is going to turn a lot of corporate heads. If nothing else, people who say, “I have to use Windows at home so I can take work home, and our company uses Microsoft Office like mad,” won’t have to say this any more. They’ll be able to use GNU/Linux and StarOffice — or OpenOffice — to handle those pesky Microsoft Office files in their home offices.

TheKompany’s Kapital personal finance manager is a commercial product that looks like it may be able to go head-to-head with Quicken and other user-level Windows financial management programs. GnuCash is adequate for many GNU/Linux users’ needs, but the latest version has so many dependency problems that it is nearly impossible for “ordinary” users to install. Kapital is a product designed to capture end user market share, and is much easier to install and start using than GnuCash. GnuCash, as its name implies, is a GNU product. Kapital is licensed under a “hybrid” system; while theKompany retains intellectual property right and expects to be paid for each copy of the software, users get the source code and are free to modify it however they like for their own use, other than the copyright provisions and registration keys. This license style may or may not become widely accept-

ed for GNU/Linux-based commercial software. If it does, it may someday be seen as theKompany's single most important contribution to Linux development. But that won't be apparent as early as 2003.

### 3 Where's the "Soft" Software for GNU/Linux?

I'm using the made-up phrase "soft software" to cover all the programs you don't have to have but make computing easier or more enjoyable. Games fall into this category, and there are suddenly lots of new games (and rehashed Windows games) for GNU/Linux coming out. By 2003 there will probably be enough GNU/Linux games available that it will be hard for anyone who works or goes to school to find time to play even a small percentage of them all the way through.

Now what about all the other "soft software" you see on computer store shelves? The special purpose desktop publishing programs that supposedly turn newsletter publishing into a click-click-click job anyone can do? Programs that help small entrepreneurs make their own business cards? Interior decorating and home design software? Even — although it's a necessity, not a "soft" need, for many professionals — 3D CAD capability? There are very few specialty applications available for GNU/Linux. They will be written only if GNU/Linux becomes popular enough that they become profitable to write or enough capable Free Software developers choose to work on them (which may require significant expansion of the GNU/Linux user and developer base), but without lots of specialty software there is no way GNU/Linux can become a true "mass market" desktop operating system. Not that this is news; this chicken/egg conundrum, often called

the "network effect," has been discussed to death since personal computers first had operating systems.

My personal take on specialty apps and "soft software" is that they're rapidly moving onto the Web and increasingly browser-based, so the operating system on your local machine is gradually getting less important as a factor in their use. Unfortunately, Microsoft is also aware of this phenomenon, and is working to dominate the online ASP (application service provider) market through .NET. Microsoft currently claims .NET is operating system-agnostic, but in light of past Microsoft actions this will probably not be true for long. There are several industry coalition groups working on .NET alternatives. It is possible that massive companies like IBM, Sun, and perhaps AOL, working together, may be able to out-muscle Microsoft. In this clash of titans, the rest of us can't do much besides staying out of the way. I pity all the small software developers who are going to be harmed because they rooted for the wrong side. Perhaps this will serve as a wake-up call to those who have decided to work only on Windows software, and a growing number of canny applications developers will start offering their products for multiple operating systems instead of just for one. Perhaps by 2003 we'll start to see a significant percentage of boxed software CDs in stores showing "Linux, kernel 2.X or higher" among the supported operating systems printed on the sides of their boxes. That would be nice, wouldn't it?

### 4 Advertising and Publicity

This is the area where a distributed, "many choices" development model is at its greatest competitive disadvantage against a single large compa-

ny. IBM runs TV spots that mention GNU/Linux briefly as a server operating system, but that's just about the only commercial mass media exposure GNU/Linux gets right now. We get email addressed to Linux.com suggesting that "we" should advertise on TV. Some of that email includes scripts for commercials. But Linux.com only furnishes information about Linux, and has no budget for mass media ad buys. Red Hat, SuSE, and all the other commercial GNU/Linux distribution publishers put together probably couldn't raise enough cash to put together a TV campaign large enough to be noticeable next to the endless Windows XP ads that are all over U.S. network TV.

But what are the chances of all these companies coming together, pooling their resources, and making mass media ad buys to promote GNU/Linux in general? Zero? A bit higher than zero? Not enough higher than zero to matter, I'm sure.

There's an organization called Linux International out there, but lately it hasn't been doing much in the way of mass-market GNU/Linux promotion that we can see.

## 5 So Who Is Going to Promote GNU/Linux?

So far, the answer seems to be this: "You and me, both as individuals and as Linux User Group members," are the most effective GNU/Linux promoters out there. I personally believe the most effective GNU/Linux outreach takes place at local or regional computer shows and IT trade group meetings, and I believe LUG presences at these events should be sponsored by commercial GNU/Linux vendors in the form of financial assistance if at all possible, and if that isn't feasible,

in the form of "demo" CDs and printed material.

Linux International has some help available on the printed material front, in the form of (.pdf format) downloadable brochures groups can print themselves. But the printing and distribution is up to the LUG or other local organization, so it still comes back to Linux being something that is primarily evangelized by volunteers.

Hopefully, this will change, at least a little, over the next year. There are enough companies now working to market GNU/Linux-based products and services that at least a few of them are bound to spend a few advertising and promotion dollars not only to support GNU/Linux-specific media, but also to reach beyond the GNU/Linux community into the "mainstream" media one way or another. Sure, each company is going to boost its own wares, but a rising Penguin lifts all . . .

(That metaphor doesn't work quite right, but you get the idea.)

Anyway, we hope a few other companies will follow IBM's lead and at least mention GNU/Linux to the so-called general public now and then.

On the software development and general usability fronts, GNU/Linux is advancing at a spectacular rate; it looks like it will be usable for, and used by, lots more people in 2003 than it is now, at the end of 2001.

And with that, I am going to stop typing — and take a few days off before getting into the swing of a new year, one I sincerely hope is full of exciting GNU/Linux and free software news we can bring to you on NewsForge and Linux.com.

**About the Author** : Robin "Roblimo" Miller is the chief editor of OSDN.