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PORTALS

By LEE GOMES



How Far Behind Is Linux?

October 17, 2007; Page B1

If some of Linus Torvalds's own family members back in Finland don't use Linux, what hope is there for the rest of us?

Linux, the free operating system whose development is overseen by Mr. Torvalds, has long been entrenched in the worlds of science and commerce. When Google gives you a search result, a Linux machine is doing the work. At tens of thousands of other companies, computer managers take comfort in the fact that these days, no one ever gets fired for "buying" open source.

But world domination? That's another story.

'CHOICE IS ABSOLUTELY ESSENTIAL'

I think Microsoft used to actually care about trying to help the consumer. I may not think that they did wonderful technology, but I think they really did try to serve their customers. But look at their [digital rights management] and their "Genuine Windows Advantage" — they're not trying to serve their customers any more in their products; they are adding features that are actively bad for users, because they probably feel like they aren't even competing any more.



▪ Read the exchange between Linus Torvalds and Lee Gomes.

Even though Linux is easier than ever to use, the dream of many Linux buffs of it replacing Windows as the desktop mainstay is, at best, stalled, and at worst, fading. While exact numbers are hard to come by, one survey has desktop Linux users barely scraping a single percentage point of the market share. Among Microsoft's customers, concedes Mr.

Torvalds, are his father and sister, though Mom has managed to resist the allure of the dark side.

So, with the top version of Windows Vista running at nearly \$400, at least for new users, why do people continue to open their wallets wide when there's a free alternative?

One reason is that for most consumers, Windows is "free," coming as it does with their new PCs. Computer companies hardly seem interested in offering alternatives. H-P, for example, ships more PCs than anyone, but won't sell a computer without Windows, at least in the U.S.

Dell is far more Linux friendly, and offers a line of consumer Linux machines that run \$50 less than their Windows counterparts. But Dell doesn't exactly broadcast the option; there's no mention of it on its home page and you need to know to click on an "Open-Source Computers" link on an inside page of its Web site before you know of the alternative.

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Dell started installing Linux earlier in the year after a suggestion box on its Web site drew a deluge of requests for the system. Dell doesn't say how many Linux PCs it ships, but one survey puts it at a tiny fraction of total units.

And, tellingly, far more people requested that Dell sell Linux than actually bought a machine once it went on sale. That suggests the typical consumer user has none of the philosophical objections to Windows of some members of the open-source community. Windows works well enough that the difficulty involved in switching operating systems outweighs any slings and arrows of using it.

Linux developers, though, remain determined to eliminate that difficulty. The best example of their efforts is a Linux "distribution" known as Ubuntu, a Zulu/Xhosa word for "human-ness." More than anything else, Ubuntu has come closest in making Linux ready for prime time.

Ubuntu's most prominent backer is Mark Shuttleworth, a 34-year-old South African who made a bundle in 1999 when he sold his security firm to VeriSign. He used some of those proceeds to become the first African in space, as a for-pay tourist in 2002 on a Russian space mission. He regards his work with Ubuntu as partly a philanthropic endeavor, because of its use in developing countries, where loaded computers are hard to come by.

Ubuntu's claim to fame is that its developers have bundled not just Linux, but a shelf full of other important programs, such as Web browsers and word processors, into a single easy-to-install package. Once on your computer, it looks and acts much a Ubuntu updates itself every six months and notifies you if security updates are needed in the interim

That last feature, incidentally, should disabuse an actual Ubuntu user of the notion that a non-Windows utopia, where hackers are powerless and children are all above average. I recently installed the Apache machine and promptly was informed that more than 50 security patches to problems discovered in downloading. Who does Ubuntu think it is? Windows?

Everything about Ubuntu worked as billed, but don't take my word for it. Test-drive it yourself at [Ubuntu](#) created a mode that lets you experiment with the software without permanently installing it on your into its own hard-disk partition using a built-in, dual-boot program -- although if you have to ask w shouldn't try it.

Mr. Shuttleworth says Linux-Ubuntu has become so easy that anyone, anywhere can use it as a priority they have a technically savvy friend to help with rough patches. And that gap, too, he's determined

Mr. Torvalds isn't involved with Ubuntu. That isn't the way Linux works. He agrees that increasing crucial long-term goal, largely because that's how new programmers get interested in the software,

He still believes that ultimately the race for dominance will go to the slow and steady. "Maybe the code conquered, but it's getting a fair amount of development attention," he says. "I'm a technical guy, so build it, they will come' motto, even if the inertia in the market would make it a long road to travel."

• Email me at Lee.Gomes@wsj.com.

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