

Ubuntu – History

The history of Ubuntu as an operating system, distinct from the distribution it was based on, Debian and by extension, Linux, begins in 2004. However, it has roots as far back as 1995. This is the year that a young South African finance and information systems graduate named Mark Shuttleworth started a company called Thawte Consulting. The business of Thawte was Internet security certification, and it was initially operated out of the garage of Shuttleworth’s parents. From these humble beginnings, Thawte would eventually grow to become the second largest company on the internet, before being acquired by it’s primary competitor, Verisign in 1999. This resulted in a massive windfall for Shuttleworth, with the purchase of stock totalling \$575 million (Dieguez-Castro 2016, Wikipedia 2022).



Thawte acquisition total in 2023, adjusted for inflation:

\$ 1,027,513,955

Shuttleworth would go on to be involved in several ventures, both philanthropic and otherwise, but most pertinent to the topic of this page is the founding of Canonical, on March 5th 2004. Canonical is a company founded by Shuttleworth and a collection of developers with an enthusiasm for Linux and it’s numerous distributions. This shared mindset would inform the development of what is certainly Canonical’s most well-known product to date, the Ubuntu operating system. Ubuntu was built on Debian, a distribution of Linux developed by Ian Murdock (and named by a fusion of his name with that of his wife, Debra) and released in 1993. Shuttleworth himself had been involved with the development and maintenance of Debian for some time, so it was natural that it would be used as the jumping-off point for Ubuntu (Debian 2022, Dieguez-Castro 2016, Helmke 2021, Wikipedia 2022).

The Ubuntu operating system derives its name from a South African philosophy of the same name. In it’s native Nguni, it the meaning of the phrase is “humanity to others”. This philosophy aptly describes the goals of Ubuntu in its infancy, to promote

Ubuntu Linux – G00275740



Home

Ubuntu – History

Ubuntu – Market Statistics

Ubuntu – Pros & Cons

Ubuntu – Unique Features

References

Conclusion

Compliance

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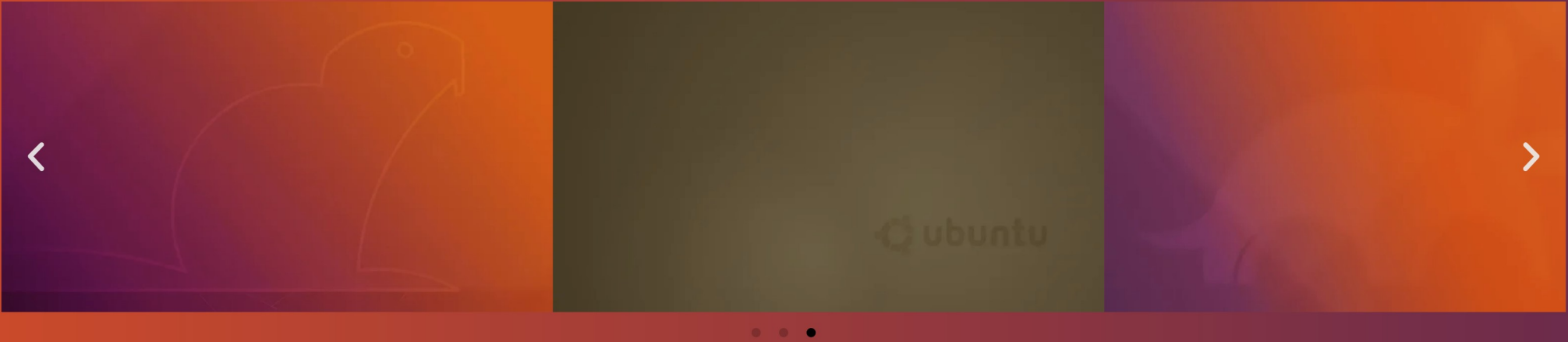
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free access to software and ensure it was as accessible as possible to the greatest amount of people. In this sense, it was a reaction to the popularity of Microsoft’s Windows and Apple’s Mac OS (Dieguez-Castro 2016, Helmke 2021, Wikipedia 2022).

Not unlike the Thawte before it, Ubuntu quickly became extremely popular. So rapid and prolific was Ubuntu’s expansion, that even today, among non-Linux users, it is not uncommon to hear Ubuntu referred to as a synonym for Linux itself. Ubuntu has certainly played an important role in improving public awareness of non-Microsoft and Apple operating systems. A key component of this is undoubtedly the emphasis placed by Canonical on delivering a product that prioritises ease-of-installation, a significant stumbling block for newcomers (Dieguez-Castro 2016, Helmke 2021, Wikipedia 2022).



Historical Ubuntu desktop wallpapers, Creator/s unknown, (2004 – 2018), Available at : <https://www.omgubuntu.co.uk/every-ubuntu-default-wallpaper>

Ubuntu’s rise to prominence has not been without it’s own obstacles, however. One example would be Canonical itself. While having the backing of a well-funded company has certainly been an advantage for Ubuntu, purists in the community have been vocal about what they consider a dilution of the DIY attitude that defined early Linux adoption. Similar sentiments have haunted Canonical with regards to it’s privately owned status, and fears that in time, the company could be sold on to a party, or parties, who are less motivated by freely distributing useful software, and more motivated by profit. The underlying concern, clearly, is investing heavily, as a user, in an ecosystem that could overnight become hostile to the very advantages that made it popular to begin with. Speculation has even suggested that Microsoft itself could be a potential buyer. As of early January 2023, rumours of an IPO are growing more present online, though Canonical is currently described as privately held on it’s LinkedIn, with Mark Shuttleworth as CEO (Dieguez-Castro 2016, LinkedIn 2023, Linuxiac 2023).

