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Ubuntu – Unique Features

When considering Ubuntu and it's features, perhaps more can be learned from a comparison to the two biggest competitors in the desktop operating system space, Microsoft's Windows and Apple's MacOS. How does Ubuntu compare to these heavyweights?

In several respects, Ubuntu compares quite favourably. Take customisability, for example. Where Windows permits some customisation of the desktop environment, and MacOS is even more restrictive in this regard, Ubuntu gives the user a great deal of freedom to adjust and tweak the layout and settings of their desktop. From precise control of desktop features to replacing the default desktop entirely, Ubuntu provides much more flexibility in this regard than Windows or MacOS. For more experienced users, it is even possible to install a particular "flavour" of Ubuntu, which comes pre-installed with specific tools and traits to suit almost any preference. Examples include Kubuntu, which combines Ubuntu with the KDE Plasma desktop environment and Xubuntu, which includes Xfce by default, a lightweight environment that can be of benefit to older hardware. (Frew 2020, JavaTPoint 2021, Vivek 2023)

Another area that Ubuntu, as a distribution of Linux, performs well is in privacy and security. Microsoft and Apple both have faced criticism in the past for their handling of these issues, with Microsoft and Apple both coming under scrutiny from their user base over perceived mishandling of user data. The appearance of obfuscation by default, that users don't know how much of their data is being accessed, how frequently and for what reason fosters an understandable level of unease. In this sense, the open-source, highly transparent nature of Linux in general, and Ubuntu specifically, is a huge benefit. Many new adopters of Ubuntu are looking for an alternative to Windows and MacOS due to scepticism of their privacy policies in the first place. With the community being involved in development and maintenance of Ubuntu, and it's internal workings being available to be inspected, the likelihood of severe privacy breaches is significantly reduced. Naturally, Ubuntu doesn't have the same focus on privacy and security as, for example, a purpose-built OS like Kali Linux,

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but for average users who don't need access to a toolset this specific, Ubuntu certainly has the advantage over Windows and MacOS where privacy is concerned. (Auerbach 2015, Bhuiyan 2022, Memel 2021, Wikipedia 2023, Winder 2019)

One more major feature that should be considered when evaluating Ubuntu is price. From a single user's perspective, all the way to companies operating vast farms of servers, the prospect of a fully featured OS at no cost is hard to ignore, especially when considering the advantages of customisation and privacy mentioned above. This is an area where Microsoft and Apple currently do not compete, there are no free tiers of operating system products available from either company. This is perhaps the greatest advantage of Ubuntu, and Linux more broadly, and considering that a very capable operating system is freely available to anyone with the means to download and install it, the reason as to why adoption hasn't been greater among home users at this point (January 2023) becomes less clear. (JavaTPoint 2021, Pedamkar 2022, SoftwareTestingHelp 2022)

Of course, when PCs are used as much for entertainment as for productivity, the issues of software support, and specifically support for current generation games, can explain some of this disparity. Traditionally, Linux has not had a reputation for being easy to game on. Naturally, the emulation of older gaming hardware and the games that run on it is nothing new to the Linux community, but the AAA games industry has been sluggish to approach Linux as a viable alternative to Windows. However, significant changes have started to take place in this regard with Valve's Steam game management software increasingly becoming available in the Linux space, their development of Steam OS (a Debian-based OS custom made for their ecosystem and packaged as standard with their handheld – the Steam Deck), the ongoing development of the Vulkan API for graphics, Nvidia finally providing driver support for Linux-based systems and services like Proton and Wine emerging on the market, to name but a few. So the reason to avoid Ubuntu based on poor game availability or performance may be less of an issue in the future. (Evangelho 2019, Wikipedia 2022/2023)