

Ubuntu Touch

I decided it was time for me to daily drive a Linux phone. Linux mobile OSs are lightweight, good looking and privacy respecting alternatives to android or IOS, and they even offer more features such as a Terminal, which to me is a key criteria for virtually any smart device nowadays. But, the phone you buy has to be able to actually run your software of choice. Luckily, there are official lists of supported devices online. I decided that Ubuntu Touch by UB ports is my OS to go to, since it's the "mainstream"- and ergo most stable, most feature rich mobile Linux distribution.

I also decided to use a Fairphone 4 for this project, since it's produced fairly and reasonably environmental friendly and it's easy to repair. I went with the 8/256GB 5G version in green and also bought a Fairphone protective cover, which all in all cost about 600 CHF. You can go a lot cheaper than that if you are looking for a Linux phone with basic capabilities, which may even come with the OS preinstalled if you buy a Pinephone or a Fairphone 3 / 3+ for example.

Installation

To install any 3rd party OS on a phone, you have to unlock the bootloader. To do this, go to settings, search for developer options, open up exactly that and enable two things: OEM unlock and USB debugging. After that, turn off the phone and connect it to a laptop or desktop PC via cable. I used Windows for flashing my phone, but Linux or Mac should be just fine, at least for UT. You then have to open CLI or the Terminal and type in the following:

```
fastboot reboot bootloader
```

This boots the phone into bootloader, where you should find information about whether OEM unlock is enabled. If this didn't work, check if Fastboot is already installed on your PC and if not, install it. In my case it also helped to switch to the folder Fastboot is installed in. Once you're in, type the following on your PC:

```
fastboot flashing unlock
```

or:

```
fastboot flashing unlock_critical
```

The difference: `unlock_critical` gives you more options such as flashing updates manually or updating your bootloader. If you ran `fastboot flashing unlock` but want to change to `_critical`, you can just switch to bootloader and run that command. However, this will wipe your data.

On older devices it might be:

```
fastboot oem unlock
```

or:

```
fastboot oem unlock_critical
```

WARNING: This can break your phone. Flashing your phone happens on your own risk.

Look and feel

The Desktop environment of UT is called Lomiri. Its currently based on Unity8, the former DE of Ubuntu by Canonical, who originally founded Ubuntu Touch.

Lomiri is customizable to some extent, which doesn't really matter in my opinion, cause one seems not meant to use the desktop. The whole thing doesn't just feel like Ubuntu ported to mobile. It really feels like a modern, thought thru operating system, where everything is where you would expect it.

Features and functionality

In the beginning, Ubuntu Touch offers similar features as Android, but with less available apps. I was not really able to do anything in the Terminal, since many – or most – directories were read-only, even for the super user. With the Ubuntu Tweak Tool from the OpenStore, I was finally able to change this. So now I can basically do with my device what I want, within the small world of mobile Linux, which not many people currently do create apps for because the chip architectures of phones are still new to the Linux world. Its certainly enough for daily driving and having fun, but it has a lot more potential.

My conclusion – So far

Ubuntu Touch is a great alternative to conventional Mobile OSs, and I would love to try other mobile Linux distributions in the future as well. It is still a bit hacky though, which for someone like me is “just right”, but simply wont cut it for the mainstream user. There are great people working on that exact problem, and it will be a fantastic experience for everyone eventually. Until then, mobile Linux is only useful (and amazing) for nerds who have already done some scripting, already did at least a system update in the Terminal, and have basic skills of googling stuff. If this is you, it's going to be a lot of fun from the moment you first connect your phone to your laptop. If this is not you, you got to wait or improve your IT skills. Otherwise, you might break your phone – forever. Or you let someone else install it for you / buy it preinstalled, in the case of UT, you will be fine then.

Which is why I encourage everyone who has time for and wants to contribute to FOSS to do so. This way, we will achieve a new level of usefulness and privacy in the digital space, even for the average consumer.

Together, we'll grow strong.

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