

# Operative word for OS: free

## Linux, which you can download at no charge, is liberating in many ways / **Simon L. Garfinkel**

**M**ICROSOFT IS not a monopoly. More than 7.5 million computer users around the world are running Linux on their personal computers. Linux users can do word processing, run a spreadsheet, surf the Web, send e-mail — and do it all without running a single byte of Microsoft code.

And their computers can do much more, like typeset mathematical equations, run banks of fax machines, act as file servers for Windows, Mac, and Novell networks, and even be a "firewall" between the Internet and private networks.

The reason for both the power and the popularity of Linux is the fact that it is "free" software.

On one level, "free" refers to price. You can download Linux at no charge over the Internet. But "free" also refers to freedom.

With Linux you are free to give a copy to a friend. If you know how to program, you're free to modify the Linux operating system, because Linux comes with the source code. Even if you are just a user, you'll find Linux liberating as well. That's because the Linux utilities generally have more power than their Windows counterparts.

In recent years Linux has made impressive gains in universities and is starting to make inroads in a number of businesses. Nevertheless, Linux has retained its reputation as a hacker's OS — an operating system for people who really understand a computer's inner workings and love tinkering.

Red Hat Software is a four-year-old start-up that's trying to take Linux mainstream. Based in Research Triangle Park, N.C., Red Hat has worked hard making a version of Linux that is easier to install and simple to administer. Red Hat is clearly on to something: The firm now has more than 40 employees and is recording significant business sales. And Red Hat's work has been recognized. Recently, Red Hat Linux 5.0 received InfoWorld Magazine's prestigious Product of the Year award for 1997.

Before you decide to go with Linux, it's a good idea to take inventory of your PC's hardware and write down the manufacturer and model number of your video, network, and sound cards. Then hop over to Red Hat's Web site ([www.RedHat.com](http://www.RedHat.com)) and make sure your hardware is supported. Although Linux supports a variety of hardware, there's a lot of equipment out there that will never

make the cut. This lack of support is really the fault of the hardware vendors: While they write their Windows drivers, they have traditionally ignored non-Microsoft operating systems, waiting instead for some motivated hobbyist to write the driver for them. Even worse, some companies have routinely shot themselves in the foot by refusing to release the technical information necessary to get the job done.

"We are into a constant game of catch-up," admits Robert Young, Red Hat's president. Complicating the problem is the fact that Linux can't properly implement Microsoft's "plug-and-play" standard because critical parts of the "standard" are undocumented. Nevertheless, the situation is improving. More and more hardware

vendors are taking the Linux market seriously and developing drivers for the operating system. The Red Hat 5.0 box comes with two CD-ROMs, two floppy disks, and a thick manual. You can devote your entire hard drive to Linux or combine Linux and Windows 95. Installation is fast (less than 20 minutes) but complicated. The main problem is that Red Hat 5.0 forces you to figure out how you will partition your hard drive between Windows and the various parts of the Linux operating system. Although there's enough information in the clearly written user's manual to help you answer these questions, you've got to read the manual first in order to know what you are doing. Hopefully, this procedure will be streamlined in a future release.

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Red Hat 5.0 comes with an astonishing number of games, developer's tools, and network software, all preinstalled and ready to go. There's even a copy of Netscape Navigator version 4.04, the Apache Web server, and the "samba" file server, which lets a single Linux machine serve files to a network of PCs. The CD-ROMs are filled with additional software arranged in easy-to-install packages.

Red Hat also sells the Applix Office Suite, which consists of a word processor, a spreadsheet, a graphics package, and an e-mail reader. Although the applications all work, they are quite primitive. For example, there is no "word count" feature in Applix Words, nor any way to split the screen. "I can't defend Applix a great deal," says Young, although he hints it will get much better in a few months. Meanwhile, Red Hat is in discussions with Insignia about having the company port its Soft Windows PC emulator to the platform, which will let people run Microsoft's Office 97.

Of course, for many Linux users, wishing for Soft Windows is missing the point of free software. Instead of pinning away for Office 97, somebody should go out and write something that is better than Office. Then give it away.

Red Hat is bringing out 5.1 this summer. People who buy 5.0 row will be able to download the update over the Internet. And of course, it will be free.

**Publisher: Red Hat Software**

**Title: Linux 5.0**

**Price: \$49.95 per CD-ROM**

**Title: Applix Office Suite**

**Price: \$99.95 per machine**

