

Foreword

You should be using Linux for the same reason I eat brown eggs.

A century ago, chicken eggs came in all sorts of colors: brown, green, blue, and red, but in the past few decades, consumer demand for white eggs has nearly eliminated breeds of chickens that lay other colors. Ninety percent of all eggs in the U.S. are laid by white leghorns. Experts say this homogenization of the chicken gene threatens the health, and ultimately the survival, of the species.

Does that sound bananas? It's not. In fact, it's exactly what has happened to bananas. Inbreeding has drained the gene pool and weakened the fruit's resistance to disease. As a result the banana as we know it may become extinct in just a decade. What does all this have to do with computer operating systems? Everything.

The nearly total dominance of Microsoft Windows is the technological equivalent of white eggs and bananas. A few more years of the Windows startup screen and you may not be able to boot anything else. And that's bad. Variety in technology has the same benefits as ecological variety: competition breeds better birds; variety sparks innovation. It also keeps prices down, slows down hackers, and gives you a choice. You may not choose to use Linux, but it's good to have the choice. And as Robin will show you in this book, it's a great choice for most of us.

People usually first consider Linux because of its price. You can't beat free. Eventually they realize there are even better reasons to use Linux. Many large companies use it for its reliability. Others like the speed with which security patches and updates are released. Some prefer Linux because they can modify and improve the operating system and its accompanying programs by themselves. Lately many Windows users who are fed up with viruses and spyware have chosen Linux as a safe haven from these information super-highwaymen. These are all excellent reasons. But now you know that it's also good public policy to support Linux. Linux is good for everyone, even people who still use Windows. The mere fact that Linux exists forces Microsoft to make a better product, keep prices low, and puts pressure on them to take security and reliability seriously. If you think Windows is getting better, thank a Linux user. If you don't think it's getting better, maybe you should *be* a Linux user.

But don't choose Linux just because it's good for you. Linux tastes great, too. Thanks to the efforts of thousands of programmers all over the world, Linux has evolved from an operating system for geeks into a computer system for the rest of us. (Sorry, Apple.)

Even if you've been using Microsoft Windows for years, you may be surprised at how easy it is to move to Linux. You'll have to retrain your brain a little, sure, but these days Linux works pretty much the way you'd expect. You'll already know how to do most of the things you want to do. And thanks to this book, it will be easy to figure out the rest. Don't worry that switching to Linux will narrow your choices, either. Linux can do everything but make an omelet. And I bet there's someone in a garage somewhere who's figuring out a way to make it do that, too.

Robin's book will show you the benefits of switching to Linux immediately. Your computer will run faster and more reliably than you ever believed possible. Surfing the net will no longer be an exercise in paranoia. And you'll discover a whole new world of powerful, free software that can run rings around the programs available for Windows.

It shouldn't matter what color your eggs are. After all, you're not eating the shells; you're eating what's inside. Nor should it matter what operating system you're using. The OS is just the foundation for the programs you really use to work and play. Truth is, many of you are already using Linux every day without knowing it. Tivo runs on Linux. So do many big web sites, including Amazon.com. The special effects for some of Hollywood's biggest movies were created on Linux, and Linux runs the billing for some of the world's largest companies.

Some day we won't know or care whether our digital devices use Windows, Linux, BSD, or OS X. We'll just know they work. But when that day comes, you'll be able to look back and say, we owe it all to Linus Torvalds, Richard Stallman, and the pioneers of the Free Software movement, who worked without pay to create the best free operating system ever, and to give us a choice when it seemed like everyone else was going bananas for Windows.

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Petaluma, California (the former chicken and egg capital of the world)
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Leo has been trying to get people to use Linux for years. He hosts *Call for Help* on G4TechTV Canada and can be heard every weekend on KFI 640 AM Los Angeles.

Introduction

We all want our computers to “just work.” We want to view Web sites, exchange email, create letters and other printed material, do our book-keeping, and perform other basic computer tasks without worrying about viruses, spam, Web popup ads, system crashes or high program license fees.



Linux is the low-cost key to trouble-free computing. It's a little different from Windows or Mac, so you'll need to learn some new tricks to use it, but they are not hard tricks, and they won't take long to learn. In return for that little bit of learning, you'll be able to perform everyday computing tasks rapidly and easily without worrying about viruses, worms or spyware. In fact, after you have Linux installed and your favorite programs set up, you won't need to think about your computer at all. You'll be able to concentrate on what you're *doing* with it, whether you're creating a budget spreadsheet for your business, creating a family newsletter or downloading and listening to your favorite music.

This book and the instructional DVD video inside the front cover are based on MEPIS Linux. The *SimplyMEPIS* CD inside the back cover includes all the software you need to surf the Web, read and write email, do sophisticated word processing, make slide presentations, manipulate spreadsheets, upload and edit images from digital cameras and scanners, create Web sites, enjoy music or videos, play many hours' worth of entertaining games, and generally do what you and most other people expect a personal computer to do.

About the *Point & Click Linux!* DVD

It's not a single hour-long video, but a series of “bite-sized” short tutorials. Each one focuses on a specific function or program. The video tutorials contain most of the information in the printed book, but *show* you how to do things instead of *telling* you how to do them.

The DVD plays in standard NTSC (U.S. format) DVD players, and in computers equipped with DVD drives. Check this book's companion Web site, PointAndClickLinux.com, for added and updated videos.

Proprietary Windows software equivalent to the programs on your *SimplyMEPIS* CD, plus the current version of Windows itself, would cost at least \$1500 or more. And if the included software doesn't cover all your needs, the MEPIS servers offer hundreds of other useful programs you can download right away and start using without paying another cent. Adventurous souls can experiment with any one of *thousands* of free non-MEPIS programs provided by the worldwide, volunteer-run Debian project with only a few mouse clicks—and can delete any programs that don't work out with another few clicks.

(Note that when you delete a MEPIS or Debian program, it is 100% gone. There is no "residue" or "registry crud" leftover as there often is in Windows when you try to delete a program you no longer want.)

While this book focuses on MEPIS, there is an appendix dedicated to other popular Linux distributions, because Linux is about choice, not about locking you into one way of doing things. You'll also be happy to know that the programs described in the following pages and on the included DVD video work the same way no matter which Linux distribution you choose. Even if you start with MEPIS and later move to another flavor of Linux, your learning time will not have been wasted.

But that's enough loose talk. Let's turn the page and get started with trouble-free, *Point & Click Linux!* computing.