GEEK TO ME: Linux as a Windows alternative involves a steep learning curve

Posted: Sunday, November 3, 2019 5:45 am

By Jeff Werner

Question: I wonder why you did not recommend to Brenda S. (Geek Note: IGTM #630, August 18, 2019) and others to try a Linux system on an older, low memory computer?

I have been using Linux Peppermint system for a couple of years and have had very few problems. Updates are fast and there are many add-on programs to do just about anything one would like to do and more added every day.

There are many Linux User Groups (LUG) around with people usually eager to help.

– Eugene S.

Lubbock, Texas

Answer: For anyone who couldn’t tell, Eugene is asking about the plethora of recent columns dedicated to the topic of Microsoft declaring end-of-life for Windows 7 this coming January, and my advice on how to deal with it.

This isn’t the first Windows end-of-life saga, and it’s Geek to Me has been around through previous ones, including Windows XP and even Vista. Would it surprise you to know that there are multiple columns in my archive that talk about the ins and outs of choosing Linux over Windows? A few stand out because of the depth of the discussion. I suggest that anyone interested in exploring Linux as a potential alternative to any version of Windows give a read to Issue #353, from April 27, 2014, and Issue #481, October 9, 2016.

This isn’t personal, Eugene, so please don’t take it as an attack, but in your question you do what I typically see many Linux proponents do: you sing its praises where it shines, but you don’t talk about the downside. That downside is precisely why I don’t tend to recommend it as a general solution to the many people who read my column. In general, my readers are people who are used to the plug-and-play experience that Windows offers. Incredible amounts of highly complex things happen behind the scenes, generally with little or no user interaction, until something goes wrong.
There isn't much in-depth system knowledge required to get a Windows PC up and running. Not so with Linux. Configuring Linux involves a learning curve that is a significant investment of time and effort, which, in this Geek’s experience, not too many people are up to. Sure, there are User Groups, but it’s not like they offer telephone support, or 24/7 service. Those relationships must be cultivated and maintained before one can use them.

In addition to the more difficult start-up process, there is a vast difference in the availability of software for Linux systems vs. Windows systems. You are correct in saying that more and more are becoming available every day, but the same can be said for Windows products, and at a far greater rate: and that's on top of the existing base of literally millions of programs that already exist. Another reason is availability of drivers. While some hardware vendors make Linux-compatible drivers available, others do not. It can be hit or miss for being able to run a new printer or scanner under Linux, while compatibility with Windows is a virtual certainty, because it is, after all, the de-facto standard operating system.

For some people, such as yourself, Linux is a great alternative to Windows. It’s cheap enough – usually free. It requires less memory, and less CPU horsepower than Windows, making it an excellent choice for keeping older hardware alive. But, for many (I would say most) users, for all the reasons above, and probably more, it’s just not a good fit.

**Question:** I listen to music on my iPhone 7 Plus using Apple’s Music app. For years, I was able to select a song in a playlist or album and when that song was over it would continue playing music in sequential order down the list. But for the past month or so, it seems like the Music app is on a permanent shuffle and after the song I select is over it will just play some random song next in the playlist instead of what the next actual song is in the list. I've tried hitting the shuffle option to turn this off and nothing happens. I’ve looked in the settings and couldn’t find anything. Any recommendations? It’s not a horrible problem to have, but a frustrating one at times.

- Dusty R.

**Fort Walton Beach, Florida**

**Answer:** I know of only two ways to engage shuffle mode. First, while viewing an individual playlist, there are two buttons, labeled Play and Shuffle. If you tap Shuffle, it plays the contents in random order, while tapping Play causes it to play straight through.

The second way is by viewing the currently playing song. At the bottom of the screen are some status icons. One of them looks like a list. If shuffle is engaged, this icon will have a little circle overlay containing the shuffle indicator (two arrows that cross over each other). Tap it, and in the “Up Next” line, you’ll see options to control shuffle and repeat. Tap them to toggle the features.

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