Open Source Software Opens Up.

Open Source software is programming code that's generally available at no cost to you. But we should draw a distinction between “freeware” and Open Source programs. The premise of Open Source (and, hence the name) is that the source code of the program is available to you. That's not so much so YOU can modify it (although you could and are free to if you knew how). It's more in order to place the program in “public escrow”. Once a program has been licensed under the GPL (General Public License), it can never be retracted, and thus never orphaned. That's an advantage for both individual users and companies; you don't have to worry about future forced upgrades by your software vendor! This licensing arrangement also encourages community development. Coders add features, fix bugs and document applications and return those improvements to the users.

As a result, Open Source software continues to gain in popularity. The best current examples are probably the Firefox browser, and the OpenOffice office suite (This article was written in OpenOffice.). Both are popular and powerful applications that run equally well on several operating systems. Firefox is generally faster than Internet Explorer, and arguably more secure. Tabbed browsing and a wide array of theme choices are popular features. Patches are generally provided very quickly to rectify any security problem that might appear in contrast to the relatively slow pace of fixes for commercial code. OpenOffice has improved in functionality, and in compatibility with Microsoft Office since its first release about two years ago. It can read from and write to Word, PowerPoint and Excel formats, compose HTML documents and output to Flash and Acrobat files. Need more? How about a database? Both applications are frequently updated; current version for Firefox is 1.5, OpenOffice, 2.0.1. Best of all, both are free for the downloading.

Some other good examples of Open Source software available for both Windows and Linux are:

- GAIM, the “multi-protocol” instant messaging program
- The GIMP, a great graphics editing program
- Blender, a 3D modeling and animation program

There are Windows applications with no perfect analog in Linux, but the situation is improving daily. Linux has matured in all desktop areas. For example, multimedia programs for manipulating graphics or editing video and audio are often on par with their commercial counterparts. In fact, Linux “distributions” either come with all that good stuff, or if not, they can be downloaded separately. The distributions range from completely free via downloaded CD images, or inexpensively purchased, with some customer support and documentation included. Much of the differentiation between these distributions (Fedora, Ubuntu, SuSE) lies in the graphical installer and system tools, driving development of a more user-friendly experience for even a novice.

Due to the inherent security in Linux, occurrences of viruses happen about once a decade. Spyware, or malware programs aren't a problem because they can't install themselves.

And Linux is stable; it doesn't crash very often. If you leave your Linux box running, several months later you'll realize it's still running, and hasn't had to be rebooted.

If you'd like to experiment with Linux, but don't want to commit to loading it on a computer, there are "Live CDs" available. These are bootable Linux CDs – everything runs off the CD rather than from a hard disk. This allows you to "try before you install". I'd say "try before you buy", but the buying is optional! Some examples of bootable Linux CDs are Knoppix and Mepis,

If you're still dependent on some Windows applications, or want to be able to use both Windows and Linux, you can "dual-boot" your computer. That means putting both Windows and Linux on the same hard drive (or separate ones), and when you boot, be able to select which operating system will boot. That gives you a lot of flexibility in what you can do with your computer.

Linux isn't perfect; there are some shortcomings:

- Administration of a Linux system is different (not harder, just different); the methods for installing and upgrading programs have to be learned.
- High end games aren't as widely available for Linux (exceptions include the iD series - Doom & Quake - as well as Unreal Tournament).
- Personal Finance is still weak; there's no direct equivalent for Quicken (although GNUCash is very usable, and of course free to try).

Hardware requirements

For good results a modern "full house" installation of Linux intended for desktop use should be installed on a computer that has the following characteristics:

- 800 MHz CPU (faster is better, of course)
- 6-10 Gigs of disk space
- Minimum 256 Megs of RAM (512 Megs is better if you're going to have more than a couple of large applications open at the same time)
- A video card with 8 Megs of RAM or better (shared RAM is ok, if that's the type of video your computer has.
- A 17" or larger monitor
- audio card & speakers

Note: inexpensive WinModems are not well supported; neither are WinPrinters, the inexpensive ones that require the CPU to do all the formatting.

If you've read about Linux and are interested, the Fourth Annual So Cal Linux Expo will be February

11 & 12, 2006, at the Radisson LAX hotel. The Expo will have seminars on advanced topics, plus beginner sessions. And there's an expo floor where vendors rub elbows with various Open Source groups such as the maintainers of KDE and GNOME, the two major desktops used in Linux. There's a discount code for readers of this article, too: When you register for SCALE4x, use discount code PCUG for a 50 percent discount in admission fees. To register, or for late-breaking info, go to http://www.socallinuxexpo.com

Summary: Linux is easy to install, the applications are easy to use, but the system administration is different than Windows (some would say it's still more difficult than it should be), but like other areas of Linux, it's improving steadily.
Linux puts the “fun” back in computing! Try it! Grab a copy and install it. The only thing you'll spend is some time, and just think of the hardware upgrades you can buy with the money you saved on software!