

Ubuntu Linux for Non-Geeks: A Pain-free, Project-based, Get-Things-Done Guidebook

Rickford Grant

(No Starch Press, 2006)

Review by Ross Gagliano

For one who has wanted to install Linux on a PC for some time, fulfilling a longer-term dream of a GUI-interfaced UNIX, I found this book a no brainer. It includes a CD with an Intel x86 Edition of Ubuntu Linux, along with eighteen chapters and three appendices chock full of great instructions.

An OS addict from his earliest days on Atari machines, the author has now written several books on the subject. While teaching may be his vocation, manning a help desk appears to be his avocation. His second Linux book by No Starch Press is aimed specifically at beginners; however, I submit that real "non-geeks" must have some really computer-literate friends handy. Here is a list of the major non-anticipated HW problems that I was forced to resolve: adding 128M RAM, modifying monitor resolution, and updating the NIC to be Linux compatible. Other than that, it went pretty smoothly despite numerous obvious look-backs to Windows.

Unable to contrast Ubuntu, an African term meaning "humanity toward others," to other Linux products (Red Hat, SuSE, and several others), I shall direct my review to how well this book fulfills its promises, rather than how Linux compares with Windows. The OS boots either from the included CD or hard drive, allowing either a dual-boot system or eliminating Windows altogether.

Upfront I confirm that this book is truly a hands-on, project-based, take-it slow guidebook for step-by-step installation and usage. It directs the reader through: configuring both hardware and peripherals; connecting wired and wireless networks to the Web; downloading applications, games, and utilities; accessing, editing, and sharing photos and videos; and playing DVDs and music CDs, either directly or on an iPod. Grant initially defines "distribution" and explains the open source philosophy. His install process precedes screen by screen, after which he describes customizing the desktop, or GNOME panel, which allows changing colors, moving stuff, and personalizing menus.

He then discusses the installation of Firefox (the Web browser), Evolution (Outlook-like email), Nautilus (equivalent to Windows Explorer), Synaptic (more powerful GNOME package manager), and Thunderbird (like Outlook Express). OpenOffice is also offered which is comparable to MS Office (Word, Excel, Powerpoint, and Frontpage look-alikes). For network connection, he demystifies DNS, DHCP, LAN, IP, and URL. His explanations of disk and file manipulation are quite helpful, including system navigation, FTP, and file permission, plus creating and extracting compressed files.

For holdover DOS enthusiasts, Linux also has a command line interface, allowing UNIX coding that features such possible oddities as tarballs, binaries, Java, rpms, and even Windows application execution using Wine. Incredibly, Linux also supports direct file conversion to PDF. The 334 excellently written pages are Perfect bound in such a way that the book lays flat, important when installing software. Moreover, the screen captures are spot on, as they say.

There have been literally dozens of other reviews of this book; e.g., *UNIX Review*, *Computer Outlook*, *Enterprise Open Source*, *Duffbert's Random Musings*, *Slashdot*, *Linux Magazine*, *KnoProSE*, *PC World*, *Linux.com*, *Blogcritics*, *Free Software Magazine*, Java User Group reviews, *LinuxQuestions.org*, *DistroWatch*, *Linux Journal*, *Wired News*, New Technology Users Groups, *SearchOpenSource*, *TUX Magazine*, and *TechTarget*. Thus, there are plenty of places to get other opinions.

But, for my money, I say this. Whether you're in the market for a relatively painless switch to Linux either as a cheaper (free!) and more powerful alternative to Windows (together with its seamless software) or to avoid its increasingly common nuisances of adware, spyware, and popups, Ubuntu seems to be the answer. Grant's book further appears to be a great way to install and learn Ubuntu! Happy conversion.

Ross Gagliano is a retired professor, having helped found the computer science department at Georgia State University. He previously was a senior researcher at the Georgia Tech Research Institute.