

It's easier than ever to break the Microsoft computing habit

By Alan Zisman © 2006

Alternatives to the Microsoft quasi-monopoly over personal computing continue to improve, becoming increasingly realistic options for a wide range of personal computer users.

- Apple released its first Intel-powered Macs, premiering new versions of its popular and stylish iMac desktops and new laptops, under the name MacBook Pro. The company claims that these new models will offer several times the speed and power of its previous generation of hardware running its attractive (and spyware and virus-free Mac OS X operating system). Additional models are promised throughout 2006, enabling the company to end the year with all its computers based on Intel processors. Canadian pricing has improved as well, as Apple belatedly adjusted to the stronger Canadian dollar.

The new models were released yesterday as I write, so I'm waiting to see them 'in the flesh' to see just how much faster they actually are, how long notebook battery life is, and whether they can be set up to run Windows in a pinch.

- Linux gets better and better. This open-source alternative operating system will run (unlike the Mac) on the computer hardware that most people already own, but like the Mac (and unlike Windows) is spyware and virus-free. The Linux installation process has gotten much easier,

enabling it, in many cases, to install itself onto a hard drive that already has a Windows installation. The Linux user-interface has also matured; it's now slick and attractive, and should be immediately usable by most Windows users. And unlike Windows, Linux 'distributions' come with an extensive set of applications, letting users become productive almost immediately. And did I mention it's free?

Linux has a big presence behind the scenes running network and Internet servers; Commercial Drive's East End Food Coop is running the store's point-of-sale system on Linux. It hasn't caught on in a huge way with North American computer users, but Linux 'on the desktop' is growing rapidly in Asia and some other parts of the world, where users are attracted by its low cost, security, and increased usability.

You can see Linux desktop systems up and running at Weblog Computers on East Hastings in Vancouver. Or try it yourself; an increasing number of Linux versions are available as 'Live' CDs, which boot and run right from your CD drive without installing anything onto your hard drive- a pain-free way to try out this alternative without commitment. My current favourite: Ubuntu Linux (www.ubuntulinux.org), available in free downloadable live or installation versions.

- If you can't quite bring yourself to cut the Windows umbilical cord, there are still a growing number of free

(and spyware-free) open source software packages that will run under Windows. The OpenOffice.org office suite, for instance, recently released its new version 2.0 with versions for your choice of Windows or Linux. It's a pretty complete replacement for Microsoft Office, and will happily open and save in commonly-used Microsoft Word, Excel, and PowerPoint file formats. Instead of installing a pirated older version of Microsoft Office on your home, business, or organization's computer, it's a no-brainer to download and install a copy of OpenOffice.org. How to get it? The name says it all—go to www.openoffice.org.

- Microsoft's anti-trust court battle of the late 1990s focused on how the company integrated its Internet Explorer web browser into Windows and used it to stifle competition. Since crushing browser-competitor Netscape, however, Microsoft has let Internet Explorer cruise in neutral; the browser lacks modern features and remains a security sink-hole. Windows (and Linux and Mac) users should check out the free, open source Firefox browser (www.mozilla.org), also with a new version. The new version 1.5 adds painless automatic updating, useful since no software product is completely bug-free and perfectly secure.

If you're still running the trio of Microsoft Windows, Microsoft Office, and Microsoft Internet Explorer, do yourself a favour and check out the alternatives. ❄