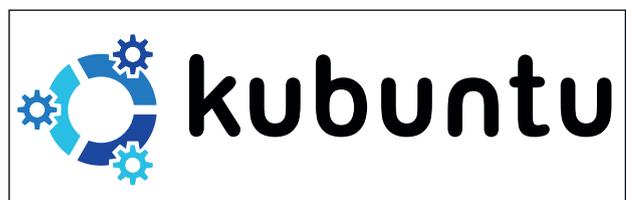
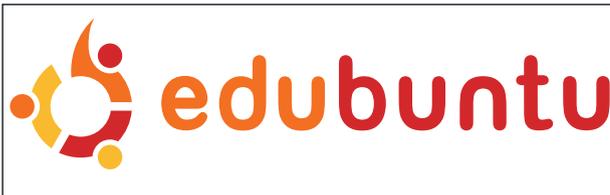




Ubuntu: Pick Your Passion



Loads of distros are based on Ubuntu, all with their own blend of aims, software and philosophy. **John Brandon** finds out why.



Our expert

John Brandon
A 20-year veteran of computing that has used Linux since its inception, installing it on just about anything he can think of: Macs, UMPC devices, smartphones, dumpster-dived beige boxes, Tablet PCs, and gaming notebooks. John has the rather unique distinction of being a former Information Technology director turned journalist..

In a perfect world, all end-users would be programmers, syntax experts, and technical geniuses. While this might seem like a tech utopia, it would also be abysmally dull. Some computer users are just interested in surfing the web and writing email; a select few are experts in creating digital media but wouldn't know Ajax code from Ajax dish soap; marketing gurus know how to write perfect prose but graphics editing is a black art. And, you know what? That's OK. As Linux gains momentum as a mainstream operating system for any user, regardless of programming background, it has also morphed into something amazingly flexible and highly customized. No distro proves this point better than Ubuntu, that crown jewel of the Linux world that has become all things to all people.

Not buying it? Consider that there is a Linux distro for every taste and preference under the sun. There's one just for Christians who want to read the Bible more, and one a computer that's not capable of running later, more bloated versions of Windows anymore. There's a distro for multimedia producers, educators, network experts, and even one for mobile devices like the Samsung Q1. In fact, there are so many Ubuntu distros that a website has listed the top 25 flavours of Ubuntu (not just the 25 that exist). See <http://tinyurl.com/yrbmv7>

“There is a Linux distro for every taste and preference under the sun.”

If imitation is the best form of flattery, there's even a mock list of Ubuntu flavours: one that will install a virus and destroy your PC, a distro for Star Trek fans, and one that looks like *The Matrix*. Place just about any letter in front of "ubuntu" (eg, fubuntu) and search for it on Google. You will likely find a real version, with an active community, and a clear purpose for its existence. Even when a Ubuntu flavour is intended as a joke (such as a satanic version), it sometimes evolves into a real version. (It reminds me of the "wireless power" joke at ThinkGeek.com a few years ago – a

device that could charge your cell phone without using a cable. Now, wireless power is actually becoming a real market and gadgets will start appearing later in 2008.)

Meanwhile, in the midst of all this Ubuntu customization is Canonical, the company that provides commercial support for the official Ubuntu distros, such as Kubuntu and Edubuntu. Canonical downplays the thriving Ubuntu distro customization market, encouraging most users to choose the main version at Ubuntu.com instead. Canonical does offer a few narrowly focused distros of its own. Yet, in open source development, there are few restrictions. So, in an effort to help you (or that one friend or family member who has still not tried Linux), here's an overview of the best Ubuntu flavours, including why they exist, comments from the creators, and how to get them.



Linux Mint

Let's start with one of the most elegant and useful flavours of Ubuntu. Linux Mint, which seems to be slowly moving away from the basic Ubuntu look and feel, emphasizes user interface over other variables, such as including bevy of multimedia tools or programming aids. Mint has a distinct look, even from the first start-up screen logo and the branching menu that lets you easily see all programs through one menu – which is not that dissimilar from the new Vista Start menu. Mint has several unique colour schemes and desktop backgrounds, although the real power of the distro seems to be its compatibility. I tested it on no less than six different PCs, some ageing homebuilt relics, one a Dell 8500 desktop, and a Fujitsu LifeBook T (which is actually a Tablet PC and notebook hybrid). Hearing the start-up chime on the Fujitsu was rather wondrous, considering that I have tried other distros before that failed – at least out of the box – to recognize the audio subsystem. I also had no trouble getting Wi-Fi to connect and accessing a network storage drive over Gigabit Ethernet.

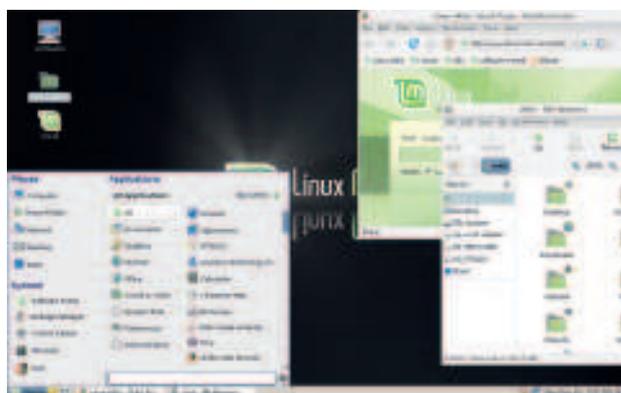
Mint also comes with a web-based package installer that is intended for Linux newbies – those who are not familiar with the command syntax for many Debian installers. Because it is built on Ubuntu, you can still install any package you find at the Ubuntu repositories.

"Linux Mint exists because there is a vision of what a desktop OS can and should be, because other distributions have their own idea of what they want to do and because it is technically easy to implement these ideas," says Clement Lefebvre, the founder and lead developer.

Lefebvre outlined some of the plans for the distro. In 2007, the team released a complete version that met most of their original goals. They are now working on fleshing out some of the ancillary goals, such as releasing a version based on Fedora, putting more work into localization and accessibility, and organizing Mint with specific versions and package offerings. They are also working on a way to back-up and restore the Home folder and looking ahead to the Ubuntu Long Term Support version in 2008.

Try Linux Mint if you:

- 1 Prefer a lean and elegant operating system to one that is more technical.
 - 2 Want powerful features that are easy to find and not buried in the OS.
- » www.linuxmint.com/download.php



» The user interface for Mint has a more elegant feel due to the colour choices for the menus.

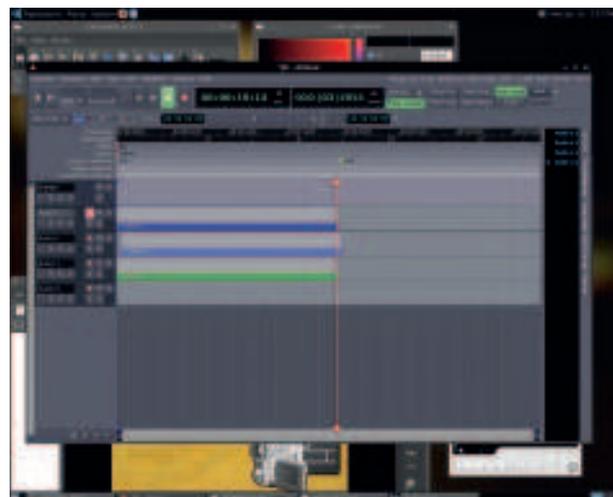
Ubuntu Studio

Multimedia producers are a special breed. They require powerful applications that can compete with the *Adobe Photoshop*s and *Avid Media Composers* of the world, and they don't need any extraneous tools that are unrelated to their field. It's no surprise that Ubuntu Studio is the largest ISO file of those we found, at 820MB, but is also the most customized for specific purposes. It includes a streamlined version of Ubuntu designed for media creators – it has an artistic, non-technical look and feel. Most importantly, the default packages – which you can select at a broad level *during installation, choosing just audio tools or just video tools, etc* – are quite robust. Studio includes the obvious programs, such as *Audacity* (a sound editor), *Gimp*, and *Ardour* (a digital audio workstation for creating music). Yet, where it really shines is in offering more obscure packages, such as *synth* emulators, looping programs, *stopmotion* (for creating stop motion animations), and *enblend*, a graphics compositor.

None of the Ubuntu versions we found included quite so many packages or were so focused on giving end-users all the tools they could possibly want. Most of the underlying technology such as drivers and system utilities are the same as Ubuntu. Ubuntu Studio has one other primary strength: it is a 'real time' operating system so you can trust that when you are rendering an animation or playing a multi-tracking recording file the results will be timed correctly. Studio is an extensive, powerful distro for those who do

Quick tip

Linux Mint does not make a lot of fanfare about the technical features. For example, you can right-click on any file and share it to the Internet. Another perk: you can print any file – even text files – to a PDF just by using the Print dialog box and selecting PDF as the output.



» Ubuntu Studio includes a boatload of music sequencing utilities such as *Muse* and *Jackbeat*.

Video Apps in Ubuntu Studio

Some of the video production applications present in Ubuntu Studio include:

- » *Pitivi* Video editor.
- » *Cinepaint* A painting and image retouching program designed to work best with 35mm film and other high resolution high dynamic range images.
- » *Ffmpeg* Highly capable multimedia

player, server and encoder.

- » *Ffmpeg2theora* Theora video encoder using *ffmpeg*.
- » *Kino* A non-linear editor for Digital Video data.
- » *Stopmotion* A program for creating stop motion animation.
- » *Dvgrab* Grab digital video data via IEEE1394 links.

Ubuntu flavours

» not have the time to weed through the vast Ubuntu libraries looking for utilities.

"Ubuntu Studio is cool because it is set up the way I and others want it to be right out of the box," says Cork Kontros, the lead developer for the project. "We also have an active community and package integration with Ubuntu. Over the next year we have no major, world-changing plans. Just keep up with the latest developments in GNU/Linux multimedia creation and put them in a nice package for everyone. We are very much tied to what Ubuntu and the wider community does."

Try Ubuntu Studio if you:

1 Are a multimedia producer who needs quick access to common open source tools.

2 Want to learn audio and video production techniques.

» www.ubuntustudio.org

Ubuntu Christian Edition



This flavour of Ubuntu, perhaps more than any other, shows how narrow a Linux distro can go. As a basic fork of the main OS, the Christian Edition does not have any specific usability or technical enhancements, except for a powerful parental filter. Instead, its focus is on including several programs for reading the Bible, memorizing verses, and even running a "virtual rosary." The *GnomeSword* program allows you to search through the Bible and read commentary notes on specific passages. *Mozilla Firefox* is skinned with the Bible Fox Theme so the forward and back buttons look like the Christian fish symbol you see on the bumper of cars. *The Word*, another Bible search program, had one major error during install: it used Spanish instead of English.

One of the main reasons to choose Ubuntu Christian Edition is for the parental filter, which is enabled by default. This means you could hand out this version of Ubuntu to your kids or to a religious institution without worrying that users could search for pornography or other inappropriate content. Ubuntu Christian Edition uses *DansGuardian* (danguardian.org) for filtering. In tests, the filter blocked several obvious sites like **Playboy.com** and **Fleshbot.com**, but did not block **Zinio.com**, which sells adult magazines – in addition to many other consumer publications. Christian Edition is a good example of a small team adding some specific features to the main Ubuntu base with RSS feeds,

» **Ubuntu Christian Edition proves that there is an Ubuntu version for just about any group.**

bookmarks, tools, and full applications without really customizing the main build and driver-level support.

Try Ubuntu Christian Edition if you:

1 Are a Christian and want to use Bible study software.

2 Want to use a capable, pre-configured parental filter for your children (or yourself!)

» www.whatwouldjesusdownload.com/christianubuntu



Edubuntu

An official Canonical release for the K-12 education market, Edubuntu includes several learning programs for math, geometry, graphing, drawing, word quizzes, and other aids – most of them geared for younger children where an instructor leads students through a few select programs. Plans are already underway with the Edubuntu team, however, to make the distro more attractive to higher learning institutions and, indeed, there are a few 'upper level' tools such as *Gimp* (photo editing), *Scribus* (illustration), and all the typical tools for email (*Evolution*) and Web (*Firefox*).

Edubuntu does a lot more than just helps schools get up and running with Linux quickly with a wide selection of software titles. It is also a very thin distribution capable of running on older PCs – those beige boxes that some schools have filed away in a closet room for storage. In some ways, this thin operation – I tested Edubuntu on a PC that is six years old – proves the point about how Linux can work so well in education because of the low system requirements, and how a targeted version of Ubuntu makes sense for admins who want to standardize and make use of legacy equipment.

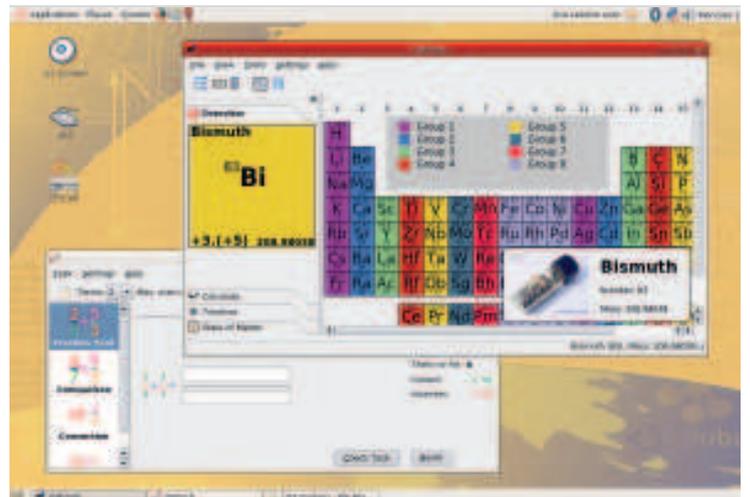
Like all official Ubuntu versions, you can obtain Edubuntu for free by requesting the CDs at edubuntu.org. (Note: Edubuntu differs from Eubuntu, which is a European fork.)

Try Edubuntu if you:

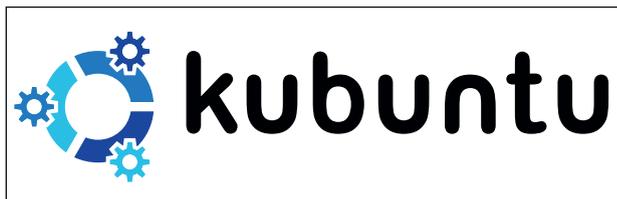
1 Work in a school and want a Linux distribution to use with classroom PCs.

2 Have kids who want to do their homework on a Linux desktop.

» www.edubuntu.org/download



» **For now, most of the programs included with Edubuntu are for K-12 classroom use.**



Kubuntu

It seems most Ubuntu forks use the Gnome desktop, but Kubuntu diverges from this trend. In many ways, it is a standard KDE build with *Konqueror* as the primary browser instead of *Firefox*, the *Adept* package manager and *Ubiquity* for installing programs, and the *Apport* crash manager. While Gnome has equivalents for all of these, some installed automatically and some available as packages, the KDE desktop is really a matter of taste – it tends to be a bit flashier (note the animated pop-ups when you move the mouse over the task bar) and more like Windows (at least at first glance), while Gnome seems to have a more traditional Linux flavour. *Konqueror* supports tabbed browsing and runs quite fast, and will not give you any trouble in common apps like Gmail or Web 2.0 tools such as *ThinkFree*.

What makes Kubuntu a different beast from other Ubuntu flavours built around Gnome is that the new KDE 4 desktop is causing waves that Gnome users are not feeling – yet. Jonathan Riddell, the Canonical contact for Kubuntu, said that preparations for KDE 4 are a prime concern.

“The major focus is to get it ready for KDE 4,” says Riddell. “That’s a lot of work for packaging and ensuring KDE 3 apps and KDE 4 apps can run alongside. There are a few parts of Kubuntu which need to be ported to KDE 4 such as the version upgrade tool and the *Guidance* suite of admin tools.”

Try Kubuntu if you:

- 1 Prefer KDE over Gnome desktop.
 - 2 Want to stick with an officially sanctioned Ubuntu version.
- » www.kubuntu.org



» The most noticeable difference between Kubuntu and other distros is that it is built on KDE3.

Mythbuntu

It’s no secret that Linux is an ideal OS for watching, recording, and archiving video. The popularity of *MythTV* – which is like a digital video recorder for your desktop – proves this point. Mythbuntu is a stripped-down version of the Linux distro without all the extra frills of word processing, image editing, instant messaging, or even e-mail (although there is a browser). While you can install each of these programs, the real purpose of Mythbuntu is to help you get *MythTV* (www.mythtv.org) up and running as quickly as possible. There are two steps. The first is in configuring the “frontend” of the part of the video stream you watch. Like any good DVR, this portion

of the program runs in full screen with the assumption that you will be running it on a television. You can scan through channels, hit a button to record any show you want, and watch archived TV.

The second configuration process involves the ‘backend’ where you configure your PC daughtercard for receiving a TV signal. We used Pinnacle Micro EyeTV and were watching television on a Dish Network ViP622 set-top box in no time. As *MythTV* has an active community, there are plenty of drivers available for PC cards, even a few obscure or outdated ones. The desktop is clean and unadorned: you can focus on television recording. The black and blue colour scheme works well for video. We did experience several crashes during testing, mostly while browsing websites in *Firefox*.

Try Mythbuntu if you:

- 1 Want to record television shows with *MythTV*.
 - 2 Prefer a lean distro without many extraneous packages.
- » www.mythbuntu.org

Fluxbuntu

We’ll come clean on Fluxbuntu: it is both an amazing version of Ubuntu that will revitalize an older PC and one of our top picks, and also a crash-prone so-and-so that needs more testing. You can

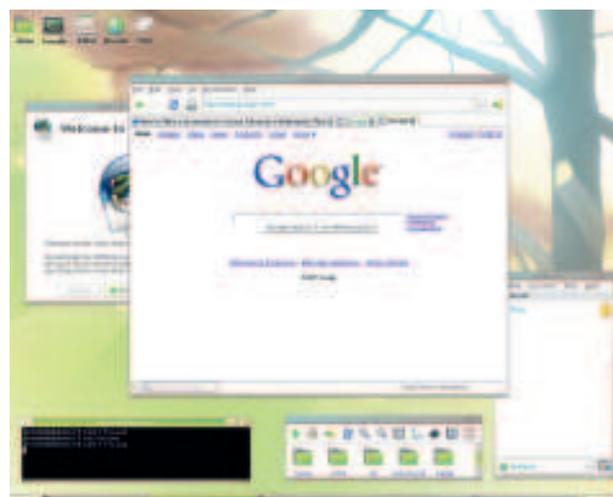


download it in a few minutes on a high-speed connection – the ISO file is just over 300MB, or almost as small as Nubuntu (a networking-only distro with no GUI). Fluxbuntu crashed on a Dell 8500 desktop, two home-built machines, and on Fujitsu and HP notebooks. (This makes us think it is not a hardware compatibility issue.) And, we’ll be honest and say it is slightly ugly with a faint blurriness about it due to poor colour choices.

So what makes it so great? The whole idea with this distro is to keep the GUI as clean and fast as possible. It is designed from the ground up to run on just about any computer. It uses the Fluxbox desktop, which is clean and sharp around the edges (despite the colour blurriness we mentioned earlier). Unlike KDE, this is not a desktop that dazzles with animations. And, each included program is lightweight enough to never bog down an aging system: it offers *AbiWord* for word processing, the *Kazehakase* browser – which is less memory intensive than even *Firefox* – and *Claws*, an ultra basic email client. Fluxbuntu is so “thin” that it is easily the fastest loading operating system we have ever tested – it literally pops-up on the desktop in just one or two seconds.

Try Fluxbuntu if you:

- 1 Have an older PC incapable of running more robust distros.
 - 2 Want to use a thin OS that is lightning fast.
- » www.fluxbuntu.org **LXF**



Quick tip



The family tree for Linux Mint, like so many Ubuntu forks, has many variants and offshoots. www.linuxmint.com/upload/mint_ubuntu.png



» Fluxbuntu uses *FluxBox* to minimize the memory requirements – it works on just about any PC.