Keeping your computer safe with Linux

Rescue Me

When thinking about ways you could rescue your system with Linux, the thought occurred to me: Why not rescue your life? Because that's what Linux can do for you.

By Brian Proffitt

I like to think that I am a good cook, but not a good chef. To me, the difference between a cook and a chef is that a cook is someone who can use basic cooking skills and put together some decent and simple food, usually by following a recipe. A chef is someone who creates wonderful and new food by understanding how food works together. Give a cook some eggs, peppers, and cheese, and they'll probably whip up a decent western omelet. Chefs could take the same ingredients and put together something like a pepper-infused cheese soufflé, just off the top of their heads.

Using Linux is a lot like being a cook in a world where it's easy to open a box, boil some dry goods, and call it macaroni and cheese – when you could just as easily and with a little more time make homemade mac and cheese that would be infinitely better tasting and even better for you.

Windows and Macs, it could be argued, are like those boxes of preprocessed food. You bring them home from the store, follow the simple instructions, and you've got yourself a meal. Or a computer, as the case may be. You can even call it home-cooked, but really, that's not what you've done at all. You've heated and rehydrated.

Bringing a computer home from the store is a lot like that experience. You open the box, plug it in, run some rudimentary configuration routines, and you've set up a computer; however, this is really treating computer-as-a-appliance, and it's not necessarily the best way to approach this powerful device you've set up in your home or office.

Think for a moment what you are asking this device to do: organize your life, store your memories, create content for work, and connect with friends and family across the planet. That's a lot of important stuff. Is it really something you want to entrust to a device you know little about?

That's what using Linux gets you, ultimately. It gives you a little more knowledge about how your computer is put together, which you in turn can use to make your system safer, more powerful, and even easier to use.

The benefits of using Linux are immediately available when you start using it. Right away, your system is more stable and less prone to crashing, and it's virtually free from attack by viruses and malware, which are very much geared to go after those Windows and Mac machines.

However, with a little tech knowledge, you can update your system and take other steps to protect your computer and reclaim some of your life by not having to worry about things going wrong.

Make a Rescue CD

Making a rescue CD is pretty simple; you can pretty much use any Linux Live CD out there. Some are better than others, of course, and for my money you can't do better

than Knoppix [1], a security-oriented distribution that's designed to bail staggering systems out and get them back on their feet – or at least get your important data recovered so you can use it on a working machine.

Rescue CDs are great for fixing broken boot systems, recovering data, or reconfiguring your hard drive to fit your needs. They are not to be used lightly, of course. Like learning how to use an oven, you will need to be careful, but these software tools are an awesome thing to have in your arsenal.

Encrypt Your Hard Drive

Encrypting your files, or at the very least, your `/home` directory, is a very worthwhile step because if your computer falls into the wrong hands, encryption will prevent anyone from opening your files and seeing what's inside.

Don't think that just because you have a password on your user account, you'll be safe from intrusion. Anyone with a Live CD or Linux thumb drive can easily launch Linux on your computer and get right to your files the same way you will be able to if you use these tools to recover your own data.

Encryption will prevent such access, displaying only random garbage to any intruders on your system. Yes, you will need a new password to manage, but if that's the worst price to pay, it's well worth it.

Shut Down Services

When Linux is first installed, it has various channels of communication to the outside world open in case you need to use them.

One such service is Samba, which enables your Linux computer to talk to Windows machines on your network. If that's something you can use, great, but if you don't have Windows machines on your network, then why leave that door open for a potential hacker to get into? Moreover, it's just one more thing running on your computer.

Get some safety and some speed back by closing down services like Samba if you don't need them. Another good service to consider is Bluetooth, for which your computer might not even have the installed hardware. Don't go crazy with this, and definitely do the legwork before shutting things down. Some software de-

pends on those services and will break if they aren't available. Consult various Linux documentation sources [2] to find out which services are the best to consider shutting down.

A Decent Meal

None of these options require a master's expertise. You just need to know how to follow directions available for your Linux distribution. In the days of yore, you almost had to be a chef-level expert to be a Linux user. Those days are gone.
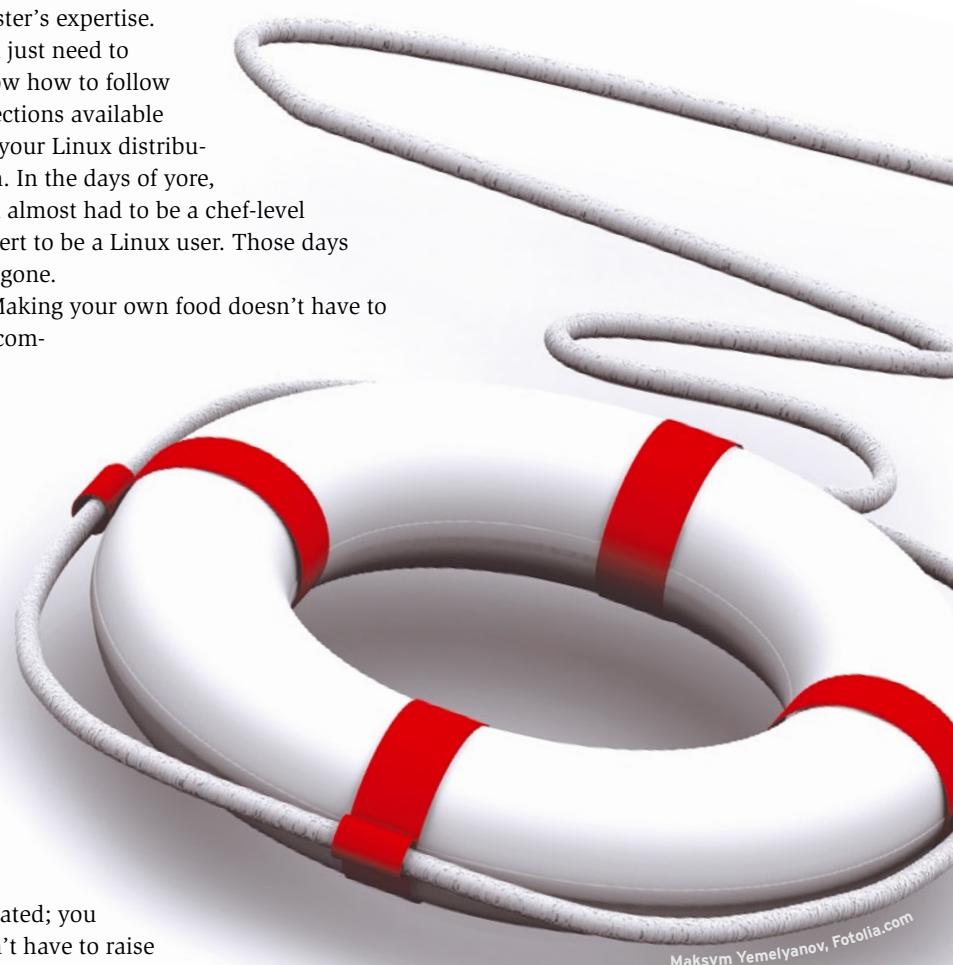
Making your own food doesn't have to be com-

Maksym Yemelyanov, Fotolia.com

plicated; you don't have to raise the chickens, make the cheese, and grow the peppers. Just buy what you need and put it together yourself.

That's what you can do with Linux: Get what you need and spend a little time learning how it works. The data in your computers could be about your life. Isn't it important to spend the little extra time and save yourself from pretty but ultimately empty operating systems? ∎∎∎

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[1] Knoppix: *http://www.knopper.net/knoppix/index-en.html*

[2] Enabling and disabling services on startup: *http://www.aboutlinux.info/2006/04/enabling-and-disabling-services-during_01.html*