

DOWN TO THE WIRE • NICHOLAS PETRELEY

Linux Unix can't really be called commercial; let's brand it underware

LINUX — how shall we describe it? It is the Volkswagen Unix for the PC. It's the layman's Unix. It's underware. And it's the focus of a well-organized plot. It's got to be.

Every time we mention a new project, we're bound to get dozens of letters telling us to use Linux to accomplish the task. It won't matter what the task is. Biorhythm charts. "I've been doing them charts with the free version of Linux for years," someone will write. We guarantee it.

In fact, Linux users have a dogged enthusiasm for their product unmatched even by the passion of followers of the, well, the "A" word. (Pst! It's a machine once sold by a company with a name that sounds something like "commode door" — wink wink, nudge nudge.)

Linux pulls a wedge

We classify Linux as underware because, technically, we can't call it shareware or freeware, especially if we're talking about one of the professionally supported, licensed versions of Linux such as our copy of Slackware Linux from Morse Telecommunications Inc. So we've arbitrarily ranked it at some nebulous level below commercial software, at least as far as how it is developed, updated, and supported.

Just between us, our target readership generally doesn't want to risk using underware in a mission-critical environment, so we wouldn't normally look at an operating system like Linux. But we are just the sort of

rabble to champion the cause of a piece of really good underware if it's appropriate, so we're taking a look at Linux in our product comparison of Internet gateways.

We crack open the CD-ROM, and Systems Analyst Steve Irvin prepares the boot disks for installation. According to the instructions, we need to create a boot loader disk and an installation disk. Steve uses the disk image that supports both SCSI CD-ROM and network access.

The installation program won't recognize the CD-ROM drive. Steve swaps SCSI controller cards and CD-ROM drives, hoping to find a brand combination that works. He gets nowhere.

That's where I come in to save the day. I swap SCSI controller cards and CD-ROM drives, hoping to find a brand combination that works. I get nowhere, outside of giving Steve *déjà vu*. So much for saving the day.

I gaze at the SCSI CD-ROM and network installation disk. Then I recall from the last time I installed Linux (that's about all I've ever had time to do with it) that the installation disk doesn't need to include network drivers. The documentation isn't clear about this, so just like I did back then, Steve assumed that the combination SCSI CD-ROM and network disk is necessary for your final installation will be connected to a network.

Not so. This disk is only necessary if you're going to be installing Linux from a network.

We recreate the install disk, using the generic SCSI CD-ROM installation disk image. Minutes later, Linux easily autodetects and configures itself for our Adaptec SCSI card, and it recognizes our CD-ROM drive. Score.

Installation ad tedium

We select the portions of the product we want installed. We choose the installation mode in which it installs the necessary modules automatically, but asks us permission for the optional ones. Unfortunately, it turns out that there are so many optional pieces to Linux, we spend the better part of an hour saying yes and no to endless installation choices.

Once we're done, it's pretty easy to set up TCP/IP and get Linux networking. To our amazement, it comes with support for our 3C509 network card — something even SCO Unix lacks in the box.

We fool around at the command line for a while to get a feel for this product. We really like how Linux color-codes file types when you get a directory listing. This lets you get a good idea of what's in a directory without having to use any command-line switches for the directory command [f]ls.

After fooling around with Linux some more, we notice that we forgot to install X Windows. We probably won't need the graphical interface for the purposes of using Linux as an Internet gateway, but we're curious to see how well it is implemented. We rerun the setup program and select the X Windows modules for installation. It asks us about the CD-ROM drive and then promptly gives us an error message when it attempts to mount the drive. We can retry the operation (which will never

work) or abort.

Now, this probably all happens because the CD-ROM drive is mounted at boot time, and it's failing to remount it. But, as is typical with commercial software and underware alike, it's not smart enough to bypass the step automatically. Nor does it give us a succinct message like "Hey dummy, the drive's already mounted!" It just fails.

We ring up technical support and confirm that this is indeed the problem. Now that we're sure, we rerun setup and choose the "install from a pre-mentioned device" option when it asks to specify the CD-ROM drive.

We admit, the installation is going more smoothly than what we'd expect from an underware product. Most of the problems aren't anything a little extra documentation couldn't fix. We mentioned this to our technical support fellow, and he said certain things are not documented anywhere because portions of the product, such as setup, are not part of Slackware but are "added value" courtesy of Morse Telecommunications. Frankly, we get more than a little fuzzy on this Slackware/Prose/Linux thing, and which parts of this product belong to whom. But I guess that's what you have to expect when you go about sharing bits of underware.

Wow. Next week, we'll go over the rest of our setup headwinds. Steve Irvin, Senior Analyst Susan Ryan, and my dog contributed to this column.

Admittedly, my dog's contribution didn't add much. Send E-mail via the Internet to nicholas_petreley@infoworld.com, MCI Mail 527-1353, or CompuServe 71333.426.



> IS management software

SkillView takes new tack: fitting employee skills to the right jobs

■ Database front end lets IS match new hires to their work, quickly create teams for projects

By Mike Heck

SKILLVIEW TECHNOLOGIES' SkillView is a skills inventory client/server database created in Powersoft Corp.'s PowerBuilder environment. If you're an IS manager, SkillView can help you train and deploy your staff more effectively. Although this product is designed for IS organizations, I also see potential in other areas, as long as employees' skills can be quantified. For instance, the software could find a home within hospitals where nursing supervisors need to keep staff skills current or when they must locate qualified personnel in an emergency.

SkillView, a Windows client application, acts as a front end to most relational databases, including Oracle, Sybase SQL Server, Informix,

dBase, DB2, and Microsoft Access. If you want to run in stand-alone mode, SkillView has a single-user run-time version of Watcom's SQL.

To use SkillView, you populate the data repository with three types of information: the skills required by your organization, the required level of performance for each skill for each position, and each employee's actual level of competence in each skill. All functions are available from a push-button interface or drop-down menus, making SkillView accessible by nontechnical users.

Adding employees required me to pass through the proper administration security sign-on and then record data such as name, employee ID, and department. All of this is done through a simple form. If

a particular role or department didn't exist, I conveniently added it on this screen. In much the same way, managers and supervisors enter or modify skill categories and actual ratings for each employee.

Because SkillView is a specialized database, it's most beneficial when you examine the different built-in reports and run query functions. For example, I requested a fitness report that compared an employee's actual profile with the model defined for a particular position. This might help a supervisor spot deficiencies that could be improved by formal training. I then summarized that same information for an entire department to see if common training needs existed. You might also try SkillView for organizational planning and career counseling, such as

helping employees build skills to improve their career opportunities.

SkillView also lets you search for employees who meet certain criteria — a useful function when you have a quickly assemble a team to complete a special project. There's also a submodule where you establish skills for a job you want to fill. This lets you go much deeper than what's on a candidate's resume, and it may help you avoid costly hiring mistakes. SkillView can improve employee performance appraisals and help you refine job descriptions.

I'm concerned that the product has a lot of layers and menus, which take time to understand and navigate in spite of on-line help for most screens. SkillView also seems costly. What may make it worth your

Opinion: ☺

SkillView

Version 1.0

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Price: \$15,750 (single-station, stand-alone), \$26,500 (client/server)

Pros: Quantitative view of staff skills; works with most relational databases; full query and reporting capabilities.

Cons: Costly; needs a more logical menu structure.

money is that this is a distinctive tool — most human resources packages focus exclusively on people rather than skills. And in the coming years, honing your workforce's skills to remain competitive will take on greater importance.