

Buying apple hardware just to run linux?

As mentioned in my previous post, I moved back to using Linux as my desktop operating system, coming from OSX. I have a couple of notes on the why and some observations about it which may be of interest.

My main machine has been a macbook pro 17 inch (or powerbook when they still had a ppc in them) for a couple of years now and I was pretty much a happy camper using OSX. OSX has represented an ideal mix for my long unix based experience and the need for screen candy and proper support of drivers which make usage of the hardware flawless.

In short, my hardware broke down. That is, it broke down a bit. Every once in a while I'd get coloured stripes on my screen or a yellowish glow or fonts of which the letter 'm' would not display correctly (go figure). Annoying, but fixable with a reboot and I could live with that, at least for a short period of time. When the machine started rebooting spontaneously and I started losing work because of it, replacement seemed the only option left.

As the problem was intermittent and seemed a bit related to how hard I was hitting the cpu with my compiler whip, I decided, before scrapping the machine, to install ubuntu linux on it, just to see how it would deal with the same hardware error and to have a look at the new ubuntu (at that time Lucid) release.

The hardware problem was still present under Linux, but I was able to control it. A major help was to be able to control the fanspeed and thus the temperature of the machine. This was something that I never succeeded in doing under OSX. Perhaps I didn't look hard enough, or was not experienced enough in OSX details or whatever. Fact remains, I got to control the fans in Linux within the hour and with that a large portion of the problem.

By carefully configuring display settings and upgrading to newer customized kernels I am now in the situation that my machine is basically back to a state where "*scrapping it*" sounds ridiculous and it's good to go for a while.

The above process took about 3 to 4 weeks. After that I realized that the level of control I had over my machine felt really good.

Having worked on a daily basis under Linux a notable observation was that I didn't really miss anything from OSX, apart from a dedicated blogging application (MarsEdit) and possibly iTunes. Apart from those, most of the applications I

used a lot are also available on Linux. Emacs and Claws mail actually run a lot better on Linux than they do on OSX. I do have a solution for the blogging (org2blog with emacs), but replacing iTunes is still a problem;

So, now I have apple hardware all over and not using OSX on any of it. At first, that does not sound like a smart thing to do. From a financial point of view for one, most people argue that apple hardware may be expensive, but a lot of quality software comes included. Throwing the software away, which is effectively what you do when you go running linux on that hardware, does not make much sense then, does it?

What I found however, is that it is quite a challenge to match the macbook pro specs, build quality and features like the magsafe connector for the same price. Add to that an ability to drive the 30" screen and it's pretty darn difficult to find a machine other than the macbook pro series from apple. (I was charmed by the Sony Vaio Z series, but it can't drive the 30"-screen and it's a bit more expensive than an MBP too) Viewed from this (admittedly biased) angle it makes sense, even if you don't plan on running OSX to buy a macbook pro again.

On top of all what is above, there is another issue which has been bothering me, and apparently I'm not alone in this, is the general direction Apple is taking. While I love their attention to detail and precise execution of production of their hardware, I loathe the way they treat (iPhone) developers and their strategy of control and censorship. The latest preview of OSX Lion only confirmed my concerns. Notably the appstore developments and the limitation of freedom to run software is bothering me. I guess the balance was held in some way with their sort-of-open contributions to several pieces of software (darwin, calendarserver, launchd etc.) but lately the scale tipped over for me.

I fully realize this is all subjective and food for rants and all, but hey, it's my blog. :-)