

COMPUTERS MADE EASY

SIMPLE GUIDES TO GET THE BEST FROM YOUR COMPUTER

What is Software ?

In this article, I will discuss what software is and all its roles.

The Operating System

Software is, simply, computer programs. (It is convention to use the American spelling).

However, there are programs that are part of the system, there are programs that are utilities, like anti-virus software, and there are programs designed to be used by the user and which perform a specific task. For example, a word processor.

The main, and most important piece of software on your computer, beyond all doubt, is the **Operating System**.

The Operating System is responsible for allocating memory and CPU and Hard Drive space to programs, making sure that they do not conflict, and also for running other programs.

The Operating System also allows your computer to access the Internet, print, save and recover files and documents.

Microsoft Windows is the most common Operating System, having an overwhelming share of the market. Indeed, it is the only Operating System most people know of. Windows comes in different versions, one succeeding the other: Windows XP, Windows Vista, and, now, Windows 7. There are also much older versions, thankfully all but extinct.

Continued



Microsoft Windows 7

Apple Macintosh Computers have their own Operating System, called OS X. (Also named “OS ten”). However, technically, “Mac OS” will only run on Apple computers, due to slight differences in the way the computers are constructed. Mac OS, like Windows, comes in different versions, named, for some reason, after big cats. The most recent being Tiger, Leopard, Snow Leopard and Lion.

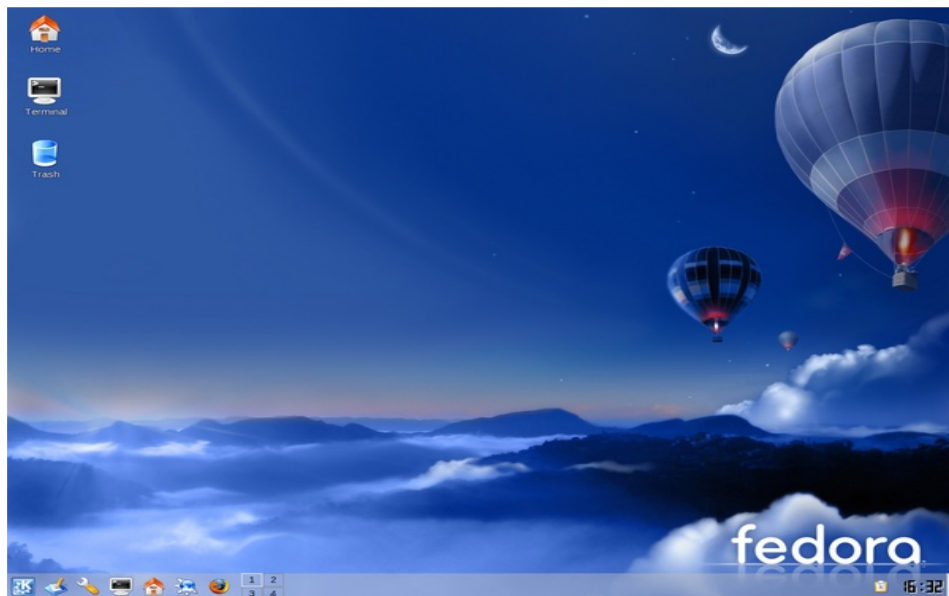


Apple OS X "Leopard"

Another Operating System, less well known, is the Linux Operating System. Linux is the most flexible and robust OS. Linux can run on either a PC or a Mac, and, indeed, runs on many mobile phones. Android is a form of Linux.

Linux comes in many, many varieties, from full blown systems easily comparable to Windows or Mac OS, to tiny versions with no Graphical User Interface. Linux is usually free! It has a good reputation for being virus proof and its rate of development is very fast. Linux is not quite so user friendly if you like to meddle- you have to do a bit of learning- but if you don't meddle, it is very hard to beat.

Over 70% of computers that hold websites on the Internet (called “Web Servers”) use Linux or its ancestor, Unix.



"Fedora" Linux, one of many Linux's

So, now we move to the next category of software: Programs, more accurately called “Applications”.

Applications

Word processors are applications. So are photo editors, databases, anti-virus tools, web browsers, email software, and many, many other programs. These are copied (“Installed”) to the computer and the Operating System mediates between the Hardware (Memory or, for example, printer) and other software. Applications basically extend your computer's capability.

Finally, we have Files. Files come in many types: some are created by the user, some by Applications, and some by the system, and they are also components of the system or applications.

Some files are not designed to be touched, and are needed for the Operating System or programs to run. For that reason, most Operating Systems create a place for your, the user, files, and tries to keep the system and program files separate. Some Operating Systems are better at this than others. It is vital that users don't go deleting important files, and also vital that other software cannot alter, delete or modify important system files. Many computer viruses (which are themselves programs) work this way.

Ordinary user files may be word processor files, (called a “Document”, like the paper object it resembles), photos, images of other sorts, spreadsheets, databases, or web pages, to name but a few.

Most files can be identified by a suffix, often of 3 letters:

A Microsoft “Word” Word processor document may be called “my poem.doc”

A digital photo or scan may be called “My photo.jpeg”.

A program may be called “word.exe”.

Unfortunately, Microsoft, in their wisdom, turn the viewing of these suffixes (called “File extensions”) off by default. It can be turned back on, though.

So, software is split into the Operating System, (needed to run the computer and all its functions), Programs (Applications), needed to do specific tasks, like surf the Internet, receive email or edit photos, and Files, which may be system files, part of programs, or the computer user's saved work.

It is very useful to familiarise yourself with this concept, because by doing so, you'll become more confident about what files are yours, and which are not. This can help prevent losing your work!

For instance, if you lose a photograph, you will know that you are looking for a .jpeg file, usually.

Eventually, you'll also know what to do with files. For example, if you see a file with the suffix of .pdf, then you'll know that you are dealing with a file like this guide you are reading!

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