

# The entrepreneur

The man behind Ubuntu, 'Linux for human beings', has won over developers who want to keep open source free, writes Ben King

**S**o you have made half a billion dollars and you have paid for a trip to space. What on earth do you do next? Some might consider politics, others would sit back and enjoy a life of leisure. But for technology entrepreneur and cosmonaut Mark Shuttleworth the next battle was to take on the might of Microsoft on its core territory – the desktop.

He has developed a complete suite of software for personal computers that handles everything from the inner workings to word processing. It is called Ubuntu, named after one of the founding principles of post-apartheid South Africa, the country where he was born. In both the Zulu and Xhosa languages, it means "humanity to others".

The project is based on Linux, the free operating system written largely by volunteers and widely used by businesses, governments

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and other organisations to run servers, the computers that sit at the heart of networks. Ubuntu is meant to take this complex but powerful system and make it easy for non-technical people to use. Hence the project's mission statement – "Linux for human beings".

Although the technology behind it may be very different, a computer running Ubuntu looks much like one running Microsoft's Windows. The interface is based on similar menus, icons and windows, and users can surf the internet with the popular Firefox browser, or edit

documents and spreadsheets with OpenOffice.

Instead of the largely blue world of Windows XP, Ubuntu is predominantly brown. Some quirky features hint at its African origin, such as the little burst of drumming that rings out when an application opens. Each new version of Ubuntu is known not just by the usual number, but an animal codename, such as Warty Warthog or Breezy Badger.

Less than two years after launch, Ubuntu has established itself as a favourite among the hundreds of different Linux-based operating systems. Ubuntu is top by some distance on a popularity chart for different flavours of Linux compiled by the website, DistroWatch. Exact numbers are hard to come by, but estimates put the number of computers running Ubuntu at up to 6m and doubling every eight months.

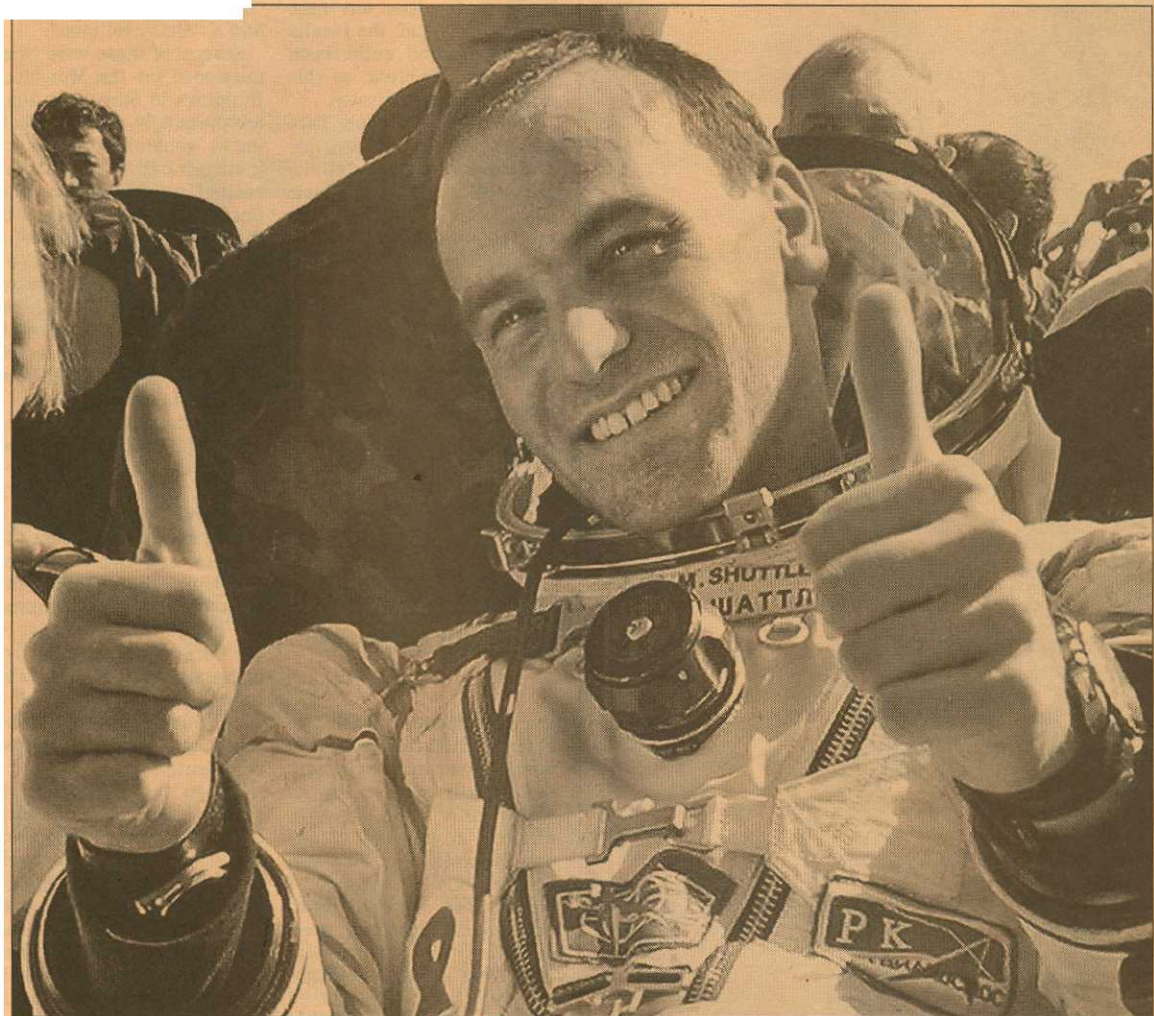
Unlike some of the other leading Linux projects, such as Linspire, Novell and Red Hat, Ubuntu is distributed entirely free. Users can download it and use it without paying at all, and Mr Shuttleworth's company, Canonical, will even post a free installation compact disc to anyone who requests it.

This is possible because of Mr Shuttleworth's vast fortune. He made \$575m selling his internet company, Thawte Consulting, in 1999, and invests about \$10m a year in Ubuntu. It is unlikely to make him any money, at least not for several years. Canonical sells support and related services for Ubuntu, but Mr Shuttleworth has no firm idea about when it will make a profit.

He launched the project because he believes he is in the vanguard of a revolution. "It is very high risk," he says. "It is not a sensible business model. But shaping the digital platform of the future is an incredibly interesting position to be in."

He has certainly created a powerful and effective desk-

# who wants to give



Down to earth: after spending \$20m on a trip to space Mark Shuttleworth is investing millions in Ubuntu, his new project

AP

top software package. From its commitment to freedom to its quirky public image, Ubuntu has many appealing features and considerable momentum. However, to continue growing at the current rate, it will need to expand beyond its existing technology-savvy base to embrace people with no prior experience of Linux.

Linux consultant and author Tom Adelstein thinks it is still hard for such people to use. "From a usability point of view, Ubuntu is ahead of the others, I think. But it is still in the Linux bag - you have to be computer literate to use it. Microsoft is still far ahead on that." Likewise, many buyers will be put off by the fact that a number of programs, notably games, are not available for Linux systems.

Few of those target users

would install an operating system themselves. So a key stage in Ubuntu's growth will be persuading PC makers to sell machines with Ubuntu already installed. Some computer makers already ship PCs with Linux suites such as Linspire.

Smaller PC makers, competing at the lower end of the market, are particularly interested in free software, as it helps them to cut their prices. Small companies account for one-third of the global market, according to research company IDC, and Mr Shuttleworth is soon to visit Taiwan to open negotiations with some of them.

Corporate and government desktops may also be fertile ground for growth. A survey by Forrester, the research company, found that 30 per cent of companies in North America are considering

switching some or all of their desktops to Linux.

Among those changing is Google, which has developed its own version of Ubuntu, called Goobuntu. Mr Shuttleworth says he is also in talks with the city government in Munich about creating an edition of Ubuntu for them.

This ability to customise Linux is a big selling point, and Canonical is developing an easy way for corporations to design and maintain specific versions of Ubuntu to suit their exact needs.

Although a stock-market darling such as Google may seem an excellent reference customer, it has an intense rivalry with Microsoft so it is keener than average to try alternatives to Windows. Other organisations will need more convincing reasons to adopt Ubuntu. Being free is clearly an advantage

and Linux advocates argue that the security and robustness of Linux products are superior to those of Windows, although these issues are hotly debated.

Mr Shuttleworth has managed to rally one important group around his standard: developers. Canonical has just 50 staff, but Ubuntu has attracted many thousands of engineers at partner companies, as well as volunteers and students, who do most of the work of extending and improving the software.

The Ubuntu community

# it all away

## MARK SHUTTLEWORTH: A STELLAR CAREER

Mark Shuttleworth has no clear idea of when his new venture will make a profit but, based on his past experience, tech watchers are treating the project seriously.

■ Mark Shuttleworth made his fortune in 1999, when Thawte Consulting, the company he started in a garage in Cape Town, was bought by VeriSign for \$575m. An e-commerce security company, it did much to make the explosion of online retailing possible, and its technology is still widely used today.

■ In 2002, he spent \$20m to join the Russian space programme as a cosmonaut, training for a year before blasting off from a launch pad in Kazakhstan. He was the first

African in orbit and the world's second paying visitor to space.

■ After spending some time "sowing my wild oats and enjoying the world", he decided to put his financial and intellectual weight into a free software system for the desktop, Ubuntu. "I was struck by the incredible pace of change in free software to the desktop. It seemed to me that the key developers in the free software world had identified the desktop as the next interesting problem," he says. For him, it was a return to his origins, as the technology his first company developed was based on Linux. "It was only possible for me to build Thawte because of the existence of Linux," he says.

has a reputation for friendliness – which is important when you are not being paid. Also, many developers who dislike the increasing commercialisation of other Linux projects are attracted by Ubuntu's commitment to remaining free.

However, selling Ubuntu beyond the circle of geeky initiates will require a massive marketing and education process, and even Mr Shuttleworth's deep pockets are no match for the budgets of Microsoft and Apple. He hopes that the virtues of a free, open operating system will sell themselves.

"My instinct tells me that free software is going to be a significant force on the desktop," he says. "Whether that is an Apple Mac-like force of 3-5 per cent; or whether that is a Linux in the data centre [on servers] force, that is 50 per cent and growing really, really fast – I don't know."

With no serious business plan, it would be easy to dismiss Ubuntu as the plaything of a whimsical hobbyist that will not go far

beyond the geek fraternity. Can a Breezy Badger really be a serious challenge to a titan like Microsoft?

During his interview with the Financial Times, Mr Shuttleworth sits across his chair with both legs on the armrest, as if it were a hammock – not something you imagine Larry Ellison, Oracle's chief executive, doing.

But he has an impressive record, and you certainly cannot question his dedication. He is currently on a gruelling three-week world tour in his private jet, promoting Ubuntu and making contacts in Croatia, Pakistan, India, China, Indonesia and Kenya. After that, he plans to "unwind" by meeting other enthusiasts for free software in, of all places, the war-torn republic of Sierra Leone.

For some, Mr Shuttleworth just seems to be having too much fun to be taken seriously. But Linux has surprised many people before – there is nothing a geek finds more fun than turning a whole industry on its head.

### MONDAY

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### THE WEEK IN BUSINESS LIFE

MONDAY Management  
TUESDAY Creative Business  
WEDNESDAY Entrepreneurship  
THURSDAY The Professions  
FRIDAY Science & Technology