It recently occurred to me that I didn’t have enough stress in my life, so I decided to try the SuSE Linux (www.novell.com/products/suselinux) operating system. As a long-time Windows user — I go back to the original coal-fired version — I knew that Windows was good for a few daily headaches, but if I really wanted to suffer for my journalistic art, I had to embrace an alternative operating system. No pain, no gain, and all that. So I bought a computer running Linux, fired it up, and stared at the screen in a catatonic-like state until my eyeballs glazed over. It was a big day for me.

When the paramedics departed, I found myself surrounded by dancing penguins (the Linux mascot) and K-things like Kmail, Klipper, Konqueror, and Konfusion. But let’s start at the beginning and answer the magical question, “What the heck is Linux?”

Linux (pronounced LYNN-ux, not LINE-ux) is a multi-tasking operating system, considered by many to be a viable alternative to Windows. It’s available in a number of varieties, called distributions or “distros,” to those with a pathological desire to sound cool. Unlike Microsoft that produces all versions of Windows, a number of companies produce distributions of Linux, and while they’re all fairly similar, each has its distinct differences. Names of distributions include Debian, Fedora, Gentoo, Knoppix, Lindows, Mandrake, Red Hat, Slackware, Xandros, and the list goes on. I’m using Novell’s SuSE Linux because it’s arguably the most user-friendly version — oops, distribution.

Linux is an open source program, which means that its source code is open to the world, unlike Windows. To this day, thousands of programmers continue to work on and improve Linux.

As an operating system, Linux is more secure and stable than Windows, and as I’ll discuss, has a number of advantages over Windows. Relatively speaking, however, there are very few Linux users when contrasted with Windows users, though that is destined to change over time. Windows still dominates the computer world, running on 90 percent of all desktop computers. Linux, however, is making in-roads and recently surpassed the mighty Macintosh in sales.

There are several reasons Linux is garnering as much attention as it is: One big plus is that anti-virus and anti-spyware programs aren’t needed (at least not yet); and as an operating system, it rarely, if ever, freezes or crashes. And if that’s not enough, virtually every piece of software you could possibly want is free — well, with the possible exception of CAT software ... but give it time.
Open source is causing great anxiety among many software vendors. Even Microsoft is rethinking its pricing structure and business model in light of open source.

So why discuss Linux? Looking to the future, it’s important to be aware of the existence of the Linux operating system and the open-source concept. You’ll be hearing a lot more about it in the future, and some of you may even decide to try it at some point. In fact, in a development that shook the rafters in Redmond, three of the world’s biggest electronics companies, IBM, Sony, and Philips, joined forces with the two largest Linux distributors, Novell and Red Hat, to create a company for sharing royalty-free Linux patents. The Open Invention Network will facilitate the adoption and integration of Linux into the computer and consumer electronics worlds, further challenging Microsoft’s software dominance. In short, the future is extraordinarily bright for Linux.

Historically, the kernel or core programming code for what became the Linux operating system was written by a Finnish student named Linus Torvalds. It’s based on the Unix operating system, which is the foundation for many corporate and Web site servers. In August 1991, Torvalds posted a now legendary message on the Internet announcing that he was working on a free operating system as a hobby, and he requested feedback from other programmers. The rest, as they say, is history. The name Linux is a combination of “Linus’s Unix,” just in case anybody ever asks.

What started as a geeky recreational project captured the imagination of programmers worldwide, who then collaborated, tweaked, and refined what we today know as the Linux operating system. It is this spirit of “community” that pervades the Linux culture.

Coming up next month, we’ll explore the Linux culture, some of the unique terminology associated with Linux, and I’ll talk about several “mindset” issues one confronts when attempting to learn a new operating system. Let’s just say it’s very humbling and leave it at that for now.

ICR Contributing Editor Richard “Mr. Modem” Sherman, RDR, lives in Phoenix, Ariz. For personal answers to your computer questions by e-mail, subscribe to Mr. Modem’s Weekly Newsletter. For more information or to subscribe, visit www.MrModem.com.

WHOSE FAULT IS IT?

REPRESENTATIVE: It is not a no-fault State if it has a $2,000 benefit. The bill is faulty no-fault, just like we find in Michigan. I agree with them that fault with no-fault is not no-fault. The fault with no-fault is faulty no-fault.

Joe Strickland, RPR, CRR
Washington, D.C.