

Underground Desktop 021 - it rocks!

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Yes, I am really excited about this one! Underground Desktop 021 might be an early development version, but it already works very well, and that despite using some really cutting edge features: Reiser4 as the only filesystem, KDE 3.5 as the only desktop, and the kernel is 2.6.14 with archck patchset. (Archck includes Con Kolivas' patches, plus support for a few new filesystems, for example Reiserfs4 and shfs, and a few other bits).

Underground is based on Arch Linux and it inherits all that is great about Arch - pacman for package management, optimisation for i686 architecture, and above all, my personal favourite: Arch's beautiful, simple and effective rc.config holding most of system settings.

Underground adds its own installer, which is very, very simple. Perhaps even too simple, because the only choice the user gets to make is the root password (and creating two partitions with cfdisk). Beware, Underground *will* install its Lilo in MBR, no questions asked! I believe Lilo is necessary, because Grub has trouble booting Reiser4 partitions, and Underground uses Reiser4 whether you like that or not - no other choices are offered. I would also like to be able to add a non-root user during the installation, but that option is missing as well. However, it was easy enough to add a user later, with KDE user manager. Underground did a great job configuring my display, and initially got the network settings with DHCP. Again, it was simple to change them to static IP I wanted with KDE tools. The desktop includes a link to short, but useful Post Install Notes which mentions setting up the network as well as several useful steps required to bring the system up to speed in the multimedia department because video codecs, flash and Java are not installed by default. But they are easy to add with pacman, no other work required.

I am not usually too worried about booting speed, but I couldn't help noticing Underground gets from Lilo to the login screen remarkably quickly, even on my rather obsolete system (AMD 800Mhz, 256 Mb of RAM). From that point on, starting KDE does take a while, though my system might be to blame for that. In fact I think the booting process could be speeded up even further by disabling hardware detection and loading required modules through config files instead, but I don't think I will bother - it is quite fast enough for me.

This is an early development version, and there are some small glitches here and there. Initial installation had very ugly and jaggy fonts, but apparently the fix was already available, because running pacman -Syu fixed the problem before I had a chance to go on the forum to ask about it. I also noticed virtual consoles seem absent. And I would like more choices in KDM login screen - such as the menu to shutdown/reboot, and to select other window managers (KDE is the only choice out of the box, but I think there is E17 available in the repos, I still have to investigate this more closely).

But this really nitpicking for any system, let alone the second development version! I think Underground Desktop is quite amazing and I hope it will become more popular. In my book it fully deserves one of top spots on Distrowatch