

Low-end machine, lightweight applications and some other stuff

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I had an old Toshiba PII 266 Mhz (I think), 4 GB HD, 32 Mb RAM preinstalled with windows 95 lying around, and I thought it with be fun to mess around with it a bit. It don't even have a network card, and it has never been on the internet. I've been into linux for a little less than a year, and I'm not yet a command line guru, but partitioning, installing and so forth usually works out.

Given the low specs of my toshiba box, I figured I needed to use either a distro with a text based installer or a distro with a very lightweight window manager, such as fluxbox. Most distros seem to have moved away from the text based installers, but the slackware derivatives stick by it, so my initial attempt was with Zenwalk. It installed fine, and seemed a decent distro. Unfortunately, xfce was a tad on the heavy side for this old laptop, and performance was very slow.

My next attempt was with puppy linux. This was able to run as a live CD, although not very well. I could not get the hard drive installer to work properly, though, and not only could it not install puppy, for a while it seemed it had corrupted the hard drive in some way. All of a sudden no distros would work. A re-installation of Zenwalk failed. As did attempts with Windows 95, Feather, DesktopBSD, Austrumi, ReactOS, FreeDos, Minix 3, Slax, Dynebolic and probably one or two others I can't remember. As a result I sort of gave up, and forgot about it all for a while.

That was until I happend to see on Distrowatch that a new edition of Damn Small Linux was out. Since it was a quick download at 50 MB, I decided to give it a shot, and, he-heyyy, it worked! Guess my hard drive wasn't corrupted after all! DSL installed fine, and that's not all: Just for fun, I tried to connect my Toshiba to my cable modem with a USB-cable (this laptop has one USB-slot), and to my own huge surprise, all of a sudden I was on the internet. Oh joy!

DSL is a fine distro, especially when you consider how many functions have been crammed into so little space. Speed was satisfactory, although firefox was very slow. As an installed OS, however, I found DSL a bit limited, so I hoped that, now that I had internet and DSL is Debian-based, I could extend it a bit, using apt-get. Unfortunately, though, I could not get this to work, and I actually didn't find the DSL forums very helpful either. Had I been a bit more patient or persistent, I could perhaps made it, but I decided, instead, to look for another distro.

But which distro? There are certainly enough to choose from! I browsed the top 100 list at Distrowatch for distro that suited my needs: A text-based installer, and the possibility to choose some other desktop enviroment than Gnome, KDE or Xfce. There were a couple of candidates, but I only got to try out one, since that one turned out to be a stayer: Vector Linux.

At first I actually went for 5.1 instead of recent release 5.8, because it offered a better choice of lightweight window-managers during installation. I installed it successfully with IceWM, in my opinion by far the best lightweight WM, only to find out that my internet-connection was not auto-configured. Neither did I manage to get it to work with the network tools that were present (I am, mind you, extremely helpless when it comes to internet connections).

So I turned to 5.8 instead. It installed with Xfce, and this time I succeeded in getting on the net. And using the package manager (it needed maybe 5-10 minutes to load when using Xfce), I managed to install IceWM. I logged in anew with Ice, and things were starting to look good.

Vector comes with Firefox, Opera, Seamonkey, Dillo and Lynx, so there are some browsers to choose from. Firefox and Seamonkey was useless due to their memory usage, so I removed them. I keep Opera around, but it too is rather sluggish, so I use Dillo as much as I can. I also installed Links2, which is fast, and usable for pure text, such as Wikipedia.

Vector's package manager is Gslapt, and I think it's really great. Adding repositories is as easy as choosing from a list, and all dependencies are handled adequately. Adding and removing programs is no problem, and the graphical interface is intuitive.

After some fiddling with Gslapt, I now have a complete stack of applications that work well on my eight years old laptop: Abiword and gnumeric as office-tools are pre-installed. As is Gaim, Opera, Dillo, xmms, mplayer and Xchat. I added the fast and elegant Sylpheed for mail and Gtk-gnutella for file-sharing (it's excellent). I removed some games that was too heavy to run, and as well as Vim and bluefish, as I'll never use them.

My old laptop now has almost all the functions one needs from a modern computer, and heck, it even looks good, with a red and yellow IceWM motif. I dig it! I actually find myself spending more time with it these days, than with my new acer with PCLinuxOS/XP. Vector is superb, though you would expect that a distro who aims to be rather lightweight would have a home page that renders correctly in a lightweight-browser such as dillo.

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