

Desktop Distros

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As a long time user of Linux, and reader of Linux Magazines, Websites and Blogs, many see the current Linux situation as being a dawn of a new horizon. Essentially the release of the EEE PC, the timely release of Vista and Ubuntu have all kick started the 'Linux Revolution' for the Linux desktop.

Why the EEE Pc? Simple, for £199 you get a cost effective PC which does what most people want (Instant Messaging, Web Browsing, EMail, and Word Processing) using Wifi or wired networks, all using Linux, and looking smart with it, the EEE PC has been hailed a revolution in the Mobile IT world, and everyone knows about the EEE PC. As i said, not using Windows has allowed Asus, to bring the product in at a low price, and make itself the brand name o beat, they are not shy about using Linux, and thats a good thing, for what it is, its a good product.

Vista, its been 6 years in the making, turns most modern PC's into a slow machine, it asks more questions than it should, and its been beaten and battered by so many members of the IT, and non IT community, it doesn't matter how good it is or isn't, its bad press has roller-coastered into a product which will obviously sell, but isn't really what it could have been, this is good news for Linux, because its being seen as an alternative by some, Dell, HP both have advertised Linux machines, and the popular press is now mentioning it a lot more, some hardware manufactures ATI most notably, are sitting up and listening, and drivers are starting to get better.

this leads me nicely onto Ubuntu, for some Ubuntu is Linux, for others, its just not their cup of tea, whatever your thinking, its undeniable that Linux as a branded product has more than been boosted by Ubuntu, and the might behind it. its out there, its tag line is Linux for Human Beings.. and in most cases, not all, it does just work.

And its on this, i want to really write about, you see in some circles, Ubuntu has been knocked, and some see it is a the new Black. what does make this distro so special? In order to ind out, i thought i'd take my Dell inspiron 1501 with 2Gb ram, Broadcomm Wifi and ATI graphics card, and give some of the new big boys out there a spin, my criteria wasn't speed, wasn't prettyness, it was essentially getting a usable system up and running from scratch.

What do i mean by a usable system? well here were my criteria. these had to be up and running:

- * Wifi, (Broadcom Hell anyone)
- * Flash
- * Java
- * Web Browser able to play Video

So I have the machine, i have the desired outcome, what did i test with, and why?

- * Ubuntu 8.04, its the new black, its the one, for some it is Linux, its supposed to just work, so i wanted to find out.
- * OpenSuse 11.0, supposedly an'Ubuntu killer' out to retake its crown.. a distro i'd love to love.
- * SLED 10 SP2, the corperate desktop of choice, slow steady updates.
- * Fedora 9, Redhats open source arm, supposedly improving with every release.

* Sabayon 3.4f, i?m using this as i?m still downloading 3.5

So with these distros in mind, a mix of RPM, Deb and Source based, remember, i?m not looking specifically how easy it is to use, i?m not looking at post install, i?m specifically looking to see how easy it is to get a distro working, with Wifi, Firefox Videos using Microsoft Codecs, Flash and Java and a working base system. Also how easy is it via google to find support to get these things working?

So what did i find?

SLED 10 SP2.

Admittedly this is a slow moving distro, for the corporate desktop, designed with slow turn around of updates, so support departments don?t have to worry about updating every release cycle, which is usually 6months for most distros. the installation on the machine went relatively fine, and Taking the option to install everything on the DVD, the install took about 40 minutes.

After the install app had completed, a few reboots later, the fun began, the system runs a 2.6.16 kernel, which my Wifi card doesn?t like, so after searching the net, it seemed NDIS wrapper was the best bet, however this isn?t installed by default. so i then had to use Yast to install it, however yast doesn?t come with any online repositories installed, so i then had to figure out which version of Opensuse related to SLED, its 10.1, then i had to add the repositories, which is a painfully slow process, once i?d added my choice, Packman, Guru, ATI, VLAN, Gnome, OpenSuse OSS and non OSS i tried installing NDIS Wrapper, this itself required a download of a kernel package, which i didn?t need, and also required upgrading my ATI Drivers, something else i didn?t want to do at this time. I actually gave up after spending 2hrs on the net, and following countless SLED instructions for NDIS Wrapper, the sheer number of them all different tell me that this isn?t a simple install.

Video codecs were equally frustrating, which is surprising seeing as how Novell has a ?special deal? with Microsoft, essentially, this is a desktop for the office, its not simple to setup, and behaving as a novice user, i?d be pretty upset having downloaded the DVD ISO, thinking this was more stable to find out its not simple to setup, and everything is an old release.

Fedora 9

Fedora was the Distro i cut my teeth on, so i?ve used it before, i remember trawling the CD stores of Pantip in Bangkok, while living there trying to find the latest release as I didn?t have broadband..

Fedora, much like Opensuse suffers with its package management, each release recently seems to tout a ?better, more efficient? package management system, and to be honest the ones on Fedora are a dog. I setup the wifi card, as i knew the instructions were on the Linux wireless site, and i finally found a good set of instructions on Howtoforge, for the ?Perfect Desktop? however, once installed, for some reason, i was never able to play any ASX based media from Firefox. (So the BBC?s streaming Click was out)

the experience with Fedora, was admittedly better documented than SLED, and it does, with a bit of fiddling seem a bit better and easier to setup, however it does require a lot of command line editing, and fiddling, to get the Wifi and Graphics cards to working.

Opensuse 11.0

I was dubious about this, as the 10.2 and 10.3 version of open suse had installed previously, and after the final reboot, launched with a colourful blocky background, and a square for a cursor, however i gave the distro a go, twice, as the first time, with no changing of any settings on boot, the same thing happened, after reinstalling, and setting up the displays monitor and testing it, the install worked, but the wifi card, to be expected, didn?t, again, the same set of instructions used for Fedora work here. so that was pretty simple, however despite setting up the ATI properly on the

install, i needed to reinstall the ATI drivers again, as for some reason the system thought i was using a VESA driver?

This is where Suse falls short for me, as i had to then find a list of Repos on the Forums, and install the basic ones, and then install the ATI Cards, it would be really nice to have the core Repositories at very least added, maybe its something i clicked on the Install, but they were not there.

I couldn't figure out how to get the Windows codecs running properly, much like Fedora, i could get Realplayer stuff working, and OGG but couldn't get Windows encrypted videos playing in the Browser.

I must say at this point, i'm sure its not impossible, however suse suffers from its forums, rather than being enhanced by them, there is a lot of information spread all over the net, and the 'official' forums are not as organised or as up to date as they could be.

Suse should be a great distro, it has the pedigree, and it should be easy to get setup out of the box. however again, i'm dropping to the command line just a little too much for a first time user.

Sabayon 3.4f

On paper, this should be one of the most difficult distros to setup, Sabayon, doesn't have package management (this release doesn't) its based on Gentoo, and that means compiling sources, the configure, make, make install trilogy, wrapped up in emerge.

However, i was quietly please, the install was about the same time as suse, and pretty simple, a reboot later, and Wifi came up, a click on the required video driver, and Compiz was working (not part of the original spec, but nice none the less), i opened Firefox, and it it played the Click test site on the BBC webpage.

this distro worked, out of the box, and i mean worked, i didn't have to actually do anything, it was setup for me. Bleeding Edge Kernels, drivers etc. all worked. Amazing.

It might be prudent to mention here, that this was also the 64bit version of the distro, as opposed to the i386 versions of everything else. It was pleasing to see the effort made to make sure everything worked.

Ubuntu 8.04

So finally we get to the 'worlds favourite?', recently released, this is the only distro i've tested which comes on a CD as opposed to a DVD, (I know you can get Live CD's for OpenSuse), it does have a minimalistic feel to it, the install takes about 20 minutes, and after the first reboot, I had a bubble popup telling me there were drivers out there for my Wifi card, and my Ati card, a point to note here, if your wifi is your only means of connecting to the net, then you are slightly skewed here, as you need to download the drivers, however the fact Ubuntu found them, and via a Wired connection installs them, is good, no command line yet.

The Click online test, again made Firefox popup and inform me i needed to load some codecs, so i let Ubuntu install these, then was able to watch the embedded video, the same was the case for both flash and java apps, both of these offered me a choice, of Open source or closed source alternatives, however if i didn't know the difference between Flash and gnash, or the alternative Java products, i'm not sure i'd have made the choice so quickly, they could be marked a little better. However the tests were passed, and i was able to have a Desktop up and running, pretty quickly, with no dropping to the command line, on my first visit to Linux. I guess the reason the distro is so lite, (CD not DVD) is why i 'm having to download the drivers i need sfrom the Net, rather than having EVERY hardware driver on the DVD, ala Sabayon.

Support wise, its not hard to find what you want for solving ubuntu based problems, the forums are quick and friendly, and just about every PC has a howto page, as does Howto forge for the 'Perfect Setup'

Final Comments.

Desktop Linux has come a long way since my first outings back in 1999, and all 5 distros look amazing, all 5 have a choice of i386 or 64 bit variants, which both seem to work pretty well, the strong thing about Linux is its choice of distros, you will find something you like, its just a matter of patience and trying, and level of IT awareness. If you don't like suse, no need to slate it, just move on, there is something for everyone. Its also worth noting, as i did to start with, my hardware is over a year old, so most stuff, albeit, with a lot of tweaking on some distros does work, however at some point you will run into problems, that this is (in my humble opinion) the make or break point fo a distro, the Forums, the level of support you get. This is an area Linux has also improved, the days of ?RTFM? and ?Do you know how to use Google? or ?Read the Man page using More and grep? have nearly disappeared, people are more helpful and friendly than they used to be in the main.

My choices of Distro were based on what are commonly known as the big Boys, the distros which seem to appear on most magazine covers, and distro watch to 10 the most often, I do find both Fedora and Opensuse lacking in that final quality to make them good desktop distros, and when running fedora seemed clunky some times, i couldn't put my finger on what, even with its new themes, it still seemed to be the granddaddy of the pack.

sabayon amazed me, 100% working out of the box, remember this was my result, yours may not be the same. the only downside of sabayon is its sourced based, which may lead to a steeper learning curve, however with so much working out of the box, you won't have to install much to start with anyway.

Due to Sabayons ease of install, i wouldn't make Ubuntu a clear winner, however it did go very far on my machine to make life as painless as possible, and following on, installing additional apps, i personally find Apt-get far easier to manage then RPM based distros. Its easy to see why so many new users do try Ubuntu, its a faster download of th ISO, the support is there, and it does offer a more gui based install for the newbie..

Source URL: <http://www.tuxmachines.org/node/28628>