

Linux Mandrake 7.1 reviewed

NOT JUST FOR BEGINNERS

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In little more than a year, Linux Mandrake has gone from being an easy-setup version of Linux intended mainly for newbies to the distribution of choice for many gurus. It isn't surprising. Linux Mandrake is based on Red Hat's familiar distribution but MandrakeSoft has made significant improvements with each new



version.

[below]
Mandrake's graphical installer makes setup easy even for complete beginners.
[below right]
The KDE desktop comes preconfigured with useful icons.

This is a distribution designed with modern hardware in mind. The precompiled kernels and most of the applications are Pentium optimized giving better performance than you'll get from Red Hat - which is designed to run on everything from a 386 up.

The kernels (version 2.2.15 in this release) also have USB support built in. Mandrake has one of the best graphical installers there is, ensuring that almost everyone will get Linux up and running quickly. The result is a distribution that should please all but those who still believe that installing Linux and locating software to run under it isn't supposed to be easy.

Mandrake 7.1 comes in two distinct retail packages (plus a GPL version available for download or from places like The Linux Emporium.) Linux Mandrake 7.1 Complete is the cheapest version and contains three CDs. There's also the seven-disc Linux Mandrake 7.1 Deluxe. You pay your money and you take your choice, which isn't as simple as you might think.

In both the Complete and the Deluxe versions the first two discs contain the installation files and source code, while a third Applications CD contains non-open source applications. These include Acrobat Reader 4.0.4, StarOffice 5.2, Borland's InterBase relational database, CompuPic: a nice graphics file manager that's free for non-commercial use, an evaluation copy of AC3D: a 3D object modeller, RealPlayer 7 Basic, the Macromedia Flash plug-in for Netscape, an MPEG TV Player (shareware), a trial

version of the Open Sound System (with a 3 hour evaluation period!) and an evaluation of IglooFTP Pro, a graphical FTP client based on the free gFTP that timed out after one day.

In the Complete version the Applications disc also includes PowerQuest's PartitionMagic 5.0 plus Adobe Acrobat editions of five books: Special Edition - Using Linux, Teach Yourself Linux in 24 Hours, Teach Yourself KDE in 24 Hours, Teach Yourself Gimp in 24 Hours and Red Hat Linux 6 Unleashed.

The more expensive Mandrake 7.1 Deluxe version doesn't contain these items; however, there's an extra applications CD-ROM containing more than 20 other packages including the Sun Java JDK 2.2, evaluation copies of VMWare, Executor (a MacOS emulator), Citrix ICA Client for Linux, Arkeia Network Backup and VariCAD. You also get AVP AntiVirus - a Linux program that checks files for Windows viruses - and the IBM ViaVoice SDK.

The Deluxe version of the distribution includes XFree86 4.0 among other goodies and the installation set spills over on to a third CD containing both binaries and their source code. On top of this there are two Contributors CDs containing over 500 extra RPMs of applications, documentation and source code. In fact, the Deluxe package is more complete than the Complete version! MandrakeSoft claims that the Deluxe version as a whole contains over 1,800 different applications making it probably the most comprehensive collection of Linux software you can buy.



Existing Mandrake users will want to upgrade as the changes since version 7.0 are considerable. Video cards based on the i810 chipset are now supported, wheel mice now work in many more applications, power management has been improved and there is now support for USB modems, printers and Zip drives as well as UDMA 66 hard drives. A version of GNOME is included which works with the Sawmill window manager, while an updated version of Qt adds support for Chinese characters to KDE. XFree86 4.0 has also been included as an option in the Deluxe version for those who like to be at the leading edge (and whose graphics cards are supported by it.)

On a more mundane level, packages have been reorganized into more logical (or at least smaller) groups so that instead of searching through a few big menus looking for an application you must now hunt through a lot of smaller ones. Menus are updated automatically in all graphical environments when packages are added or removed, as long as you use Mandrake's own package installer RPMDrake.

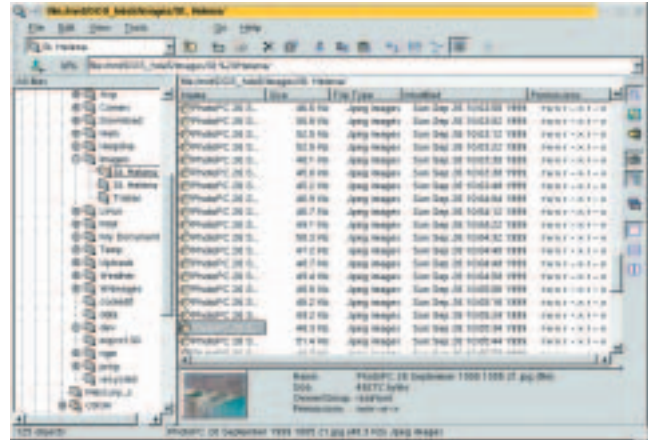
Mandrake 7.1 may have a lot of appeal for experienced Linux users but it still has many features that continue to make it the best choice for first-timers. The installation CD auto-runs under Windows to give a choice of setup options including Lnx4Win. This is a setup that installs into a Windows partition so that no repartitioning of the drive is needed, and which can be uninstalled as easily as removing a Windows application. If Linux co-resides with Windows, Setup installs a TrueType font server that can pick up the user's fonts straight from the Windows fonts directory. This will help smooth the transition path by helping to ensure the new user's documents look the same under Linux as they do under Windows.

Painless

Thanks to Mandrake's excellent installer first-time users are likely to find their introduction to Linux a painless experience. There's a fully automated install option that requires the user to make a minimum of choices. Gurus can choose the Expert option while the rest of us will select Customized which gives you control over the disk partitioning if you want it and offers a choice of setups for office use, development or use as a server. These choices affect the packages that are installed on the system by default, but they are a bit too broad for convenience. Inevitably, whatever you select, you end up spending time removing packages you don't want and adding those you do, but which didn't get installed automatically.

Package selection apart, the Mandrake installer does a first-class job of creating a fully working system. All the system's users, not just root, can be set up during the installation. Network configuration is thorough: there's even an option to configure dial-up Internet access if your computer has a modem. Printer configuration is comprehensive too, even handling the setup of remote Unix, NetWare or SMB printers and concluding by printing a test page to

kruiser, a file manager that will seem familiar to Windows users, is included.



verify that the printer works. Mandrake offers you a choice of GNOME or KDE graphical environments. It exhibits no particular preference although the user guide includes a chapter on using KDE but none on GNOME. Mandrake is one of the few distributions to include kruiser, a file manager for KDE similar to the Midnight Commander of GNOME or the Windows 95 Explorer. The latest version, 0.4, boasts features like a graphics file preview and the ability to bookmark folders and add external drives and FTP sites to the directory tree. These enhancements make it one of the most versatile tools of its type, though we found some of the new features to be a little fragile.

A welcome improvement in this version of Mandrake is the use of grub as the default boot loader. Grub allows users to pick a boot option from a colourful menu instead of the cryptic LILO prompt: it is also unaffected by the 1,024-cylinder limit of lilo, a stumbling block for many new users. However, despite its use of three methods to attempt to determine the available RAM you may still need to edit the kernel parameters to get Linux using all of your system's memory. Grub is configurable using the DrakBoot graphical configuration tool but, confusingly, the klilo graphical boot configuration tool is also present which could result in the inadvertent overwriting of grub by lilo.

One reason for paying good money for a packaged Linux distribution is the manuals that come with it. Mandrake includes two manuals: an Installation and User Guide and a so-called Reference manual. They are quite useful, falling somewhere between those of Corel (well presented but too basic to be useful) and SuSE (full of useful information but a bit daunting for a beginner.) Like most Linux distributions, the support you can expect from Mandrake only covers installation.

So which version should you buy? Enthusiasts should certainly consider buying the Deluxe version. Beginners would be better off buying the Complete version for the additional books supplied as Acrobat files on the CD. But neither choice is likely to cause disappointment. Both are easy to install and both contain plenty of useful software. When everything is considered it's fair to say that Linux Mandrake 7.1 is one of the top Linux distributions available. ■

