

Linux Mandrake 8.0 on test

THE INNOVATIVE SOCIAL CLIMBER

ANDREAS HUCHLER



Linux Mandrake, a Red Hat offspring of French origins, which two years back was still treated at best as a secret tip in the Linux communities, has recently turned into a real cult system for many users. Linux Magazine has looked at the brand new version 8.0 on your behalf.

The new version 8.0 came out just before we went to press, so that only the download version was available for testing. The PowerPack Edition of Linux Mandrake, like the previous version, comes with not only the manual but also several additional CDs with free and commercial (demo) programs (including the full version of IBM's speech recognition

software, ViaVoice) and costs about £40. The ProSuite Edition which is also available aims to be a professional server solution especially for small and medium-sized enterprises. At the time of going to press, it was still not clear whether Mandrake will also be selling a standard version in Europe, which might be somewhat cheaper than the PowerPack Edition. The present success of Linux Mandrake can be attributed to two fundamental decisions by the manufacturer MandrakeSoft: the choice of Red Hat as basic system and the decision to place all the distribution-specific administration tools (including manuals) under the conditions of the GPL. The decision in favour of (almost) 100% Red Hat compatibility means the user has access, apart from Mandrake's own rpm packages, also to the whole range of Red Hat rpms which are widely available on the Web. The large following of subscribers to

the GPL philosophy also contributes to the fact that an increasing number of users and developers are taking advantage of the comprehensive online offers and the rapid availability of Pentium-optimised Mandrake rpms.

Installation

Thanks to the very good automatic hardware recognition, both the SCSI-DVD drive and also the USB mouse were fortunately recognised immediately on our test system, so we were able to get started straightaway. The graphic installer has only changed slightly in terms of appearance with respect to the previous version (7.2). But in terms of functionality it has been heavily revised. First of all, there is now a large question mark symbol, which provides, after a mouse click, additional instructions for the user. Compared to the previous version, the developers have now managed for the first time - taking in their stride a few limitations of co-determination - to ensure that, even as a non-expert, one can now put oneself in the hands of the installation class 'recommended' with a fairly easy mind. The installer no longer spoon-feeds the naïve user who clicks on recommended as much as it used to in previous versions, but simply rushes him past a few queries, which may be somewhat confusing for raw beginners. But whether it was all that clever

to leave practically the entire X11 configuration of the automatic hardware recognition in the recommended mode, will remain to be seen in practice. Anyone who wants, after first log-in, optimal resolution with maximum image repetition rate on his own monitor, will presumably prefer the expert mode, in which the X11 configuration can also be performed manually. According to marketing reports, it is now also supposed to be possible in Mandrake 8.0 for the first time for 3D graphics enthusiasts to enjoy 3D hardware acceleration "without additional configuration effort". Unfortunately we were unable to try this out with the download version, which was fairly limited in terms of packages. But it must be assumed that this long-awaited feature will be an option in the PowerPack Edition. The image has also changed when it comes to packet selection. The pre-defined implementation scenarios are now differentiated considerably. So apart from the main categories of Workstation and Server, there now also exists a whole range of specific implementation scenarios such as Office Workstation, Games Station or Network Computer (client). This fine-tuning is certainly welcome in principle, but the choice of packets is somewhat overloaded as a result. Mandrake now offers, like SuSE, a summary after the one-off run through of the hardware configuration, in which the user can see at a glance which hardware components have been successfully configured. It is also possible to jump back to the respective question marks. If one overlooks the still-not-quite-perfect intervention options in the recommended installation class, the Mandrake installer mainly gives a good impression, mostly thanks to the fine hardware recognition.

Initial configuration

The Mandrake developers have considerably jazzed up the graphic configuration tools DrakConf for version 8.0, not only in terms of appearance, but also functionally. The central configuration tool is now called the Mandrake Control Centre and combines, under five main drop-down headings, just about everything that can be changed when Linux is running with respect to existing hardware and software configuration. The greatest gem, and so far unique to Linux, is surely the HardDrake hardware configuration tool, which is significantly refined compared to the previous version, and offers an overview of all the hardware components found in the system. And when doing something like installing a new PCI card, it also sometimes provides the user with manual driver selection. But the central configuration tool of Mandrake has lots more to offer besides. So the Linux start procedure (boot manager, system utilities, etc.) can be adapted to individual requirements at the click of a mouse. Obviously, the hobbyist-administrator will also find graphical configuration tools here, which will help to set up Internet access by modem, ISDN and

even xSDL (although this was not tested). It is precisely in the domain of Internet connection via ISDN and xSDL that one was usually left high and dry by Mandrake in the past. But MandrakeSoft has now finally put its shoulder to the wheel and presents the user with an easy Internet configuration tool, together with comprehensive provider database and nice dial-up program. More advanced administration tasks such as the configuration of an Internet gateway computer (DrakGW) or a personal firewall (tinyfirewall) are no longer a problem with Mandrake 8.0. System administration under Linux has never been so simple!

Expandability

In terms of system expandability, too, Mandrake puts you on the safe side as a desktop user. Because Mandrake is now drawing even with Red Hat 7.x and equally risking the rpm version leap to Version 4.0. and the gcc version change which is being hotly disputed in the developer scene (gcc 2.96). This means that practically every rpm packet available on the WWW ever built for Red Hat 6.2 / 7.x runs under Mandrake 8.0. Mandrake's own rpm front-end RpmDrake has, by the way, also been considerably jazzed up in terms of appearance and if required, will fetch security updates and packet updates from the free Mandrake server (or a mirror). Obviously, it is also possible to read in and manage rpm packages from other source media with the package manager. As with the Debian community, at MandrakeSoft there are now three degrees of maturity of distributions: Cooker (in development), MandrakeFreq (mainly stable) and the official release. Anyone who does not want to wait for the next official version from Mandrake can get it online or on MandrakeFreq CD.

State of the art as Linux desktop

A glance at the new features of the download version is enough in itself to be able to determine that MandrakeSoft has succeeded in pulling off a surprise coup with the brand new Mandrake 8.0, again. Mandrake 8.0 thus offers practically everything one needs as a desktop user for everyday administration work under Linux. And this is also at the very latest level with GNOME 1.4! ■

Linux Mandrake 8.0 (Download Version)

- + *Very up-to-date and comprehensive system*
- + *Central X11 administration tool DrakConf*
- + *Easy expandability with RpmDrake*
- *Installer still has room for improvement*