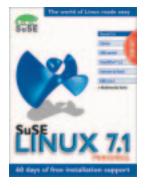SuSE 7.1 Personal on Test

KILLER PACKAGE
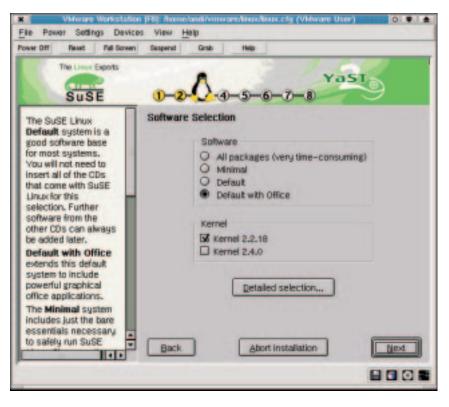
ANDREAS HUCHLER

The distribution from SuSE Linux UK Ltd is identiifed to all intents and purposes by many Linux newbies as the Linux operating system. We have taken a somewhat closer look at the latest Personal Edition on your behalf.

Since version number 7.0, SuSE has been splitting its distribution into two versions. Since then the former, full version has been sold, together with a DVD, at the increased price of £49 as the Professional variant. So as not to lose the ordinary, price-conscious Linux user, SuSE is also offering a trimmed down variant (for differences, see box) at a price of £29 as the Personal Edition for (purely) desktop use.

Installation

The better-than-average hardware recognition means the first CD even booted up from our SCSI-DVD drive immediately. The USB mouse, too, went to work without complaint after the graphical installer appeared. Basically, SuSE gives you the choice between a new installation and a (more time-consuming) upgrade of an already existing old SuSE system.

When setting up the data partition(s), in the Personal Edition one can also choose between the classic ext2 file system and the new journaling file system Reiser-fs. The selection of packages offers enough flexibility, both for newbies (with rough categories like *Standard with Office*), as well as for advanced Linux users (up to the selection of individual *rpm* packages), even if clarity does suffer somewhat as a result.

There is also a choice of kernel: a refined and patched kernel 2.2.18 or, again, the new (also patched) kernel 2.4.0 with all its advantages and perhaps some bugs that have not yet been corrected? It's a sound idea, but on the other hand in practice presumably fairly unusual for the boot manager to be installed by default on a boot diskette. Anyone who prefers, after switching on the computer, without inserting a Linux boot diskette, to be able to choose between the installed operating systems, must therefore explicitly say so at installation (in a fairly fiddly way). Equally tiresome, but nevertheless sensible, is the fact that the installer compels you to enter at least one valid

Figure 1: SuSE's installation program shines, particularly because of its flexible selection options, such as here, the choice of the kernel and of the packages to be installed

user together with the root password in an appropriately secure form, before the installation can be continued. Overall the SuSE installation procedure is increasingly coming to resemble that of Windows - the positive thing about this is that there is far-reaching automation and a user dialog which is fairly comprehensible. But less worth copying are the over-vigorous warning instructions together with the need for reboots even during the installation procedure.

Relatively exceptional, though, is the fact that thanks to SuSE, as owner of a new 3D graphics card (in this case: nVidia Geforce 256) by simply ticking on *Activate 3D-acceleration* you can enjoy the benefits of a (though not always completely stable) 3D hardware-accelerated X-server.

In all, despite the menu guidance that sometimes takes some getting used to, SuSE's latest installation procedure is convincing, especially because of its clarity and error-friendliness. Because of the Braille support, now even the blind can perform a SuSE installation on their own.

Initial configuration

The initial configuration of the main hardware components turned out to be a piece of cake. The compulsory manual commissioning of ISA cards might, though, overtax a Linux newbie somewhat. Central configuration tools such as SuSE's YaST/YaST2, though, do have some disadvantages: Especially whenever one has to leave ready-made configuration menus for whatever reason, perhaps to get an existing exotic hardware component to work under Linux, one comes up against the limitations of distribution-specific configuration tools. It can sometimes happen with SuSE that YaST(2) soon overwrites configuration files which have been painstakingly edited by hand, because of the built-in script automation. Another disappointment was the announced USB support: For the USB ZIP drive, there does exist (in Kernel 2.4.0) in principle a suitable kernel module; but one searches in vain for a corresponding entry in the */etc/fstab*. Nevertheless the new YaST2 Control Centre may be just the right thing for migrants from Windows as a passable alternative to the system control.

Expandability

On both binary CDs there is an acceptable repertoire of Linux application software, even if it also sometimes still needs supplementing from other sources. Extremely tiresome when installing *rpm* packages later: The YaST2 package manager first needs, on every later installation of packages, the first SuSE CD, regardless as to on which CD the package to be installed is ultimately found. So DJ-use is pre-programmed here! Otherwise, due to wide-ranging binary compatibility, the system is relatively easy to expand in a normal case with Red

Figure 2: With each new SuSE version, the X11-based configuration tool YaST2 replaces a bit more of the menu-based predecessor version

Hat 6.2-compatible RPMs and also, if necessary, by direct compilation of source packets.

A question of cost

SuSE 7.1 currently combines, better than most other common distributions, administrability with relatively low requirements and the fact that it is as up to date as possible. The central administration concept of YaST(2) also enables Linux newbies to become productive as quickly as possible on the desktop. On the other hand, as an advanced, Not-Just-A-User, one feels increasingly restricted in a SuSE system in terms of design freedom. ■

SuSE 7.1 Personal

+ Very up to date system
+ Central configuration tool YaST/ YaST2
- Tedious CD changing when later installing packages
- Relatively high price for 'trimmed down' distribution

Which is it to be then: Personal or Professional?
The SuSE Professional Edition comes with the following additional features:
- **Installation DVD**
- **additional know-how manual (635 pages)**
- **New CUPS printer system**
- **additional developer tool / autoinstaller**
- **C/C++-IDE KDevelop 1.3**
- *LDAP Server*
- *Server Tools*
- *IP Videotelephony*
- *Clustering*
- *Longer installation support*

In particular, advanced desktop users considering buying a new SuSE distribution should ponder whether the first mentioned extra features of the Professional Version are worth the extra cost of £20.

In the Office

Having tried all the different distributions in the office it is fair to say that the SuSE Professional is the version we use for the everyday production of Linux Magazine. The sheer number of packages provided (and so tested to work first time) is a little overwhelming at first, but means that the full system is always to hand. The YaST2 configuration interface does take some time to get familiar with, but is no hindrance. At a recent London computer fair, SuSE gave demonstrations. The system was installed half a dozen times by users new to Linux to show how easy it was to configure. One SuSE user did express concern about doing a minimal install but running through at the show installed the system fine. As SuSE typically have a four-month period between launches we guestimate that, with a fair wind, their next version (7.2) will hit sometime early July.