

The latest from SuSE

SuSE Linux 8.1

Whole version number releases are often frowned upon, because they will usually contain new technology still trying to bed itself in comfortably to a distribution, which is why it is always a relief to find version x.1 released.

SuSE 8.1 is everyone's chance to see how their technological developments have managed to settle in.

So, what do you get?

A boxed set of SuSE Linux will give you a complete, easy to use desktop system. The professional package will also give you access to a wide range of server side applications like Apache.

SuSE take delight in holding the users hand throughout the installation process, which, in the simplest of cases means that you only have to touch the keyboard two or three times throughout the whole of the install procedure.

Walkthrough of an install

SuSE will automatically shrink the size of a FAT 32 files system, so, for anyone doing their first Linux install from

Making it's break for stability, SuSE have released their Linux version 8.1.

Read on to see what goodies await, for both new and seasoned hands.

BY COLIN MURPHY

Windows 95, 98 or Me you will find nothing complicated to do. Users of XP, or anything else that has left them with an NT file system will have slightly more work to do.

In an ideal world, XP will not have been installed on your machine. You now have the chance to reserve some, maybe lots, of space for your SuSE install, using tools like *fdisk* or *Partition Magic*. If this is not the case, the easiest option would be to add a new hard drive to your machine. Some of the latest partitioning applications, like *Partition Magic 7* will allow you to resize NTFS partitions, but since this is not included with the SuSE package, the extra cost in software would have nearly bought you the new hard drive in any case.

Once you have selected your language, the installation procedure takes a look at your hardware and creates a proposal, listing section headings like *Timezone*, *Partitioning* and *Software*. Selecting one of these section headings now allows you to amend some of the proposals made for that part. So, if you were to select the *Partition* label, you would now have the chance to change from SuSE's default configuration, of having just some swap space and a single Linux ReiserFS partition for '/', '/home', '/var' and everything else! I very much like to keep a separate '/home' partition, but then I get to play with lots of different distributions, so it makes my life much easier to tinker with the settings. Should you still be finding your Linux feet, sticking with the defaults should get you a running system, but, at some point, you must give in and have a tinker too!

Installation of SuSE 8.1 can be very quick, maybe no more than 30 minutes on a modern machine, but you really should put aside 2-3 hours to do this for

the first time. This is not because it is complex to do, you will want the extra time just to go through the thousands of software packages that you might want installed on your system, which are not included by default!

By selecting the *Software* heading from the proposal screen you will get the chance to control the amount and type of software installed. The default system will give you a graphical desktop courtesy of Xfree86 version 4.2 and KDE version 3.0.3. which will leave you with a fine, workable system, but how will you know what you are missing if you don't go looking?

Hidden treasure

The Software Selection screen allows you to view the numerous applications by 'Selection' groups like *Games* and *Multimedia* or by 'Package' groups like *Documentation* and *Productivity*. The most important 'Package' group must be *all* where you will be able to see all of the packages included with the distribution.

Not all of these packages can be installed at the same time, some will conflict with others. To help you through this you there is the 'Automatic Dependency' checking utility, which is switched on by default.

This does add 2-3 seconds to the selection of a package, each time you select a package the utility will consult its dependency database. This is fine for the odd package that you might want to add, but a real pain if you are adding lots, or nearly all. Luckily this function can be turned off and you are given another button with which to check for problems when you want. Should there be problems you can resolve them through a series of check boxes.

SuSE Linux 8.1



Personal Box set	£39.99
3 CDROMs, 1 quickinstall poster, 1 manual (User Guide), 60 days of installation support	
Professional Box Set	£59.00
7 CDROMs, 1 DVD, 2 manuals (Administration Guide, User Guide), 1 quickinstall poster, 90 days of installation support	
Professional Upgrade	£39.00

Once you are happy with the proposed install, you are just a couple of mouse clicks away from making it happen. The only thing left now is to swap the CD's in the drive, and the installation screen gives you an approximate countdown for both the entire install and for when the next CD will be called for. Now you know if you will only have time to make some tea or make an entire lunch before the next CD is required. Of course, if you are using the DVD that comes with the Professional boxed set then you will be saved even from this.

You are now prompted for a root password for your system and then given the chance to create some less godly users for everyday use.

The 'graphical interface' section of the YaST installation tool now kicks in, allowing you to set up your monitor and graphics card to the resolution you prefer to run at. You also get the chance to configure the keyboard and mouse, as you would expect, but more of a surprise is the opportunity to set up graphics tablets and touch screen monitors, should you have them. You can now configure your LCD monitor to run in portrait mode if you so wish, see Figure 1.

The rest of the hardware now gets a going over, like sound cards, printers, modems and other network devices, scanners and digital cameras. Hardware was once a big burden with Linux installs, but, so long as your equipment is neither too old or bang up to date bleeding edge then you shouldn't have a problem. Once this is out of the way you can consider yourself installed. This new version now supports USB 2.0 and firewire devices

SuSE have decided to move to *grub* as their boot loader, which should not

cause anyone any problems. Grub is a modern boot loader, and anyone who has compiled their own kernel but forgotten to update their *lilo* configuration, the older boot loader system, then you might very well appreciate grub, which won't let you down in this way.

Some of the other changes

The SuSE Professional box set comes with 7 CD's and 1 DVD, two books, the 'User Guide' and the 'Administrators Guide' and 90 days of installation support by e-mail/fax and phone.

The Personal box set has just 3 CD's, the 'User Guide' and 60 days of installation support. If you chose the Personal box set you will also miss out on the features such as *Project Management*, *Scientific Software* and the integrated *IP video telephony*.

Apart from now using Grub, SuSE have moved over to CUPS, moving away from LPRng for its default printer spooler. You can easily opt out of using CUPS via the YaST2 installation tool, which is the recommended way of changing the system configuration and for keeping your system up to date, with YOU, the Yast Online Update.

The other important change to the distribution is SuSE's decision to drop StarOffice 5.2 in favour of OpenOffice 1.0.1, now a mature product which has just celebrated its 2nd birthday, as shown in figure 2.

The value of having some documentation on paper can not be highlighted enough for the new user, which is why I always advise someone trying Linux for the first time to go for a boxed set, even if it is not the most up to date version. The books act as a shield as you journey into the unknown.

The 'User Guide' runs to 360 pages with a third of that devoted to the installation and configuration of your Linux system. The remainder of the guide goes on to introduce the user to the KDE and Gnome desktops and some of the other applications that come on the disk, like Kmail, Evolution, Galeon and the Gimp. Without some form of introduction the user might never get to learn about what is available, unless they spend ages playing. The 'Administration Guide' runs to nearly 500 printed

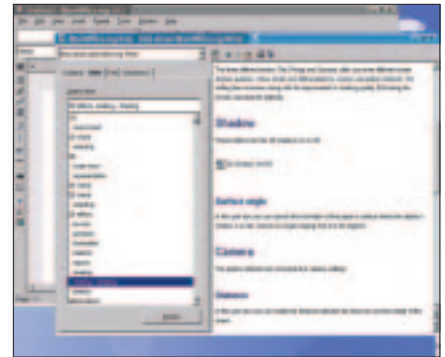


Figure 2: OpenOffice 1.0.1 now takes the place of StarOffice 5.2

pages and goes into much greater detail explaining how to administer the vital services that keep a Linux system ticking over. While this manual is only available in printed form with the professional boxed set, it is included in electronic form on the CD with the Personal set.

SuSE 8.1 is built on Kernel 2.4.19 and uses glibc 2.2.5 and gcc 3.2 in the compilation of its software. Apart from the default choice of ReiserFS, you can also select from Ext3, JFS and XFS for your choice of journalised file systems.

SuSE is now optimised for Intel Pentium and AMD Duron and Athlon processors, so 8.1 is no longer going to be of help to you to build a firewall on that old x486 in the loft. Memory is always a crunch point with Linux, the more the merrier, and SuSE recommend having 128MB available.

You could get a minimal system onto a 400MB drive, but this would be a shame, because you have as much as 6GB of software to choose from. You can spend ages just going through the games.

If you are a regular SuSE Linux user, you will know of this, what you may not know is that you also have the option of upgrading your SuSE 8.0 Professional boxed set with the SuSE upgrade package. With this, you get all of the disks from the 8.1 Professional boxed set but no manual.

SuSE makes for an excellent all encompassing Linux system, giving you all of the server applications needed to handle email and other internet tasks, if you take the Professional boxed set. If your needs are not quite so high, then the Personal set will give you a desktop system with a very capable office suite. ■

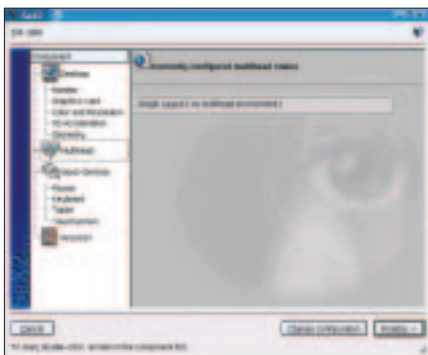


Figure 1: Now you can configure graphics tablets within the YaST configuration tool