Take a cool Linux desktop with your, wherever you go

MandrakeMove

Without a laptop, how can you get your Linux away from home? How can we convert that stubborn friend or relative, who just has no time to install, or is afraid to lose his files, to Linux? A distribution that runs directly from the CD-ROM is the answer, and MandrakeMove is certainly a good choice.

BY MARCO FIORETTI

Some distributions can boot and run straight from the CD-ROM, without installing or requiring anything on the hard drive. Lately, this way to package Linux has become very popular as the ultimate mobile Open Source desktop, or an excellent solution for demos. People can try a different distribution every day, just by inserting a CD in their drive, and then go back to their default system.

Mandrake offers two live CD versions of its 9.2 release, called MandrakeMove (*www.mandrakesoft.com/products/mandrakemove*). The first is freely downloadable from the Internet, the second comes in several boxed sets. The two most popular ones are priced at 69.9 and 129 Euro respectively. In contrast to the downloadable version, the boxes contain a (128 or 256MB) USB key and extra documentation, partly specific to MandrakeMove (almost nothing of this last kind can be found online). Users purchasing the boxes will also find extra, non-GPL software like nVidia drivers, Real Player, and Flash Player.

On the road, the main and most interesting advantage of the boxed edition is that it can store user files and configuration data on the USB key. With the downloadable ISO image, you need to reset everything each time you boot. The version described in this review is the one available online, released on December 9 2003.

The hardware requirements for MandrakeMove are: a Pentium (II or better), AMD K-6, Duron, or Athlon. 256 MBytes of RAM is recommended; the minimum is 128 MBytes. MandrakeSoft also recommends a CD-ROM drive speed no less than 32x. A hard disk is not necessary. The only official requirement on USB keys is that they need to be VFAT formatted. We found no problem with a PicoDisk Easy 2, 128 MByte, but the Mandrake mailing list archives mention several problems with other keys. The ISO image was tested on a minimum configuration (350 MHz K-6, 128 MByte RAM) and on a slightly more powerful computer (900 MHz Duron, 256 MByte RAM).

As expected, and confirmed by the menu structure in Figure 1, MandrakeMove is aimed at the home and office user. The menu doesn't offer compilers or other programming tools, which is fine. This is not what the system was built for. Most of the documentation available on the CD is the same as Mandrake Linux 9.2. One chapter is devoted to switching to Linux from Windows.

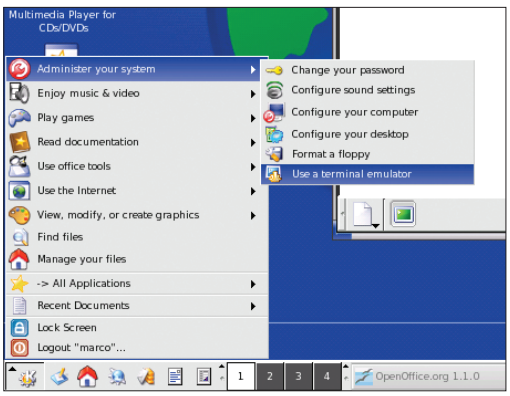

Figure 1:The system menu in MandrakeMove: everything needed to work in the office, or enjoy music and video at home.

Start Up Procedure

The boot interface is graphical. Pressing F1 displays some general information – but not much – on how to drive the system during this phase. For example, it explains how to pass some options, but does not say which options are available. It is possible to switch to another console running busybox at any time, by pressing Ctrl + Alt + Fn. The initial boot phase took less than one minute on the 350 MHz computer. Making start-up as fast as possible was an explicit design goal of MandrakeMove. This means avoid prompts, as far as possible.

While this may mean not leveraging the features of the available hardware to the max, it makes a lot of sense. A live CD-ROM like this is almost always used for short periods, to do simple tasks, and/or by unexperienced users. In the following steps the user is prompted to choose the language (English, German, French, Italian, Dutch and Spanish are available) and accept the license. The install continues with hardware detection after the user has supplied a name and password.

Once the system has booted, both the standard Mandrake management tools and the command line area available. Almost all hardware on our two test systems was detected, configured, and used without problems.

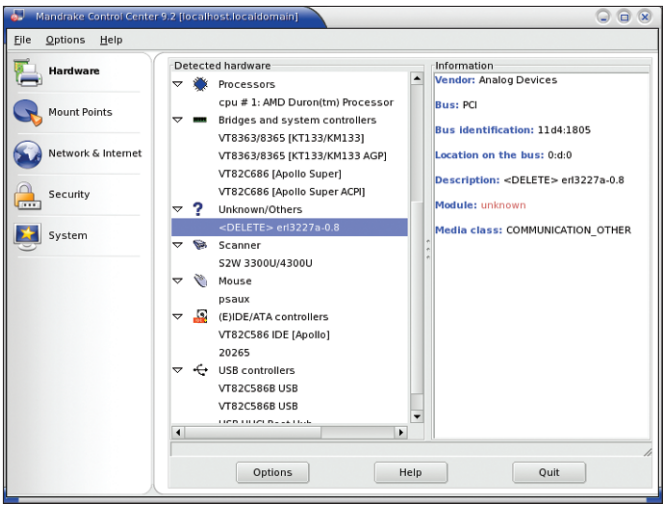

Figure 2: MandrakeMove uses the same hardware management interface of the standard Mandrake 9.2 release.

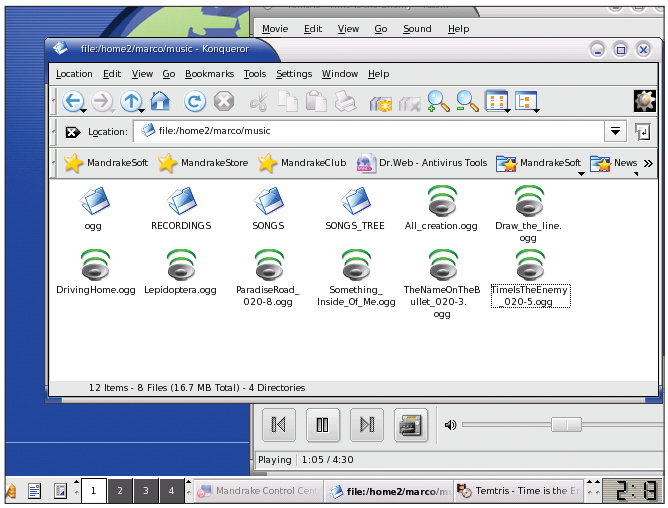

Figure 3: Point and click music: browsing Ogg files on the local drive and playing them back with Totem.

All CD and floppy drives were linked to desktop icons.

This didn't work for the USB key. The K-6 computer is a Linux only machine, with several ext3 partitions. They were not mounted automatically. The C: drive of the Duron system (Windows only), as well as the VFAT USB key on the Linux box, were both mounted on */mnt/windows*. Sound management was fine, from the system bell to playing music from CD and ogg files. This also applies to printing, with an Epson Stylus and a HP Deskjet 890.

Modem management (with Kppp) worked as it always does in Linux: immediately online with an external 3Com U.S. Robotics, no luck, as expected, with an anonymous internal winmodem.

The Desktop

MandrakeMove is set by default to a US timezone. That's fine, if it happens to be your timezone, but you will not be prompted to modify the setting. This is the only glitch in the desktop, which is otherwise well laid out, complete, and easy to use. The base platform is KDE 3.1. Popular applications like Gimp 1.2.5, OOo 1.1 GnuCash, MrProject, GnomeMeeting, the Totem multimedia player and many more are included.

Everything ran just as quickly as in normal Linux installations on the same computers. OpenOffice.org worked fine, except for complaining that the Java Runtime Environment was missing in */usr/lib/jdk-1.4.1.0.1*. Should it be necessary to become root for any reason, it is enough to type *su -*, without password. We had to do this to unmount the floppy disk. It is auto mounted when inserted, but the *umount* action in the icon menu fails.

The MandrakeMove CD can be removed during usage to insert other disks. Before doing so, you will need to stop the CUPS print daemon in a pop-up window. Whenever we stopped listening music, the system reminded us to put the Mandrake CD back in the drive.

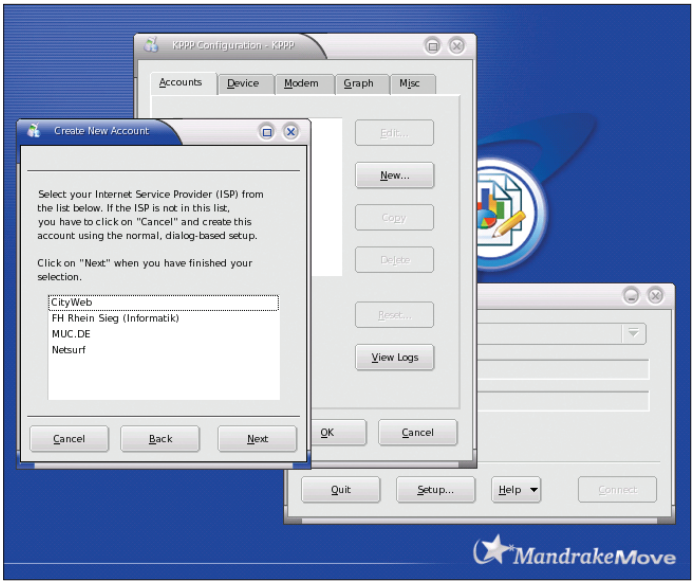

Figure 4:The connection parameters for several ISPs are included in the Kppp setup wizard.

The basic Internet procedures and tools are the ones typically offered by KDE. Since we had only dialup access to the Internet, we used Kppp. Obviously, ADSL and LAN connections are also possible. Some system files, usually created during a standard installation, were not present where expected. Kppp complained because it failed to find */dev/modem* or an */etc/resolv.conf* file. Maybe patching Kppp to avoid, or give different, warnings could save users some confusion. In spite of this, with the external modem we were up and happily surfing in a few minutes.

Conclusion

Even with the minor defects described above, MandrakeMove remains a neat and full featured *desktop in a pocket*. However there are other, more mature, Live CDs with the same or slightly better characteristics, starting with Knoppix. The download edition is certainly the best choice if the user is already familiar with Mandrake way, or, if you want to practice first, before installing Mandrake 9.2 in a production environment.

On the other hand, the download edition is the best possible demo of the boxed version, even without hardware acceleration and the USB key, as tested. ■