Suse Linux 9.1 Professional

New Core

The new Suse Linux distribution hit the stores on the 8th May and includes the 2.6 Linux kernel at its heart. We take an initial look at how the system fairs.

BY JOHN SOUTHERN

The Suse 9.1 Professional set contains 5 CDs and 2 double sided DVDs. The second DVD is for sources while side B of the first DVD is for 64-bit AMD and Intel processor machines. However, we will concentrate on the usual 32-bit side of things.

This is the first release by Suse since it was acquired by Novell and just after Novell bought Ximian. We could not see any major cooperation as the default is still KDE and the GNOME desktop, although version 2.4, shows no sign of Suse/Novell improvements. The major change for this version is the 2.6 kernel.

For those familiar with Suse, the installation will come with no great changes, apart from a new funkier drawing of the Suse chameleon, Geeko.

If you have not seen Suse installed, then you may be a little shocked at how much control is available. You can opt for a default installation (KDE only) or full variable control where you can choose applications individually. What is missing compared to other distros is a range of ready-made profiles. These would aid some users and allow for a quicker setup, such as catering for Multimedia or Games users.

With the default setup, using just the first two CDs, KDE version 3.2.1 is loaded. Here the K menu has catered for usability and, similar to other recent distros, is now using the simplified application names. An example is Audio player rather than XMMS. This is fine if you do not know what the application names are, but a little irritating if you do.

Konquering the desktop

By default the KDE desktop expects users to use Konqueror as its web browser. Mozilla is available and can be easily added via the YaST control center, although both Thunderbird (Mozilla mail application) and Firefox (Future Mozilla development version) are also available as Mozilla options.

Suse is promoting Rekall as the distributions answer to Microsoft's Access for a database manager. Using this for just a short while, we found that it was easy to configure and manipulate files. This shows great potential and we hope to discover more of its secrets later.

Similar to browsing, Konqueror is used as a graphical FTP client. This along, with the Fish facility (graphical secure FTP), remains one of our favorite features and keeps us away from Nautilus as a day-to-day file manager.

The default theme is Thin Keramik with the majority of visual effects turned off to help those on slower processors. The KDE control panel is still the place to easily configure the desktop.
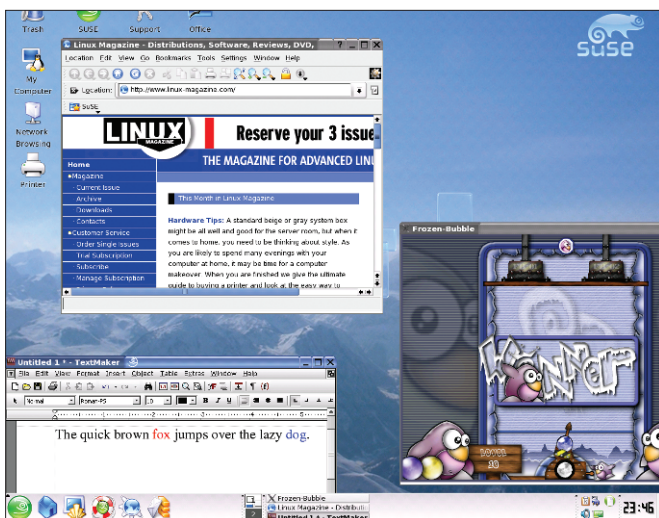

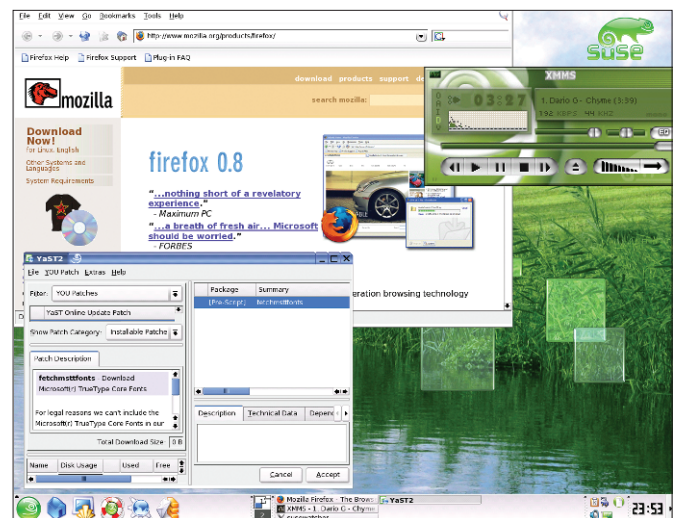**Figure 1: KDE desktop, playing Frozen Bubble, TextMaker and Konqueror for browsing.**

Figure 2: Mozilla FireFox, XMMS playing an MP3 file , and YOU loading in Microsoft TrueType Core Fonts.
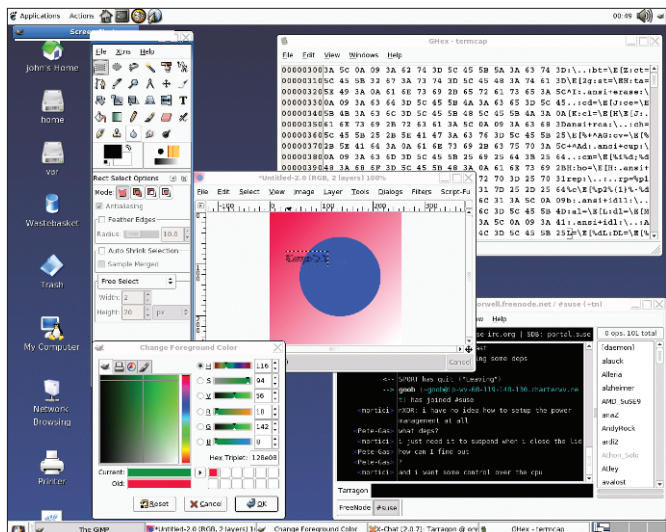
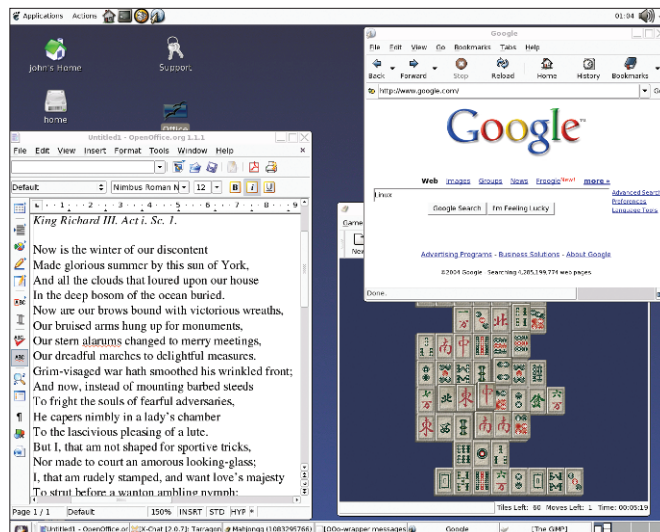Figure 3: GNOME desktop with Gimp 2.0, Hex editor and Xchat.

Figure 4: OpenOffice Writer, Epiphany browsing and a game of Mahjongg.

Easy updates

One of the strong points for choosing a modern distribution is the ease at which they can be updated. Suse is no exception and has the YaST Online Update (YOU) feature, which is similar to the Red Hat Up2Date utility. Both these tools have worked exceptionally well in our office with the previous versions.

As the 9.1 version made it on sale just recently, we were not surprised to find only a few patches available. These include a new kernel and Xine for security releases, plus Qt3, Gconf2 etc.

For those who have downloaded these patches previously and want to limit their bandwidth usage, you can use YaST | System | /etc/sysconfig Editor | System | Yast2 | OnlineUpdate to modify the repositories. Turn off the YAST2_LOAD-FTPSERVER line and then edit the /etc/youservers file to include your local copies of security patches. This is where you can also add new mirror sites as found on the Suse website at *http:// www.suse.com/us/private/download/ftp/ int_mirrors.html*

Media Playing

The YOU tool had no problem with installing nVidia graphics drivers. Where we did have a little problem was with DVD players. Due to the current copyright issues, Suse has decided not to include software to play DVD film discs. That is not quite true. The distribution is very careful and says it can play video clips. This is obviously not DVD films bought in the local video store.

Fortunately the apt-get tool in the form of apt4rpm has now been ported to Suse. Better still is the Synaptic GUI front-end. Using the power of this great Debian utility meant that we only had to choose Mplayer and all the dependencies and codecs where successfully taken care of.

Suse 9.1 does play MP3 files straight out of the box, unlike Red Hat.

Hardware was no problem, with the install finding webcams, graphic tablets and USB pen drives. Many of the improvements are due to application development. Previously we always had to resort to the GNOME desktop to use GnomeMeeting. This was because we found that on exiting under KDE it left zombie jobs. Suse 9.1 did not suffer from this problem.

Suse gains on other distributions because of the number of applications included in the set. However you should still not expect everything to be there. Mpage, a tool for printing multiple pages on a single sheet of paper, is not included. Here we just downloaded the Red Hat package from rpmseek.com and installed with the KPackage tool.

By default the system uses DES encryption for passwords, but MD5 and Blowfish are available.

After we used the YaST center to install the GNOME desktop we also found Blackbox. IceWM, WindowMaker, wm2, metacity, enlightenment and fvwm2 window managers.

For CD and DVD burning the K3b tool in included which starts as soon as a writable disc is inserted into a drive.

For a real gaming surprise, try playing the graphical adventure Beneath a steel sky game. This uses the LucasArts' S.C.U.M.M interpreter.

Unclear

For networking, we still find IPforwarding not quite right. After setting this up in the initial installation routing section, we still have to go through the YaST Firewall settings to switch it on for a second time before it works.

Mounting of removable media such as CDs has always been a hassle for those new to Linux. The Suse 9.1 now uses subfs to handle the mounting and unmounting automatically.

On the Office front, OpenOffice 1.1.1 plus the usual KOffice and GNOME office programs are included. This time TextMaker and PlanMaker are also given a try, along with Samba 3 with ActiveDirectory support for those who want to connect to Windows machines.

Conclusion

The 2.6 kernel alone is reason to update older Suse systems. For those who want an all in one boxset, then this distribution will give you most bang for your buck, euro or pound, with a vast array of applications. ∎

Suse Linux 9.1 Professional

Price	£64.95, $89.95, 89.95Euros
Support	90 days free installation help
Website	*www.suse.co.uk/uk/index.html*
Kernel	2.6.4-52-default