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.

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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.
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 were 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.

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 IP forwarding 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.

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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