

Linux interfaces

Red Hat Linux 8.0 Pro and Mandrake Linux 9.0 PowerPack

Since most PCs arrive with Windows preinstalled, persuading users to switch operating systems isn't easy. But it doesn't stop Linux vendors from trying. This month Red Hat and Mandrake are both attempting to tempt Windows users with new Linux releases that offer easy install procedures, loads of applications and the ability to coexist with an existing Windows setup.

Open debate

But why switch? For some it's an opportunity to learn more about computers, for others it's a way to expand their marketable skills now that Linux is increasingly common in large organisations. Others like Linux because it employs open formats free of the upgrade pressures imposed by proprietary formats. (for example, when one has to upgrade Microsoft Office or Windows in order to continue sharing information with others who have upgraded).

Linux is not owned by a single vendor but is a community effort released and developed under General Public Licence. Its full name, GNU/Linux signifies the merger of GNU operating system components developed by the

Free Software Foundation with the Unix-like Linux kernel produced by Linus Torvalds.

Linux is available from a variety of sources in the form of 'distributions', some prepared by commercial organisations which turn a profit by selling boxed versions with manuals and support. Standard distributions with basic applications run to at least two CDs and can be downloaded freely or purchased from a variety of sources for as little as £10. All manuals are usually available in electronic format but if you're happier with a printed manual you can buy a boxed set or perhaps a general book on Linux from a respected publisher such as O'Reilly.

Distributions typically employ common core components but differ in packaging and presentation, a feature made possible because Linux has a choice of graphical desktops; and unlike Windows they don't insulate you from the underlying system. In fact you're actively encouraged to delve

into the innards; on occasion when things go awry it's actually a necessity. In Linux a graphical desktop really is what it says – a simplified interface that can be bypassed to control the underlying system directly through a text shell similar to, but much more advanced than, the Windows command prompt.

It's this culture change – like the difference between heating a TV dinner and creating a meal from raw ingredients – that distinguishes Linux from Windows. So, the best reason for staying with Windows is when you know that you can't spare the time or commitment it takes to learn the Linux way of working.

Linux runs on many different types of hardware as well as PCs, but if you're running Windows your hardware is probably supported. For the easiest introduction to Linux, install it on a PC that's no more than three years old. On older PCs you may have to configure your hardware manually

and the graphical desktop will be slow. You'll probably find it's worth it, though. As a rule of thumb, if Windows is snappy, Linux will be snappier on the same hardware.

Red Hat

Red Hat is one of the original commercial distributors of Linux and is now the biggest and best known. Seen as a business-oriented distribution, Red Hat 8.0 includes for the first time a 'personal desktop' installation aimed at beginners and those switching from Windows. A successful install produces a clean, usable, graphical desktop and ready-to-use software including the OpenOffice suite and Evolution which integrates email, contacts and a calendar.

The installation process is very good at hand-holding the absolute beginner. Booting from CD or DVD produces a split screen with help on the left and installation choices on the right.

→ Red Hat 8.0 now includes a Personal Desktop installation for first-time users



← Red Hat's default desktop is a highly polished effort

All selections can be revised prior to the 'About to install' screen. During our installation, this enabled us to backtrack and review the boot loader setup which on rereading we changed, having misread the selections at first. Red Hat can coexist with an existing Windows installation but this is best achieved by using a third-party tool like PartitionMagic to create free (unpartitioned) space, which Red Hat can automatically allocate.

Red Hat's hardware support is very good; most hardware is automatically detected. Our installation produced no surprises on a dual-Celeron desktop machine and a Pentium III laptop.

On first booting you are invited to join the Red Hat Network in order to download any updates or security patches. Purchase of a boxed set entitles you to a free trial of the service. We looked at the full-feature Professional edition. A Personal edition with limited documentation, fewer CDs, no DVD, no telephone support and 30 days of web-based support costs under £30 excluding VAT and shipping.

Mandrake

Mandrake emerged in 1998 as an effort to make Linux easier to install and use. Starting with a Red Hat distribution, Mandrake developed GUIs (graphical user interfaces) for installing, setting up and configuring Linux. These have been drawn together in the Control Centre which gives access to most software and hardware configuration tools as well as to new backup and scheduling features.

Like Red Hat, Mandrake installs a graphical desktop and applications ready to run. On most recent hardware it does a great job automatically and will arrange partitions to coexist with Windows on the same PC. Now that Red Hat has a refined graphical installation utility there's little else to choose from between the two except that Mandrake does a better job of explaining and managing disk partitioning and boot loader setup. The major difference now is Mandrake's Control Centre which brings all the configuration tools together under one umbrella, keeping you away from the text-based shell a tad longer than Red Hat.

As for applications, the core set is much the same though Mandrake installs a greater selection

→ Mandrake 9.0 offers a choice of automatic install or expert for manual control



← The Mandrake desktop with applications and Control Centre open

by default. The main difference is the desktop environment, KDE for Mandrake, which at its default settings appears less polished than Red Hat's Gnome desktop. Mandrake sells PowerPack direct for €79 (about £50) including shipping.

The UK ex VAT price of £48 quoted below is as supplied by the Linux Emporium on 01491 837 010. A Mandrake Standard version costing under £20 with only one printed installation manual, three CDs and 30 days of online support is available as alternative to the full-featured PowerPack boxed edition.

Verdict

Red Hat is a good-value boxed set with comprehensive documentation in four printed manuals and 60 days online and telephone installation support. The complete operating system plus system tools and extensive selection of software applications on seven CDs (plus one DVD with everything) can be used to install any combination of server, workstation or personal desktop.

Mandrake is terrific value for money with seven CDs containing thousands of applications, two printed manuals and two Adobe PDF guides plus 60 days of online support. It's a little less polished than Red Hat but a little more user friendly as well. ■

Terence Green

Red Hat Linux 8.0 Pro

- Red Hat: 01483 300 169
- Website: www.europe.redhat.com
- Price: £110

System requirements

Pentium processor; 64MB RAM for minimal graphical performance; 128MB recommended; 1.5GB hard disk space for Personal Desktop installation.

Ease of use



Features



Value for money



Overall rating



Mandrake Linux 9.0 PowerPack

- Mandrake: +33 (0)1 4041 0041
- Website: www.linux-mandrake.com/en
- Price: £48

System requirements

Pentium processor; 64MB RAM (128MB recommended); 1GB hard disk space.

Ease of use



Features



Value for money



Overall rating



Video-editing software

Ulead VideoStudio 6.0 DVD and CD Deluxe

Ignore the confusing title: this package is basically a bundled version of two established Ulead products with a couple of goodies thrown in. The chief component is VideoStudio 6.0, an excellent video-editing suite pitched squarely at beginners but powerful enough to coax the best out of amateurs. The methodology will be familiar to anybody who has experimented with such products: first connect a camcorder to your PC via a FireWire port or analogue capture card (no hardware is supplied) then copy or capture your video footage to the hard disk for editing and production. VideoStudio captures video in Mpeg-1 or Mpeg-2 format directly from the camcorder, saving a good deal of conversion time later on.

Batch it up

Batch conversion is also available, so you can capture multiple scenes from an extended video sequence and ignore all the duff or dull bits. Scene detection during capture is automatic but weak, being based on time signatures rather than changes in the subject matter.

VideoStudio adopts a dual storyboard/timeline approach to editing. The first is ideal for dragging thumbnails of captured scenes into chronological order and chopping them roughly for length. The second is more suited to frame-by-frame trimming and fine tuning. Beyond the absolute basics, you can add a soundtrack (from MP3 or WAV files or ripped from an audio CD) and narration, apply video filters, special effects and static or animated titles, jazz up your scene changes with a selection of transitions and even, with a bit of fiddling and patience, overlay one video clip over another.

Work-in-progress is monitored in a large, resizable preview screen, and a handy Instant Preview feature gives you a fair approximation of how the movie will look for real.

Finally, VideoStudio renders the entire project and creates a video file in the format of your choosing (AVI, Mpeg-1 and Mpeg-2, or RealVideo, WMV and QuickTime for web streaming). Alternatively, with the help of an authoring wizard, you can burn your movie straight to DVD or CD media, adding a simple DVD-style menu as you go.

Chock-a-block

Our biggest gripe was that Mpeg-2 output was slightly blockier than we would have liked, particularly compared to that of Pinnacle Studio 7.0 – one of VideoStudio's main competitors.

→ Storyboard and timeline, titling and effects – VideoStudio has the works



← Create stunning titles with Cool 3D with a bit of effort effort (or a lot of luck)

The other program, Cool 3D, is a high-end animation tool. The rationale for inclusion is that you can design and produce creative, professional-looking titles with which to enhance your movies. It's great fun but the very devil to master, requiring hours of trial and error or a crash-course in 3D modelling. It's questionable whether amateur video editors really need such a thing – or, frankly, will bother learning how to use it – particularly when VideoStudio itself has rudimentary but quite acceptable titling built in.

Incidentally, although version 3.0 of Cool 3D is also in the box, Ulead has seen fit to include a supplementary manual pertaining to version 3.5, an upgrade release with support for Flash output that would set you back a further £19.

Finally, there's a selection of royalty-free videos, pictures and sound clips: in truth, no more than samplers from Ulead's Pick-a-Video, Pick-a-Photo and Pick-a-Sound collections. All very pretty and effective but will a Shanghai cityscape find a place in your holiday memoirs?

Verdict

VideoStudio is up there with the best of entry-level video software. But as a standalone product, you can get it for £20 less – which either makes Cool 3D a snip or unnecessarily bumps up the cost for little real gain. ■

Kyle MacRae

Ulead VideoStudio 6.0

- ☐ Ulead: 01327 844 880
- ☐ Website: www.ulead.co.uk
- ☐ Price: £60

System requirements

450MHz Pentium II (700MHz recommended); Windows 98/2000/Me/XP; 64MB RAM (128MB recommended); 500MB hard disk space for program plus at least 4GB for captured video; FireWire port or analogue capture card.

Ease of use



Features



Value for money

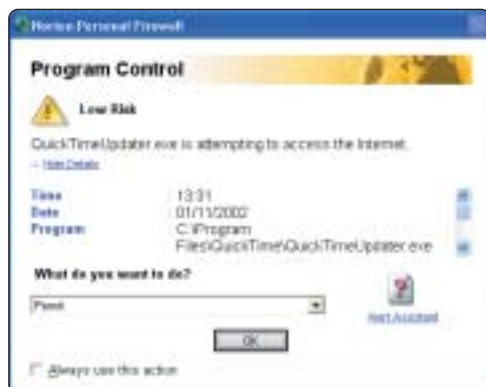


Overall rating



Internet security software Norton Personal Firewall 2003

→ Firewall keeps your PC safe by blocking any suspicious internet traffic



Now that over a million of us are purportedly using always-on broadband connections, a firewall is becoming a must even for home users. This software protects against unauthorised PC access which means that even when your computer is connected to the internet, no one can get in and browse your files.

Norton's Personal Firewall 2003 promises to shield your computer when it is online, but also adds an extra Intrusion Detection tool which examines internet content for malicious activity and blocks anything it thinks is suspicious. It also stops outgoing connections, halting spyware and Trojan horses.

In principle this all sounds like a good idea, but it becomes intrusive when it blocks benign software that needs to access the internet to get updates. Though in these cases a dialog asks if you want to permit access, we found that even when we allowed the software access Firewall wouldn't stop asking us until we gave in and blocked it. However, you can check a box that always permits or blocks certain software which does simplify things.

Another intrusive aspect to Firewall is its Privacy Control, which allows you to prevent it sending out certain personal information without your consent. Again, this seems like a good idea, but we found it made using any sites which needed to check your registration impossible, and you can forget about shopping online.

Norton Personal Firewall 2003

- ☐ Symantec: 01628 592 222
- ☐ Website: www.symantec.com
- ☐ Price: £34

System requirements

300MHz Pentium II processor (Windows XP); 150MHz Pentium processor (Windows 98/Me/2000 Pro); 48MB RAM; 25MB hard disk space; DVD or CD-ROM drive; Microsoft IE 5.0 or above.

Ease of use



Features



Value for money



Overall rating



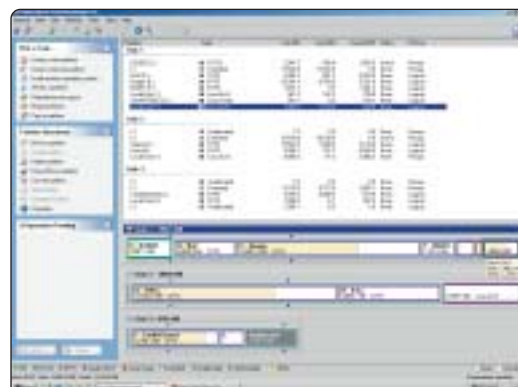
One real benefit with Firewall, is that as well as shielding your PC, it will also protect you from those pesky online ads. They are one thing you won't miss.

Verdict

Firewall is easy to use and if you are very cautious about the web then it should keep your PC locked up tight. However, Windows XP has basic firewall protection so Norton's extra features might prove more of a hassle than a help if you use XP. ■

Ursula Seymour

Hard drive partitioning utility PartitionMagic 8.0



← Always know where you are with the uncluttered, informative user interface

Although so many new PCs have enormous hard drives, it's not uncommon to find the entire drive formatted as a single partition. This makes life easy for PC suppliers but isn't always in your best interests. If, for example, you run Windows 2000 or XP on a large drive formatted as FAT32, disk access will be slower than it would be had the drive been formatted with NTFS, the native file system for Windows 2000/XP. Windows will happily provide a one-way conversion, but if you want to go back from there you're on your own. You may want to install more than one operating system to run both Windows 98 and Windows XP from the same PC or to experiment with Linux. You may want to create a separate data partition to make backups easier. Or maybe you have the opposite problem – a drive with several partitions which you want to rearrange or merge.

To achieve any of these objectives you need tools that perform low-level operations on drive partitions and Windows only provides destructive tools, Fdisk and Format, for this purpose. To use them you have to backup the entire drive to some other storage medium, make the changes, and then restore from backup. PartitionMagic, on the other hand makes it easy to create, delete, resize, move and merge Windows and Linux partitions nondestructively from within all editions of Windows except server versions. PartitionManager 8.0 has new tools and wizards to support running multiple operating systems, a new file browser, support for USB 2.0, FireWire and drives up to 160GB.

PartitionMagic 8.0

- ☐ PowerQuest: 01189 522 600
- ☐ Website: www.powerquest.com
- ☐ Price: £43

System requirements

Pentium 150MHz (233MHz for XP); Windows 95/98/Me/NT4/2000/XP; 32MB RAM (64MB 2000/128MB XP); 70MB hard disk space.

Ease of use



Features



Value for money



Overall rating



Verdict

PartitionMagic isn't perfect – you should still back up critical data before plunging in – but it has proved over many years to be the most reliable and user-friendly partition manager on the market. Version 8.0 has new Wizards, new tools and tidies up some rough edges. It's simply the best. ■

Terence Green

CD writing software

Roxio WinOnCD 6.0 DVD Edition

If you own a CD writer, it no doubt came with a 'lite' or cut-down burning suite so to venture into more exotic formats you will need a dedicated package. WinOnCD 6.0 DVD Edition is the latest addition to Roxio's ever expanding CD burning collection and answers a few more burning issues than a standard-issue package.

The software supports an impressive number of writing formats, covering both CD and DVD. The interface has been given a good overhaul and is designed to improve ease of use.

Disc-tech

On first start you're presented with a floating selection window with a choice of five different projects: Video, Audio, Album, Data or Copy. Each project then offers further sub-options including Video CD, audio CD and MP3 album.

It's all easy to follow, and the categories make sense. The only thing that's slightly awkward is performing a simple CD-RW disc erase as you have to first pick a project just to get to the menu option.

Once you've chosen the type of disc you want to create, you're then into a drag and drop interface with source files at the top and your compilation at the bottom.

In terms of project selection, the most varied section is Video. From here you can create a Video CD, overspan Video CD, Super Video CD, overspan Super Video CD, DVD/mini DVD (DVD on a CD) or photo-video CD. Overspan allows you to create projects greater than 700MB and split them over a number of CDs as required. This is useful if your video is too big to fit on a single CD and you don't want to have to enter into the hassle of using an editing package to trim it down or split into appropriately sized chunks.

When it comes to handling multiple sub-700MB files, however, it could be more intelligent. For example, burning two 500MB files in an overspan set results in the second file being split. It would make more sense to put the whole of the second file on CD two and avoid any unnecessary chopping.

Making tracks

WinOnCD provides a fair amount of control over Video CD creation, so you can specify menus, backgrounds and button control (though it does take time to master).

On the album side of things, you can opt for a Video CD, MP3 or DVD album. Drag and drop your chosen tracks and WinOnCD will diligently



← WinOnCD allows you to create menus and specify button control for Video CDs

produce an interface containing track names (if available), durations and so on.

If you opt for an MP3 album, the menu consists of a set of HTML pages. The interface is basic at best, allowing you to play tracks but not providing any controls like fast forward or rewind.

The DVD album creates a DVD video disc, with the track names displayed on screen. However, we found the text somewhat hard to read when played.

There's little to offer above and beyond on the data front, but the overspan facility (last seen in version 5.0) has been greatly improved. Each disk in an overspan set features a program called FileOnCD, which lists all files created in the set. You don't need to manually search for the correct disc, just select it from the interface and it will prompt you for the CD it needs. FileOnCD also handles restoring single big files split over multiple discs correctly and in the right order.

There's also a CD-ROM emulator thrown in, allowing you view disc image files as though they were real CDs a handy feature for testing, although you can download free applications that provide similar functionality.

Verdict

If you feel like getting creative with your CD projects, WinOnCD has plenty to offer. The overspan feature is useful and is much improved over previous versions. However at £51, you'll need to burn a lot of CDs to get your money's worth out of the package. ■

↑ The Music Album screen arranges your tracks for you and even creates a simple interface

Roxio WinOnCD 6.0 DVD Edition

- ☐ Roxio Europe: +49 240 545 0870
- ☐ Website: www.roxio.com
- ☐ Price: £51

System requirements

400MHz PC; Windows 98/Me/2000/XP; 120MB hard disk space (2GB for Video CD authoring and 10GB for DVD video authoring); CD-RW or DVD recordable drive; Internet Explorer 4.0 or later.

Ease of use



Features



Value for money



Overall rating



Will Head