

Distrowatch

» This month's news from the four corners of the Linux distro development world.



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Boycott Novell?

Novell's signing of the infamous patent protection agreement with Microsoft split the open source software community into two camps. The first – and more vocal – immediately called for a boycott of Novell's products as a form of protest against the deal. But the second group disagreed strongly; after all that Novell has done for the Linux community, boycotting OpenSUSE just didn't seem like a smart action. So who is right?

In common with many, my opinion is that Novell was wrong to sign with Microsoft. At the time when the Open Source developer community desperately fights the introduction of software patents in Europe and other regions, Novell (and subsequently Xandros, Linspire and Turbolinux) effectively legitimised Microsoft's claim that Linux had infringed on a number of its patents. Of course, in the absence of any evidence, this is nothing more than the usual Microsoft FUD.

That said, should we go as far as boycotting those Linux companies that have signed the deal? That's a tough question to answer. Personally, I am not a fan of large-scale boycotts of entire businesses and their products. However, given the choice of Free operating systems and software we have today, I have to admit that I consciously lean towards using a distribution developed by one of the companies that have openly and unequivocally rejected Microsoft's patent claims.

Red Hat, Canonical and Mandriva have publicly refused to sign a similar agreement – risking facing potentially crippling lawsuits – but by standing up to the powerful bully, they have earned the respect of the Linux community.

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Upgrade times

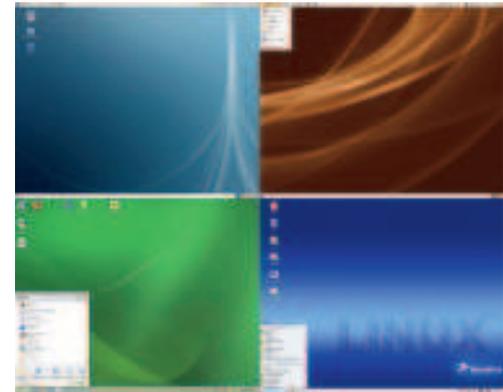
The big 2007 Q4 release rush is over. Which Linux distribution are you using to ring in the New Year?

As has become customary at this time of the year, all major Linux distributions released new versions of their flagship products. OpenSUSE 10.3 was the first with a new single-CD installation media, followed by Mandriva 2008 and its reworked hardware detection subsystem and a simplified installer. Ubuntu then brought us seamless 3D desktop integration courtesy of *CompizFusion*, before Fedora delivered its latest and greatest, complimented by excellent artwork and a new sound server.

If all these features don't seem all that exciting, it's because they are not. This is not necessarily a bad thing, however, and certainly not the fault of the developers. Originally, many of them were expected to focus on integrating the much-improved *X.Org 7.3* into their distributions, with the eagerly anticipated KDE 4.0 as the cherry on the top. Unfortunately, the former turned out to be unusually buggy, while the latter got delayed by several months. Instead of sitting idly, the developers turned their attention to various improvements on the existing stable desktops. The result? A better integration of various components and a smoother user experience.

OpenSUSE 10.3 was the first of the major releases. Besides the usual back-end changes to its package management and several new *YaST* modules, the project has embraced the concept of a single-CD installation media and has also started working on an installable Live CD. However, when the final release came out, many users and reviewers reported an unusually high number of bugs that escaped the attention of the developers – an unexpected surprise given the distro's traditionally high quality control standards. On the positive side, openSUSE has gone further than any other distribution in integrating some bits and pieces of KDE 4.0 into its latest release.

Next, it was Mandriva 2008. Once again, the new release didn't feel like a major upgrade, but perhaps as a result of some internal personnel changes (new director of engineering, new lead developer, new bug master), it was Mandriva's first release in several years that received universal praise from its users. This was a welcome turn of events from a struggling company. It almost felt as if the old Mandrake with its community-oriented approach and desktop focus



» So many distros – which one is the best?

was back to regain its rightful spot as one of the best desktop Linux distros on the market!

The long awaited Ubuntu 7.10 followed, eagerly anticipated by the desktop Linux community. The reason? A tasteful and unobtrusive integration of 3D desktop technologies, together with small beginner-friendly enhancements, such as the its migration assistant and desktop search features. And although some users reported problems with upgrading the distribution, most reviewers found 'Gutsy' to be one of the most polished and best integrated Linux desktops ever. Unfortunately, those who expected Ubuntu's sister projects – Kubuntu and Xubuntu – to remain on equal footing with their older sibling were sorely disappointed after finding out that many of the best new features were only designed for Ubuntu and GNOME.

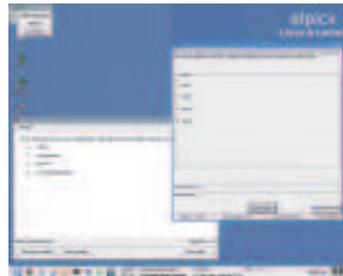
Finally, it was Fedora's turn to show off its efforts. As with the other three distros, the developers working on Fedora 8 chose to focus on less visible tasks, such as better support for popular laptops and integration of the PulseAudio sound server, while its artwork team continued improving the visual experience of the desktop. However, Fedora still remains the only major distro that actively discourages users from adding non-free software to its product. Great for Free Software purists, but anybody with modern desktop needs will need to visit the **Livna.org** repository to get the extra bells and whistles.

Be a Linux guru

elpicx 1.1 – a Live distro that helps preparing for the LPI certification exam.

Many IT job applicants without Linux certification will struggle to get that dream job. But which certification? There's a good way to ensure that sleepless nights passed studying thick manuals do not go to waste when the results are evaluated? The distro-agnostic Linux Professional Institute (LPI) certification is popular, not easy to acquire: the LPI failure rate is reportedly higher than other certifications, including Red Hat Certified Engineer (RHEL).

To help you prepare for the LPI exam, Germany's elernit project has developed an excellent live DVD that will try to ensure that you don't become another failure statistic. Called elpicx, the bootable DVD is based on Knoppix and CentOS, so is an ideal practice medium for the two most popular package management formats – DEB and RPM. The comprehensive docs on the DVD has Linux Fundamentals, LPI exam reference cards, training notes, exam preparation guides and exercises: the most complete collection of Linux study material ever published on a bootable medium.



› The elpicx live DVD showing two LPI test simulators.

To test your newly acquired knowledge, the DVD also includes two exam simulators – LPISim and Penguin Brain Checker. Both of them offer a large number of questions, similar to the ones an LPI aspirant is likely to face during the real test. The simulators are customisable in terms of number of questions and time allowed to answer them, but also include an option that matches the real test environment as closely as possible. A fantastic way to prepare for the final test – enter the classroom with confidence of a student that knows they won't fail.

www.elearnit.de/live_cds/elpicx/

Click and burn

NimbleX – easy compiling of custom Live distros from within a friendly GUI.

Thinking about creating a live CD designed to your exact needs, but don't feel like learning a scripting language? Never fear. Thanks to the NimbleX project, building a custom Live CD has become easier than ever; as long as you know how to use a mouse, you can compile your very own Live CD – complete with any device drivers, software packages desktop features and language localisation that you might need.

All this is possible thanks to a PHP-based web application developed by Bogdan Radulescu. It walks the user through a number of steps that include selection of packages and various configuration options before providing a button for generating the ISO image. A few minutes later, the live CD gets ready for download. This is a real, Slackware-based live CD, but instead of a generic image designed by a developer, it is customised to the user's exact needs.

While Custom NimbleX is the project's most impressive feature, it doesn't stop there. A specialist edition of NimbleX called sub_100 is



› Customise many desktop aspects, including KDE sounds and background wallpapers.

the first ever Live CD that provides a KDE desktop, but still fits into less than 100MB of space. And for those who just need a generic Slackware-based Live CD, there is always the standard edition of NimbleX – a 200MB CD that comes with KDE and *Fluxbox*, excellent wireless networking, full NTFS write support and other useful features.

www.nimblex.net

Distro usage statistics

What is the market share of the various desktop Linux distributions? While it's unlikely that anybody will ever come up with a reliable answer, there are data that can shed some light on the subject. One of these are web log analyses of Linux web sites. Since most distributions (with a notable exception of Slackware and Gentoo) identify themselves in their browsers (by modifying the so called user agent string), it is possible to detect the market share of these distributions from web server logs.

The table, right, provides data collected by **DistroWatch.com** over October 2007. During that month the website received a total of over 3.7 million visitors, of which nearly 40% used either Linux or another Unix flavour to access the site. Besides distro stats, it is also interesting to note that *Firefox* users constituted 58.6% of all visitors; they were followed by readers using *Internet Explorer* with 18.8%, while *Opera* users represented 8.0% of the total.

Rank	Distribution	Market share
1	Ubuntu	31.30%
2	Debian	9.90%
3	OpenSUSE	7.40%
4	PCLinuxOS	6.10%
5	Fedora	3.80%
6	Mandriva	3.50%
7	Linux Mint	3.40%
8	MEPIS	1.40%
9	FreeBSD	0.80%
10	Kubuntu	0.70%
11	CentOS	0.40%
12	Zenwalk	0.40%
13	Red Hat	0.30%
14	Pardus	0.20%
15	Solaris	0.20%
16	Elive	0.20%