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Blue Belle: Running PCLinuxOS Test 4

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PCLinuxOS [2] is an up-and-coming distribution that recently made it into Distrowatch.com [3]'s list of Top Ten Distributions [4]. Originally, you might have called it a fork of Mandriva Linux [5], but four years after its inception, it's definitely its own distribution, with its own package repositories, striking artwork, and enthusiastic user community [6]. In my experience, one thing that stands out about PCLinuxOS is its commitment to making Linux look good. This new version is simply gorgeous. (It helps if you like the color blue.)

[7]

I installed PCLinuxOS Test 4 on a 10 GB partition (with a separate 1 GB /home partition) on an AMD Athlon 2600+ with 640 MB of RAM and an NVIDIA GeForce 6200 LE graphics card. This hardware is no great shakes nowadays, but it's plenty fast enough to run PCLinuxOS with all the bells and whistles.

By default, PCLinuxOS installs kernel v2.6.18.8.tex4, X.org v7.1.1, and KDE v3.5.6. It's an rpm-based distribution that distinguishes itself by using the Synaptic package manager (or apt-get from the command line) to install packages. It also uses a highly customized version of Mandriva's ?DrakConf [8]? tool (which itself is similar to openSUSE's ?YaST [9]?), called the PCLinuxOS Control Center, for system administration tasks such as configuring hardware, modifying network settings, partitioning your hard disk, configuring a Web server, and so on. And although PCLinuxOS comes with KDE by default, GNOME packages (as well as packages for Xfce and Mandriva's Metisse [10] desktop) are available through Synaptic.

Installation was a simple 12-step process that took less than a half hour to complete. If you've already set up and formatted your partitions (my preferred method is to run the GParted live CD [11], which separates the partitioning process from the installation routine, giving me more time to think about partitioning, and allowing me to use an excellent partitioning tool), it's simply a matter of telling the installer which partitions to use; letting it install to disk; giving it settings for the GRUB bootloader; specifying a password for the root user; and setting up a normal user account. (Unfortunately, whatever settings you may have changed, and whatever software you may have installed, in the live CD environment are *not* carried over to your hard drive installation. It was a bit different to have to set up my ethernet connection after installing, since it was up and running from the live CD.)

Usually, after I install any given Linux distro, I have to spend time getting KDE just the way I want it. In the case of PCLinuxOS, just about all I had to do was select a screensaver and make the fonts a notch smaller. Everything looks fantastic, right out of the box, right down to the wallpaper. (The icon set, as well as several custom application ?splash screens,? were created specifically for PCLinuxOS by its ?beautification team.?)

[12]

Although there's a lot available in the repositories, space constraints on a live CD mean that developers have to carefully pick which applications to include on a default installation. PCLinuxOS comes with a plethora of useful ones, including OpenOffice.org v2.2, Firefox v2.0.0.3, Java 6, GIMP v2.3.10, and Mplayer v1.0rc1. The Adobe Flash 9 plugin comes installed by default, as does the mplayer-plugin ? although you'll have to install the ?win32-codecs? package (for viewing Windows Media Player and QuickTime movies) and ?libdvdcss2? (for viewing commercial DVDs) yourself, through Synaptic.

[13]

Other interesting software that comes on the CD includes DeVeDe v2.11 [14] for video DVD/CD creation; Kbudget v0.6, a personal finance app; and Nmap v4.20 (with NmapFE, a GUI ?front end?) for network monitoring.

[15]

Installing proprietary video drivers and using Beryl was a point-and-click affair. The NVIDIA v100.14.xx driver was available through Synaptic. After installation, it prompted me to restart the X server by logging out and in again. Then, through the **PCLinuxOS Control Center** > **Hardware** > **Configure 3d Desktop Effects**, I told it to use ?Full 3D desktop effects? (which enabled Beryl by default), and this prompted me to restart X once again. When I logged back in, Beryl was running.

[16]

(One small gripe is that Beryl Manager doesn't start when Beryl itself does. Beryl Manager puts an icon in your system tray, and allows you to make a bunch of choices regarding various Beryl options, including the Emerald Theme Manager. There's a button to run it in the PCLinusOS Control Center, but hiding it away there isn't terribly useful. It's easily run via the command line, though, or via a desktop icon, or even via a symlink to ?/usr/bin/beryl-manager? in ~/.kde/Autostart.)

[17]

[18]

The only glitch I encountered was when trying to enable XGL on my laptop while running from the live CD. My laptop has an ATI Radeon Mobility 200M chipset. I had to configure /etc/X11/xorg.conf by hand to enable DRI (and disable the Composite extension, which the proprietary ATI ?fglrx? driver doesn't support). When I enabled XGL, my laptop hung. This was, of course, way more the fault of the ATI driver than PCLinuxOS. My advice: until ATI gets its act together and supports the Composite extension with its proprietary driver, get a laptop with an NVIDIA chipset.

Something really cool about running PCLinuxOS on my laptop: using the ?mount=auto,rw? cheatcode (which finds and mounts all the existing partitions on your computer's hard drive), it allowed me to choose ndiswrapper, locate and use the Windows drivers which I had saved on my home partition, and set up wireless networking, all before getting to the GUI, and all through a simple point-and-click interface. Very nice. (Although it'd be even nicer if those settings carried through to a hard drive installation!)

In conclusion, PCLinuxOS is about as easy to use as you could hope for, and its artwork is simply stunning. Highly recommended.

[19]

StumbleUpon [20]

Reviews

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[4] http://distrowatch.com/dwres.php?resource=major
[5] http://www.mandriva.com/en
[6] http://www.pclinuxos.com/index.php?option=com_smf&Itemid=26
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