



THE OUTER EDGE

Tall Tales from the
Brink of Sanity

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LINUX LABOURS

Is LINUX really ready for Simple Users?

PART 2 – ON A CLEAR DAY

A New Direction

There are a few distros that claim to make it easy for Windows refugees. **PCLinuxOS** was one of those but the only version I could find was a beta 2. Still, the reviews said it was solid and deserved its place in the top 10. I checked on Intel G915 support and was assured that it was a simple tick-the-box install, courtesy of **Synaptic** (a 'package manager' that helps you install software).

The install took just over 20 minutes, including the usual questions and the now familiar partition routine. The screen came up in the equally familiar 800 x 600. When I checked the Display settings, PCLOS told me that I'd have more luck with the 915 resolution installed – would I like to install it now? I hit the OK button and rubbed my hands with anticipation. PCLOS came straight back and said it couldn't do it after all, sorry.

By now I had an idea where to look for help: Synaptic, which was easy to get to with the 'convenience' icon in the taskbar. I found 915 resolution, marked it for install and ticked Apply. Synaptic said it couldn't do it either and wondered if something more basic was amiss. I ran up Firefox and it couldn't connect so I checked the DSL setup in the Control panel, ticked a couple of boxes and went back to the screen settings. This time PCLOS kept its promise and got rid of the Flintstones look.



I could see clearly at last. **PCLinuxOS** uses KDE, which is easier to follow than the Gnome but has more settings to tinker with. The list of installed applications is exhaustive and includes OpenOffice, Scribus (DTP), Thunderbird and MPlayer (for video clips and movies). Despite laying on the works, PCLOS felt more nimble than the two previous distros. Only OpenOffice still crawled onto the scene.

I had other things to worry about: panels that hung and wouldn't close whatever I did. Logging out would leave me stuck, staring at black and white lines – the power button was the last resort. After a reboot, PCLOS had lost the internet connection again. This also happened when it shut down normally.

I liked **PCLinuxOS** a lot and plan to come back when the creation is finished.

The North West Passage

Xandros promises an easy transition for Windows refugees, but here you pay for the trip - about US \$100 for the professional edition, which you can try for 30 days before you buy. From the moment the install began, I was impressed. The screen has a left pane like Windows XP that gives you a running snapshot of the installer's progress, while the right side tells you all about Xandros Linux.



It was slick and painless because, unlike Windows, Linux distros don't insist on inserting an electronic eel into the bowels of your PC to check that your set-up is legal.

I checked that 915 resolution wasn't a problem but, when Sesame opened, a warped world faced me once more. The XP-like layout made it easy to find the Display settings, and **Xandros** let me choose the 1280 by 800 resolution along with the driver. Despite these hopeful signs, it didn't produce the hoped-for results.

I checked the **Xandros** user forum and, once again, I wasn't the only dummy looking for a fix. One helpful geek wrote in: *'I downloaded and tried the Intel driver but couldn't get it to work either :-(. I downloaded a more up to date release candidate kernel (2.6.12-rc6) and found that DRI support for the i910GM card had been added. For AGP compile in kernel support for '/dev/agpgart (AGP Support)' and 'Intel 440LX/BX/GX, 18xx and E7x05 chipset support'. For DRI support compile in kernel support for 'Direct Rendering Manager (XFree86 4.1.0 and higher DRI support' and 'Intel 830M, 845G..... (i915 driver)'.*

That wasn't nearly the end of it but it was the end for me. I closed Firefox and hunted around for other system settings. I was about to give it away when I spotted an item called 'Drivers' under **Xandros Networks**. When I saw the list of installed apps, the penny dropped that XN was the package manager on duty here. I found the driver for the Intel G915/945 card, ticked the box, then Install and off Xandros went and fetched the thing for me, installed it and told me to reboot.

I was greeted by a close to perfect desktop. What a difference the right driver makes in these mountains. OpenOffice wasn't among the installed apps, so I ticked that box too and watched Xandros fetch it and install the complete Office suite for me. I didn't have to do a thing - it was a whole lot easier than installing *Microsoft Office*.

An icon in the taskbar was vying for attention, a rather unattractive critter that looked like a bedbug jumping up and down. It turned out to be the **Xandros** Security Suite, which includes a Firewall, antivirus and even a rootkit detector. This looked impressive, but why bother? To make paranoid Windows users feel more comfortable? Last year, 48,000 new virus signature were found in the

Windows world, against all of 40 in Linux. So why was this bug throwing its weight around and insisting on a full file scan on a fresh installation with no user files?

Xandros offered me a 3D desktop but I thought I'd better learn to walk before attempting double backwards somersaults (PCLinuxOS does 3D as well but I didn't get that far). Like **Ubuntu**, **Xandros** had found my DSL connection and wanted me to install updates. It's another click and watch process, and you don't have to reboot. What a joy compared to Windows, which hounds you every 10 minutes until you curse, stop whatever you're doing and reboot.

The **Xandros** File Manager is conveniently laid out like Windows Explorer, and it listed both the Linux and Windows partitions (Windows pretends that Linux doesn't exist, as you'd expect). Out of idle curiosity, I popped a Windows document back-up CD into the drive, fully expecting **Xandros** to give me big read cross error sign or a rude message. Instead it listed the folders on the CD and opened individual files with a simple click. Opening a Word document brought OpenOffice to life (eventually), and it did what its name promised. The same happened with PDF and HTML docs, and even Powerpoint presentations. The only kinds of office docs **Xandros** couldn't handle were those created with Publisher.

Xandros Professional includes **Codeweaver's CrossOver**, a piece of software that lets you run Windows apps on Linux, but the list was limited and featured ancient software like Acrobat Reader v5. Publisher wasn't on the list at all. Still, I could copy most of my files from Windows to Linux and vice-versa as it turned out. You can even write to Windows files from Linux via OpenOffice.

The Verdict

Xandros did exactly what it claimed: open an easy passage for Windows users through the mountains of Mozilla. I was more than impressed but, after spending a few days here, I grew restless. It wasn't the real thing, it dawned on me, but a halfway house somewhere between the kingdom and the mountains. Many Linux utilities are re-branded and proprietary software has been added, so it's hard to figure out what is Linux and what is **Xandros**.

If you merely want to find a familiar refuge from Windows, **Xandros** provides it. If you want to explore the bold new world of Linux, on the other hand, **Xandros** might be the wrong way to go.

Mandrake, the Magician

People said Mandriva, once known as Mandrake, was a magic place. A Linux mag offered a **Mandriva 2007** DVD to take me there in a hurry – downloading these distros and burning the CDs takes hours, even on DSL. The DVD came loaded with extra cheese, salami and anchovies, and the install was slick.

By now, the distorted screen had become as familiar as a friend who's overstayed his welcome. Digging into the Display options made Mandrake the magician appear. He told me that I had an Intel G945 graphics card. What's more, he offered to install the right driver for me. Log out and back in, and the world looked normal again. Why couldn't the others make it this easy?

Mandriva's default desktop is KDE, which suited me except that it felt like a heavy load. Or was the extra cheese gumming up the works? Come to think of it, all of the distros I'd tried were slower to start and to respond than XP on the same machine. Launching or clicking on a process can a little like ringing the bell for a nurse in a hospital: a lot of time goes by before you hear the footsteps in the hallway and see her appear. OpenOffice takes longer to rise from its slumber than a teenager who's been out partying all night.

I found a panel that lets you disable unnecessary processes, but was written in a foreign language. Mind you, my first reaction to XP's Task Manager was the same – it takes time to become familiar with operating system processes.

Easter Eggs

When it came to tracking down desktop and system settings, KDE reminded me of Windows. With KDE it's not so much a case of hidden Easter eggs but too many look-alike eggs. There are two control centres: the one that goes by that name is KDE's control panel, which gives you access to themes, panel colours, wallpaper and so on. The **Mandriva** Linux Control Centre is hidden under 'Configure Your Computer'. It lets you mess with files, set up printers and tweak screen settings, as long as you log in as administrator. This safety feature can get annoying after a while, since you have to do it every time you open a panel with restricted access.

KDE is a puzzle with many pieces that range from an email client to a CD burner. One of these is a guy called *Konqueror* who has many jobs including that of file manager - listing him under Internet browsers adds more confusion.

Linux is Not Windows

The DVD was loaded with apps, from OpenOffice to DTP and Website design, but *MPlayer* and *Opera* were missing. There are rigid procedures for installing software on Windows, and these are followed to the letter by all authors except those who work at the King's Court. In the mountains of Mozilla, where everything is handcrafted, installing software is a hit-and-miss affair. The smart thing to do is to buy what you need from the shop you bought the platform from, then there's a good chance that the add-ons will fit. The shops call this 'package management' and talk about 'dependency hell', meaning that some programs won't work or will only work after adding other bits and pieces.

Mandriva's Software Management Console lets you download updates, see what's installed and what else you can get from the shop. A visit to Mandriva's website revealed that these guys make their money from bundles of apps that have been tested for compatibility. Mandriva Club members get download and other privileges, but the Silver Service is a hefty \$130 a year.

There's another way to get more apps, but it involves a tortuous journey through the mountains. First you have to find your way to the village of Urpmi, which is on the way to RPM Drake. There you need to find a certain guide who'll take you to the **Penguin Liberation Front** further up in the mountains. The folks at PLF will help you track down what you're after, but their procedures are ponderous. Once you get the software, installing it can be tricky as some of the artisans use tarballs to package their wares in.

All of this sounded too hard so I tried a more direct route: downloading Opera with Firefox. To my great surprise, **Mandriva** installed it without a hitch.

A New World opens up

The **Mandriva** Control panel offered 3D effects, which I assumed required a better graphics card than the humble Intel in my Inspiron. A quick check with Google found many articles on how to enable 3D with Nvidia and ATI cards. More digging produced a piece that said the Intel G945 was enough for the basics. I ticked the 3D option and suddenly, everything I clicked on went wobbly. Panels behaved like curtains in a breeze when you moved them, or like chewing gum when you tugged at their borders. The world on my screen looked weird again, only this time it followed Salvadore Dali's ideas rather than those of Barney Rubbles.

I couldn't see what the 3D fuss was about until I followed the instructions of the Linux mag that had provided this distro: hit CTRL+ALT+ right cursor, which made the cube spin around to a second desktop. Not bad. CTRL+ALT+ right-clicking on the desktop with the mouse lets you move the whole cube in space, in any direction. Shift +CTRL+ALT+right+left cursor allows you to drag an open panel across to the next side of the cube. And if you get lost among all the cubic desktops, you can hit CTRL+ALT+ down cursor and see all the screens at once in 2D.



This stuff will impress your mates, but it can be useful when working on multiple documents, cutting and pasting. You can have transparent panels, menus and toolbars as well if you want to impress your mates some more. I was surprised that this fancy stuff worked so fast on a base-model Dell Inspiron.

Microsoft says Vista Premium will run on this machine, too, but we know their hype for what it is by now: hype. Dell's online configurator recommends 2gb of RAM for anything above Vista Home, plus ATI or Nvidia graphics cards. **Mandriva's** fancy graphics are free and work well on basic hardware, that's the beauty of it.

I didn't find any bugs, only pleasant surprises: after fiddling with the settings on one occasion, I lost all my toolbars. Rebooting not only restored them, but also restored the programs I had open at the time. There was a greater intelligence at work here, you could feel it. **Mandriva** even speeded up over the few days I played with it, I don't know how. All I know is that it took less than a minute to boot up in the end.

Mandriva grew on me. If you can live with the generous list of installed applications on **Mandriva's** menu, or don't mind joining the Club, this could be a fine alternative to Windows Vista.

PART 3 – [LINUX MEANS BUSINESS](#)

Screenshots courtesy of:

<http://shots.osdir.com/>

<http://knolinux.com/>

<http://www.tuxmachines.org/node/337>