



## THE OUTER EDGE

Tall Tales from the  
Brink of Sanity

These are BRIARD's own  
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## LINUX LABOURS

### Is LINUX really ready for Simple Users?

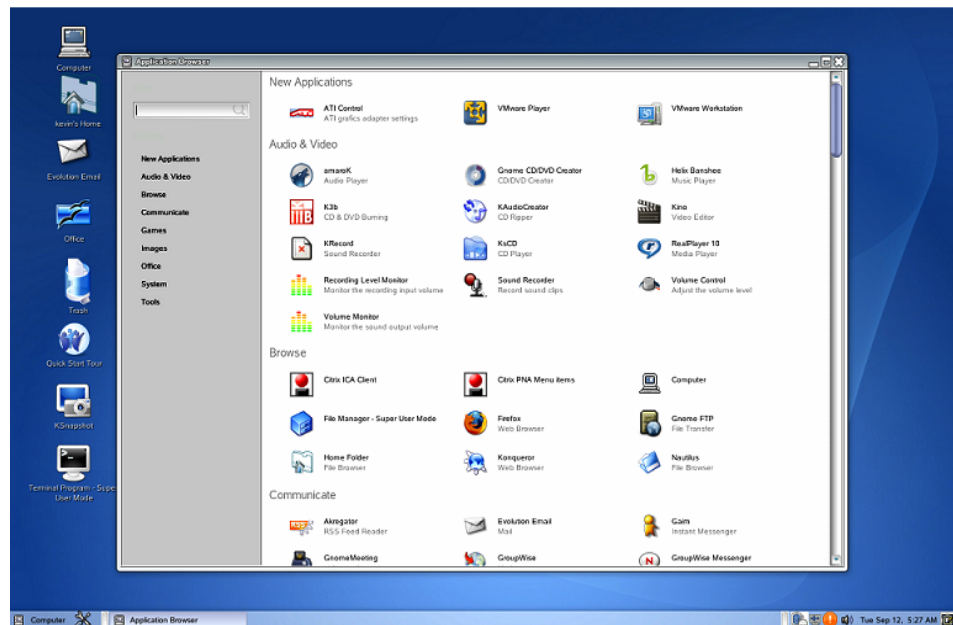
#### PART 3 – LINUX MEANS BUSINESS

#### NOVELL SUSE Linux Enterprise Desktop 10

This is Novell's business edition of **SUSE**, which was released to rave reviews late last year. Novell offers a 60-day trial for **SUSE Linux Enterprise Desktop 10** (the cost is modest US \$50). Basic installation was easy and took about 40 minutes.

Then the fun started, with Novell acting a bit like Microsoft – registration, product codes, access to updates and support. That took half an hour and the updates took another forty minutes. The 800x600 resolution had me worried but when all the rest was done, **SLED** came good and offered to reconfigure the screen to 1280x800.

The default Gnome desktop makes the Simpson Desert look lush. All you see are couple of folders on the screen and a My Computer button in the bottom taskbar, next to a pencil. 'My Computer' turns out to be the 'Start' button. It opens a screen offering a few apps, a 'More Applications' button and pointers to things like Help and Control Centre. The More Apps button goes to other extreme and opens a leather-bound volume of 160 programs: 21 office applications, 9 browsers/file managers, 10 communications tools, 10 graphics programs, 15 audio/video programs, 50 system utilities and 28 tools. There are group headings on one side, but you get the entire Carte des Vins on the right. When you click a heading, it colours in the related group but it still takes too long to find what you want.



#### The Works and More

There was no bar along the top of the screen, which puzzled me since **Ubuntu** had one. After turning the Gnome upside down and shaking him a few times, he confessed that I could add a top bar if I right-clicked on the bottom task bar > new panel.

The top bar appeared with 3 headings: Applications, Places and Desktop, all with sensible drop-down menus including the long-lost RUN command.

With Novell aiming **SLED** at the corporate desktop, you wonder why there are so



viewer offered me a 'set as background' option. By chance I found that you can 'add' your photos to the background theme panel, and select them from there with a single click. The 3D toys were as easy to set up as Mandriva's, and the settings provided more options than I knew what to do with.

On balance, neither of the two desktop GUIs is harder to come to grips with than Windows XP – I had the same problems the first time I saw that boring green lawn. Diving headlong into several Linux distros with different desktop managers, as I did, was bound to add more confusion. A user choosing one distro will only have to learn one GUI. The only problem is in choosing one over another. Hang on, is that me complaining about choice? After the years I spent in the kingdom of no choice?

### More Extras and more Speed

Choosing Gnome didn't bar access to other KDE apps like K3b, the burner, or Kaffeine, KAudioCreator and Kino. Conversely, you have access to Gnome apps if you choose KDE's desktop, so **SLED** offers the best of both worlds. Novell says it's done a lot of work on OpenOffice (which it owns) to provide better support for Microsoft Office macros, Excel ones especially. It also throws in App Armour, a security suite that claims sandboxing facilities. A more useful addition is a laptop package that provides power management and wireless support.

There's even a process monitor that resembles XP's Task Manager. It revealed that **SLED** occupied 250mb of RAM and 3gb of disk space, not bad for a full-featured system with a truckload of tools and applications. Even with half a dozen apps running, **SLED** used just over 400mb of RAM.

It takes a couple of minutes to warm up from a cold start, but once the **SLED** is moving, it's fairly quick to respond to the helm. This is the first time I've seen both Firefox and OpenOffice come up in seconds rather than minutes, so the tuners at Novell's garage have done a pretty good job.

### You Can Print That

I don't have much fancy hardware on my laptop but I do have a couple of printers in my office. I chose the 'add printer' option on the Control Panel and **SLED** picked up the HP 3100 Photosmart right away, offering to install the driver. Yes please, I said, and **SLED** opened the file manager for me, which gave me a blank look. I checked HP's website and found that the 3100 wasn't an option for Linux but my second printer, an HP Laserjet 1300, was. I plugged it in but drew another blank.

Back to HP who offered me a driver set and instructions for a simple install via the console. I stumbled over the first instruction - cd to directory - so I approached YaST, the guy who offers help with all kinds of problems. He asked me a few questions and then offered to test the printer. To my great surprise, it worked.

### Verdict

Novell's **SLED10** is a serious alternative to Vista: business users will most likely find few glitches and a number of sensible tweaks, while home users will find plenty to amuse themselves with. The documentation is extensive and the QuickStart Tour is a great way to explore the new landscape. Best of all, the fifty dollar price tag includes a year's access to updates and support.

### Simply MEPIS

People on the internet said it was like **Ubuntu**, only better. Downloading the live CD gives you the now familiar look-before-you-install option. Before you do that, F3 lets you choose the screen resolution and my spirits lifted when I saw a 1280x800 option. The install was simple, with a progress bar and assorted tips and features that helped pass the time.

After the reboot, I was back in the stone age. The 'Display' panel claimed the resolution was 1024x768 and offered no improvement on it. Other settings deep in the System panel were no more generous. Once again Google showed me that I wasn't the only one with this problem and pointed me to sites offering fixes that involved the usual command line surgery.

The best of them was one from a contributor who said getting Mepis set up was a breeze, including the widescreen fix: 'I've done this so many times in the past,' he wrote. 'I just used a script I made to set this patch up properly. I still remember how difficult it can be as a newbie to install

915resolution and make it work each time the computer reboots.' I looked in vain for the fix but, like a man who claims to know where the fabled treasure is buried, he left the tavern without revealing the details.

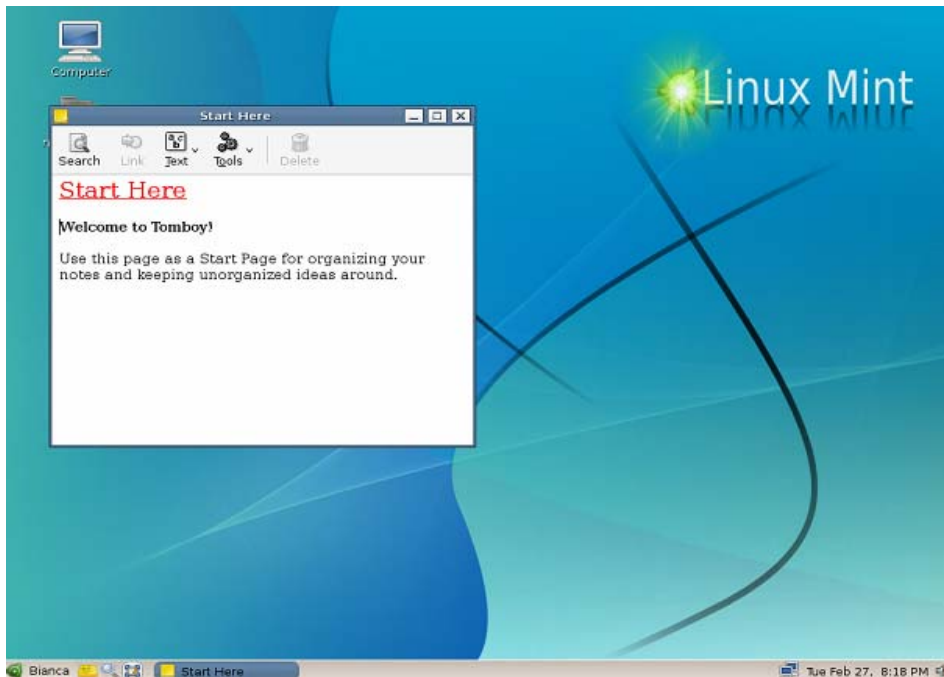
## LINUX MINT

I had no luck with *SimplyMepis* and wasn't keen to try another distro based on *Ubuntu*, but lots of people on the web likened *Linux Mint* to the Holy Grail. I was even less keen after seeing some folks on the forums complain that there was a problem with 915resolution and, worse, that installing *Mint* had trashed their Windows installations.

The version I downloaded was 2.2, christened 'Bianca' by its French/Irish creators. I ran the live CD and it came up in full 1280x800 technicolour right away.

After that impressive debut, I couldn't wait to see more of Bianca. *Mint* uses the Gpart partitioner and it demands all of your attention when it comes to ticking the right partition boxes. The process is logical if a little unnerving for baby penguins.

The *Mint* emblem looks like a slice of green star aniseed with a bright white centre that beams like Venus. They say Venus is a treacherous planet but no treachery occurred. In fact, the install was a breeze and beat all records at 15 minutes flat. Bianca even ejected the CD before rebooting from the hard drive, something most of the others refuse to do, leaving you to wrench it out right after the reboot. She turned out to be a fast lady in every way: I was up and running in half an hour, a time that exceeded all reasonable expectations.



Bianca had my internet connection working right away and told me there were updates to download, which she took care of without making a fuss.

The desktop was a different Gnome (the South African cousin?) from Novell's and you wonder why the artisans can't leave these things alone. The theme choices were limited and lacked polish, and the boot screen looked like a throwback to the days of PC-DOS – clearly Bianca is still going through puberty.

## Linux on Speed, with the lot

They should've called it Lightning Linux – it fires up in 45 seconds, rearing to rev. Firefox and OpenOffice bounce onto the screen as if propelled by a slingshot, and so does everything else. It's the most responsive distro I've tried by far.

In the end, I settled for the **Ubuntu** default theme rather than Bianca's bile green and blue hues. Now I was back where the journey through the mountains had begun: on the Highveld. I didn't mind that since it gave me a chance to see why the village of Ubuntu was such a popular destination.

The Package Manager is one reason, I suspect. The plain English package descriptions include logos and popularity ratings, and the apps already installed have ticks in their boxes. Tick any others you want to install, click Apply, then sit back and watch the download/install happen in front of your eyes. The list of apps is longer than the Limpopo river - everything is just a mouse-click away: Opera, the Gimp and NVU, and even Xara-Extreme and Inkscape, and all of them are easier to install than any software on Windows.



Bianca played a DVD movie out of the box (Mandriva and SLED refused to) and even made the push button controls on the Dell Laptop work the volume – another first.

The reason some distros don't play CDs or movie DVDs is related to copyright and digital rights issues. The **Mint** website says their developers opted for freedom instead. To those of us who resent the Windows kingdom's restrictions and the frequent probes by its Secret Police's into the fundamental orifice of our PCs, this is Nirvana.

### A Bridge too Far

Sadly, Nirvana is a mythical place. After I'd installed a few extra packages, **Mint** browned out next time I booted up. The screen said: 'warning – not loading blacklisted module ipv6'. I wondered if this was a one-off or something I'd done wrong. I'd been so impressed with **Mint** that I reinstalled it. The only program I added this time was Opera yet Bianca told me I had a broken package and urged me to check the filter in Synaptic. I followed that lead but soon felt like a blind man trying to read the insert of a fortune cookie in the dark.

When Opera closed and apologized for its hasty departure, I uninstalled it. The broken package icon went away and **Mint** was happy once more, but the next day it wouldn't start again. It's a shame, but the rough edges are clearly more than skin deep. The best I can say is that Bianca has lots of potential: **Ubuntu** with the extras offered here has to be a winner.

### PART 4 – [TAKING STOCK](#)

Screenshots courtesy of:

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

<http://knolinux.com/>

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