

How good is the new Suse?

CHECKUP

In the June 2006 issue of Linux Magazine, we took a look at the new features introduced by the imminent Suse version. Read on to find out if the final version is worth an update. **BY MARCEL HILZINGER**

May 12 was the big day: Novell finally uploaded Suse Linux 10.1 to various servers for *i386*, *x86_64*, and *ppc*. You may recall that the beta version we tested still had a number of bugs, and this prompted us to carefully scrutinize the official version.

Installation and Hardware

Installing Suse Linux 10.1 on a recent machine should be no problem. And we had no trouble updating a 10.0 version in our lab, although you may need to resolve conflicts if you choose to update. If you have a heavily-used machine, this could mean numerous clicks on *keep packagename* or *delete packagename*. Some users might have appreciated a button for *Keep everything* or even *Delete everything*. YaST sets up a random hostname that follows a pattern of *linux-*

abcd during the install process: a good idea, especially if you are installing multiple machines simultaneously on a network.

Suse Linux still has reliable hardware detection, however, the fact that Suse identifies your hardware correctly does not automatically mean that you get hardware support. WLAN drivers are tricky. The drivers for the Realtek Series 2400 and 2500 cards cannot be compiled for the current kernel, and they are missing in Suse Linux 10.1. Don't expect support for Atheros cards either, although, fortunately, you can download and install drivers from the Madwifi page [1] in this case; and the folks at Packman have

added a few kernel modules to their repository. If you prefer to install the drivers manually, you might like to check out the Opensuse Wiki [2] for a Howto. The new network manager gives you optimum WLAN support.

Suse Linux gives you packages for drivers that are not part of the official kernel. The WLAN drivers are located in the *wlan-kmp-default* package, and Ndiswrapper is in *ndiswrapper-kmp-default*. Suse Linux also supports Intel's 3945 chipsets. Firmware is available from the mirrors in the *non-oss-inst-source* branch.

Data Locks

If you want to use Suse 10.1 in connection with multiple Linux partitions, Novell's new security policy will probably annoy you. Users are not allowed to access local drives, unless the system administrator adds the drives to the */etc/fstab* file. Otherwise, HAL will even stop users mounting partitions of this kind.

Thanks to open source, there is an easy way to work around the security measure: in Line 7 of the */usr/share/hal/fdi/policy/10osvendor/99-storage-policy-fixed-drives.fdi* file, change the `< ... type = "bool" > true </merge >` to `< ... type = "bool" > false </merge >`,

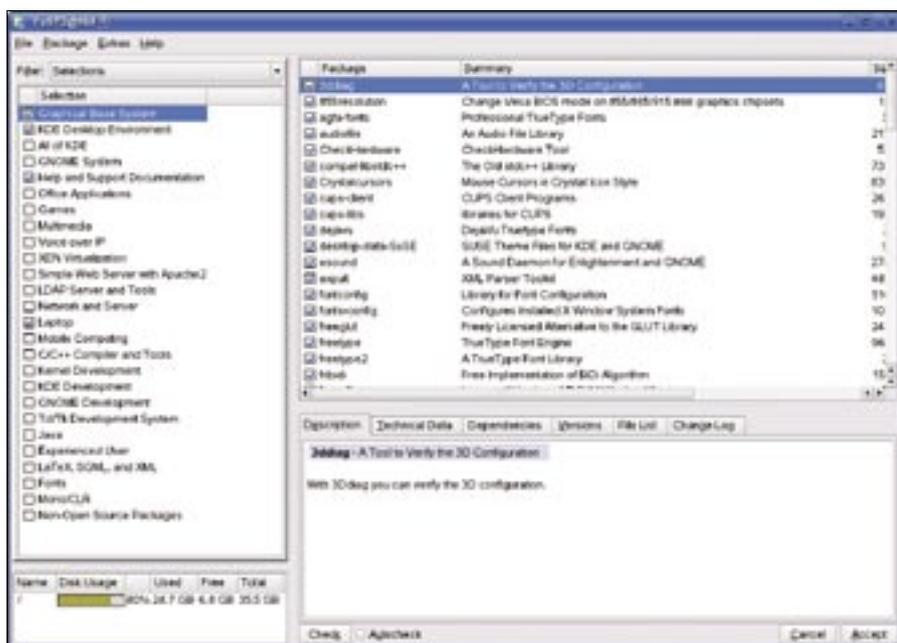
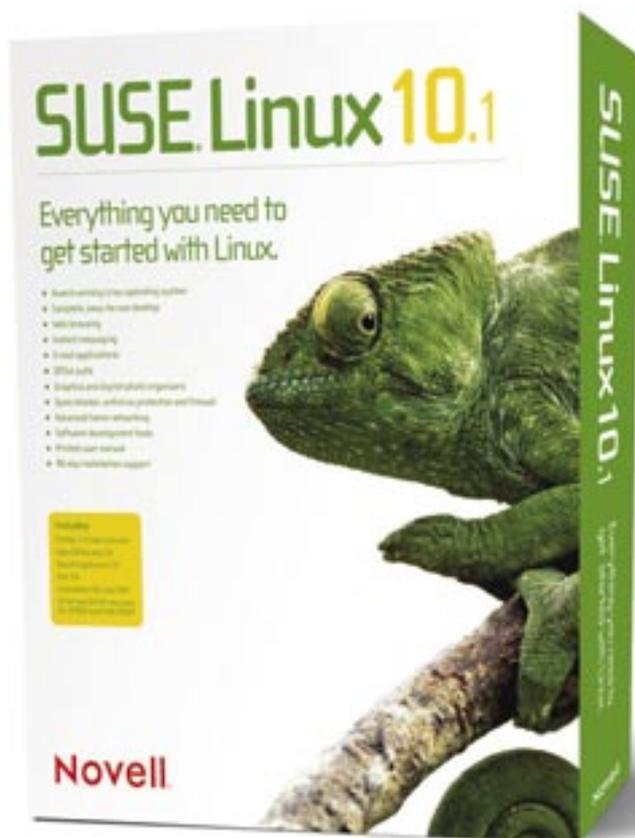


Figure 1: YaST provides a convenient interface for installing and managing software packages.

and then restart the HAL daemon as *root* by typing *rchal restart*.

Online update (YaST Online Update, YOU) may not be completely blocked, but Novell has definitely added an obstacle. You need to register your computer with a Novell server before you can use YOU. The YaST *Online Update Configuration* module will help you register. Many Linux users are allergic to the word registration, but before you start writing poison letters, let's just mention what the registration is mainly intended to do:

- Collect hardware data (mainly for Business Support) and
- set up a fixed update server, which is located somewhere near where you live (previously, Online Update just selected a mirror at random from a list).

If you prefer not to register, just enter your preferred YOU server in the YaST *Change installation source* tab.

Xgl and Gnome

For friends of Gnome, Suse Linux 10.1 is a good choice, although it does not in-

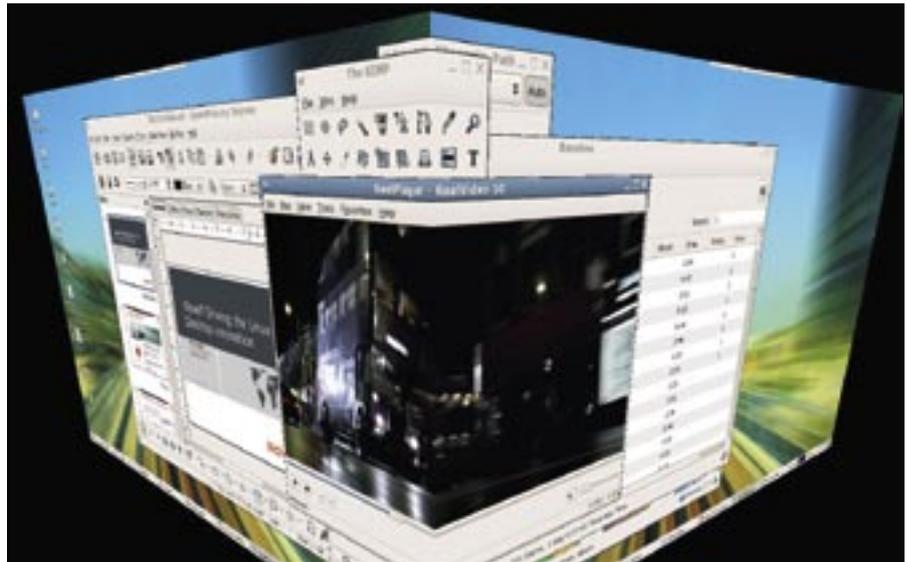


Figure 2: Xgl brings 3D to the Linux desktop.

clude the current Gnome 2.14 but instead makes do with the previous version 2.12. Despite this, the desktop has a fresh feel about it, and it is noticeably quicker than KDE. But it would be overkill to sing the praises of Gnome as a KDE replacement: for example, Gnome

does not give you a GUI tool to set up the mount options for external hard disks, and don't bother looking for the useful overview dialog at *sysinfo:/* on the GNU desktop. Additionally, Gnome doesn't offer a genuine alternative to K3b or KPowerSave.

advertisement

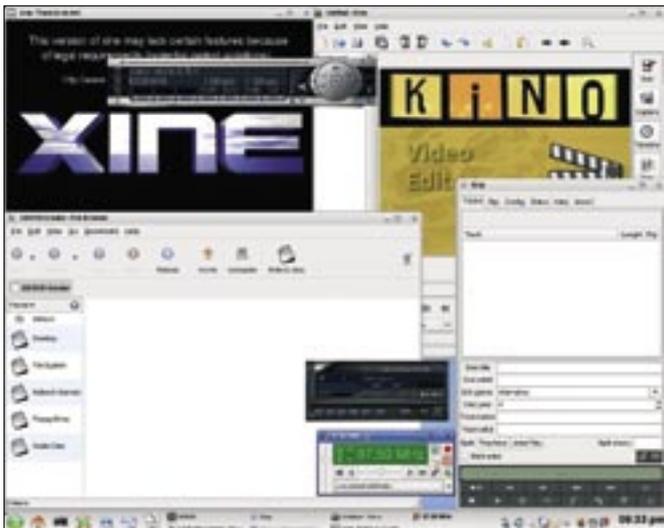


Figure 3: Suse comes with several popular multimedia applications.

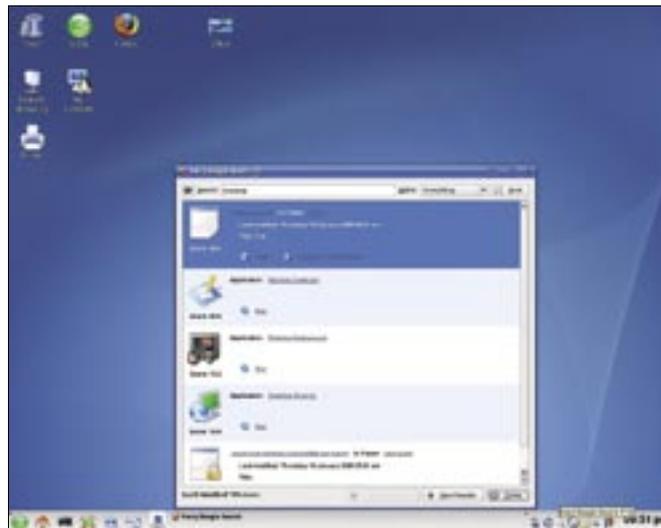


Figure 4: KDE users can find files with the Kerry Beagle.

Gnome is also recommended if you are interested in trying out Xgl – Novell’s 3D desktop system. Users with supported graphics adapters can enjoy the Cube and numerous 3D gadgets while Windows users are still waiting. Although a manual setup is required, it should not pose too much of a problem, even to newcomers.

The Opensuse Wiki [3] has a Howto including tips for setting up individual graphics adapters. Xgl will work with KDE also, but with some restrictions: for example, you have to use Gnome window decorations, and the desktop switcher in the KDE panel does not support Xgl.

Not Good Enough

Although package management was completely overworked several times in the beta phase, it still leaves much to be desired. The Zenworks Linux Management Daemon (ZMD) is mainly designed for system administrators in heterogeneous environments – but the tool is more likely to slow a home PC down. On our lab machine with 256 MB RAM and a 1.4 GHz CPU, it took ZMD over a minute just to wake up.

Installing a 2 MB RPM package took another one and a half minutes (see

the test results in Table 1). The results are slightly better on a machine with 512 MB RAM.

At least Suse Linux 10.1 lets you release the handbrake, because YaST will work without ZMD. The `rpm -e zmd rug zen-updater` deletes the memory-hogging Mono tools. If you have a fast Internet connection, you might prefer to do without Novell’s package manager, and use Apt or Smart instead.

Light on the Horizon

Apart from these two major construction sites, Suse Linux 10.1 proved to be a very usable distribution. The new `rug` command line tool is very powerful, and it gives users the ability to install updates in the style of Apt or Smart. However, it is extremely slow as of this writing.

Zen Updater, Zen Installer, and Zen Remover all have neat features. For example, Zen Updater shows you updates from all installation sources, and not just the security patches and bug-fixes by Novell. This output of updates from all sources lets you keep track of whether Packman has a new version of K3b, for example. Zen Installer facilitates the installation of new packages, thanks to its uncluttered interface, and the installer also allows specific users to install

software without knowing the root password.

Initial reactions on the Suse Laptop list [4] suggest that Suse 10.1 has vastly improved power man-

agement. Thanks to the new `s2ram` command line tool, suspend-to-RAM will now run on many laptops without manual intervention. To do so, `s2ram` checks a whitelist to see if the device in question supports the feature. Just a few mouse clicks in YaST are all you need to send your laptop to sleep when you close the lid. Suspend-to-Disk will work on any more or less recent computer, no matter whether it is a laptop or a desktop.

Conclusions

You might conclude that Suse Linux 10.1 is a solid piece of work, if it weren’t for the slow package managers and tooting trouble with the Zen tools. If you use Apt or Smart for package management anyway, there is no reason not to update.

If you are a laptop owner, check the appropriate forums for details on whether Suse Linux 10.1 supports your WLAN device before you take the plunge to the latest Suse. If your hardware is supported, the update is definitely worthwhile. For users with older machines, and those of you who are quite happy with your current setup, the old adage still applies: never change a running system! ■

Table 1: Installation Times

	yast -i ipw-firmware	rug install ipw-firmware	rpm -ivh ipw-firmware && SuSEconfig
With ZMD	1:40 min	1:15 min	0:16 min
Without ZMD	1:06 min	-	0:10 min

Note: When ZMD is not running, the install with YaST and Rug takes about a minute longer.

INFO

- [1] Madwifi: <http://madwifi.org/>
- [2] Setting up Atheros cards: http://en.opensuse.org/Atheros_madwifi
- [3] Setting up Xgl: <http://en.opensuse.org/Xgl>
- [4] Suse Laptop list: <http://lists.suse.com/archive/suse-laptop/>