BUSINESS LINUX DISTRO

SuSE Enterprise Desktop 1

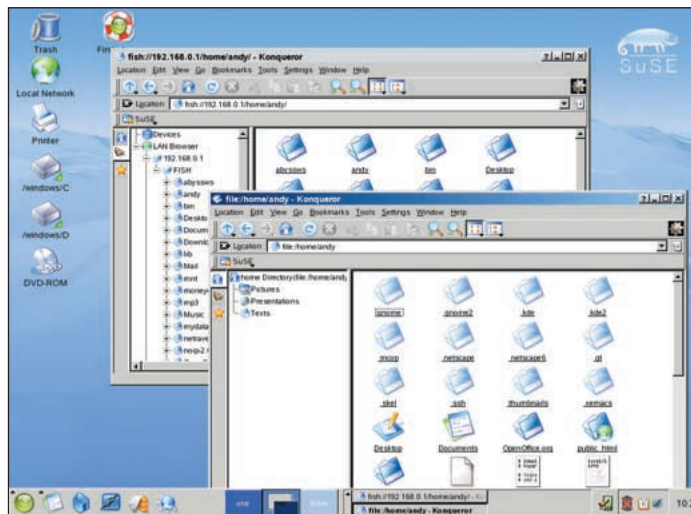**Can SuSE's new business-centred distribution set the corporate world on fire, or are the developers perhaps spreading themselves too thinly? Andy Channelle takes a spin round the floor with the desktop debutante.**

While SuSE's Personal and Professional product lines head toward double figures in the version number stakes, the company has decided to hit the drawing board to create a new boxed product aimed specifically at enterprise buyers investigating alternatives to Microsoft Windows. And while SuSE Linux Desktop has many similarities with the most recent standard release, it has been given the version 1 designation to set it apart from the its progenitors. It will, SuSE says, have a longer release cycle, more enterprise-friendly support and maintenance options and an application bias toward the standard office jobs. Moreover, the package includes tools developed to make rolling out SuSE desktops across hundreds, or thousands, of machines

The LAN browser allows you to view and access the entire network.

simpler while centralising many of the routine setup, configuration and general administration jobs. Finally, to make adoption smoother, it also includes a number of commercial applications – Sun's *StarOffice*, CodeWeavers' *CrossOver Office 2.0* and a small but useful selection of professional typefaces from AGFA | Monotype – which should make migrating both user skills and legacy documents less of a chore. It is arguable that SuSE may get more

mileage from including something like *Ximian Connector* (which allows *Evolution* to work as a client for *MS Exchange* server) in place of *StarOffice*.

As usual, SuSE has done a very good job of presentation, the box is packed with five CDs, a pair of manuals helpfully split along 'user' and 'admin' lines and, in lieu of the traditional stickers, a rather nice branded SuSE mouse mat.

Installation

The first real difference between this and SuSE's established distributions – apart from the fact that this is dropped back to kernel 2.4.19 – comes in the installation classes on offer. Firstly you get three options:
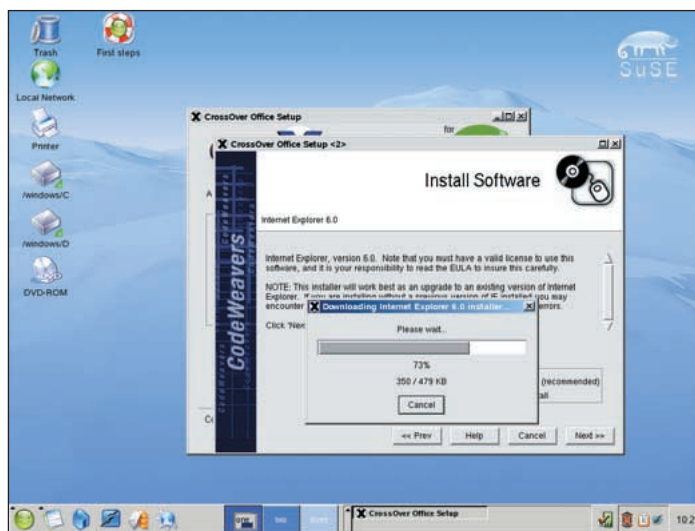
Single PC or small to medium-sized Office Network – SuSE says this is ideal for standalone machines or offices with a network of up to 50 machines. As applications and data are stored locally, you'll need about 1.4GB of free space for this option.

Template for Enterprise Clients – This class is specially designed for deployment on large networks installing, still locally, a reduced selection of basic applications including office package, email/web client and SAP client.

Template for Thin Client or Slower Computers – This option includes a small-footprint desktop and has been developed for situations where applications and data will be largely run from a central server. It should consume about 500MB of space.

Once this is passed you can choose to run either KDE (the standard SuSE desktop), KDE optimised for Windows users or GNOME. After fiddling with various selections to see the scope of them, I selected *Template for Enterprise Client* and *KDE for Windows Users* with the target audience in mind.

Installation follows the same routine as SuSE 8.2, meaning very good hardware detection, intuitive partitioning options and lots of feedback. During the X setup phase on a laptop install, the system ground to a halt after a 'successful' resolution/colour depth test which needed a hard reboot to solve. It didn't seem to affect *YaST*'s flow, though and the rest of the install passed without incident. The problem wasn't reproduced on any other test machines and a second installation (with the same configuration options) on the same laptop went smoothly.
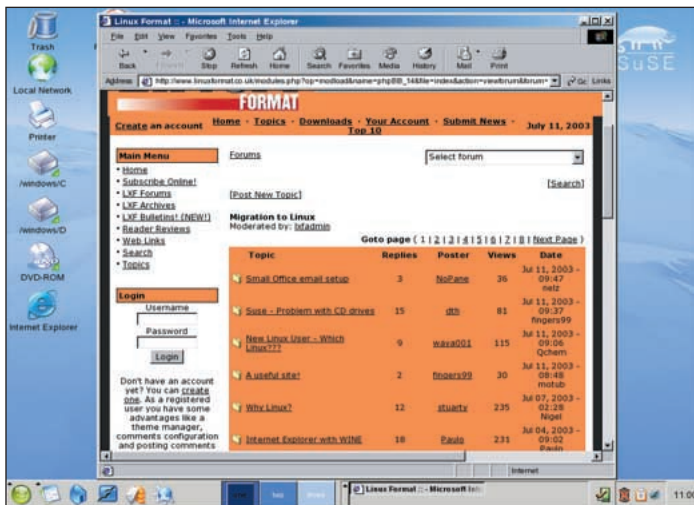

CrossOver Office 2.0 **adds Windows compatibility for many applications.**

Internet Explorer **proved to be a little flakey, but many other Windows applications ran without a problem when we tested them.**

Input was needed only for specifying network information – IP address, netmask, gateway *etc* – and when *YaST* tried to foist a 800 x 600 screen resolution on me.

Ease of use

Like the manual, SuSE Desktop has been developed with two distinctly different groups in mind: users and system administrators. The desktop is designed to be familiar to those trained on Windows, and as such is launched with 'Redmond' window decoration and the QT Windows window style. This ethos is also clearly reflected in the start menu structure with its Applications, Settings and Documents entries. In our unscientific tests, Linux virgins could find the file manager, word processor, email and web browser without struggling, and managed to open and print mildly complex *Word*, *Powerpoint* and *Excel* files without any help.

As well as the regular Applications menu, there is also a Windows Applications entry where programs installed under the bundled *CrossOver Office* are stored. Once you've installed applications in here – *CrossOver Office* supports *MS Office 97, 2000* and, to an extent, *XP*, as well as *Internet Explorer, Adobe Photoshop, Lotus Notes* and *Quicken* – they follow the menu structure of Windows. Though most things worked as expected, *Internet Explorer 6* was quite unstable (this wasn't evident in a standard *CrossOver Office* installation) and sometimes required the use of **xkill** to clear the screen.

Browsing is handled by either *Konqueror* or *Mozilla*, with the former given prominence on the taskbar, while *KMail* takes care of email chores. I don't know if *Mozilla* was included for compatibility reasons but I think, with the noble intention of

making Linux foolproof, novice users could probably do with less choice.

And so it is with office suites. *OpenOffice* is installed by default, which seemed a little odd as one of the big features of the product is a *StarOffice* license. But there is a problem with *StarOffice*; not a giant one, but it is very annoying and adds time to configuration. I installed the suite via *YaST*, but when I launched the word processor, I was bounced into the *StarOffice* setup script, which did another install in my /home directory.

And then the real snag hit: as far as the system is concerned, *StarOffice* is installed in /etc/opt which is not writable; so, after typing a few hundred words, I attempted to save, causing the application to crash taking my precious work with it. Removing the suite via *YaST* leaves it installed in /home, though to access it you need to rebuild the menus. Like I said, annoying and time-consuming. Also running *StarOffice* next to *OOo*, in all its anti-aliased finery, demonstrates how far the Open Source version has developed.

The users' manual is well written and targetted, covering everything from the basics of the KDE desktop to more advanced tasks such as file encryption (which this package makes a breeze, by the way).

Administration ABC

While attempting to make Linux suitable for the average Windows user, this package also bulks up the tools available to sysadmins to make sure that they:
A can create a unified environment without configuring a thousand machines individually; and
B limit the scope of damage capable of being wrought by the average Windows user; and
C sort out any problems that arise without having to actually venture out onto the shop floor. Though, to give credit where it is due, much of this functionality comes courtesy of the KDE development team and the *Kiosk* project in particular.
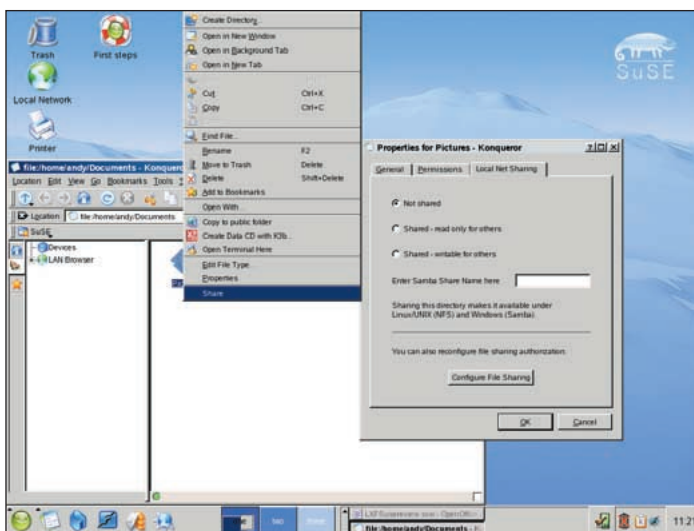
The first problem is solved by KDE's excellent central configuration options: the administrator configures a standard desktop, defining menu structure, look and feel etc, and then moves the configuration files (from /etc/opt/kde3) onto an NFS or *Samba* share on the server. It's then just a case, when installing the client systems, of making sure this directory is mounted via NFS/*Samba* as /etc/opt/kde3.

Once the default desktop is set up, *Kiosk* allows you to then set limits on what users can and cannot do; *eg* it is possible to prevent the launching of apps not on the desktop, deny shell access (though this isn't secure) or remove the ability to log out or lock the screen. URL manipulations provide options for redirecting HTML requests to specific hosts to local files, or restrict a user to browsing their own /home directory. Currently *Kiosk* is configured using a plain text file (*kdeglobals*), but the commands aren't too obscure and the Admin manual gives a good account of what you can and cannot do.

If things go wrong, or networked machines need some work, you can get access to the entire network through the LAN browser. This uses the Lan Information Server (LISa) daemon to periodically scan the network and list all connected devices (it does generate a lot of network traffic though). Access is then provided via *fish* which gives secure and authenticated access to the machine as either user or root. The use of the LAN browser is limited somewhat by its use of IP addresses instead of host names to identify network elements; this is OK on a tiny network, but it doesn't scale well.

Some networking additions do work well. The directory/file share options follow the Windows XP path of allowing or denying shares from a well-designed dialog box, letting the user decide whether the shared file is read only or writable and making accessible by either NFS or *Samba* with just a few clicks. The Remote Desktop Sharing feature is also well implemented. These are genuinely useful additions.

Finally, clients can be set to be automatically updated over the LAN, ftp or http, making local testing followed by a network rollout of updates efficient and straightforward to perform. **LXF**

Sharing files and directories has been simplified a great deal.

VERDICT

Features	**7/10**
Performance	**6/10**
Ease of use	**8/10**
Value for money	**8/10**

Issues with *StarOffice* mar what is otherwise a very good introduction to Linux for corporate buyers. It is an excellent showcase for the KDE's new *Kiosk* features though.

LINUX FORMAT RATING
7/10