

REVIEWS Slackware Linux 10

DESKTOP DISTRO

Slackware Linux 10

It aims to be the most Unix-like distribution, but what does

Tom Wilkinson think of the new release of the oldest surviving distro?



BUYER INFO

Linux distribution aimed at advanced users, with similar audiences to Debian and Gentoo in mind.

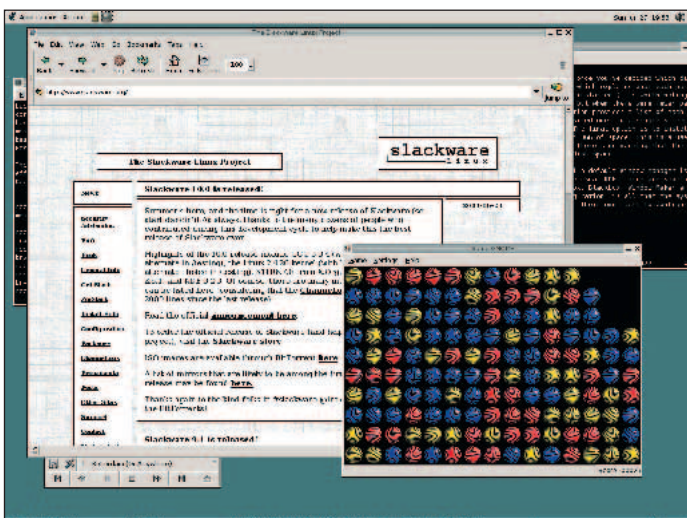
- **DEVELOPER** Slackware
- **PRICE** Free download, CD-ROM US\$39.95
- **WEB** www.slackware.org/

Many modern distributions aim to make Linux as easy as possible to install, configure and use, providing graphical tools allowing the user to use the ever-increasing number of applications available for Linux without ever going near a command prompt. Slackware isn't one of these, instead aiming at an altogether different and more technically advanced user base.

Having said that, we were nicely surprised to find that although we hadn't done any configuration, the correct drivers for the mouse, sound card and USB ports had been loaded.

While GNOME was selected as the default window manager during the installation, only a very basic X server configuration had been included, limiting the screen to 640x480. Slackware – like most recent linux distributions – uses X.org's fork of the XFree86 software. While this means that the configuration file format hasn't changed at all, and binary drivers such as those supplied for use with Nvidia's GeForce cards will still work, many programs have changed names, making initial configuration more difficult for a user who is more used to the XFree86 commands. It doesn't take long to work out the new equivalents, though.

The GNOME desktop is supplied as – without any distribution-specific customisations such as those added by Red Hat or Mandrake. The result is that many applications aren't listed in the menus to start off with, but what is there is a solid base that any user would be happy to use until they had the time and inclination to customise the desktop to their own liking. One thing we did note,



Just because it's regarded as a 'serious' distro doesn't mean that you can't have fun with Slackware: GNOME games come as standard.

though, was that although the *Epiphany* web browser (the usual GNOME default) was installed, *Galeon* had been placed in the menus instead.

Packaged up

A common misconception about Slackware is that it lacks a package management system. This isn't exactly true, but it is the case that its package management system is somewhat simpler than RPM or APT, the Debian package management tool. Packages under Slackware are simply compressed tar files of the relevant binaries or libraries, without any information on dependencies or requirements included. This means that it's quite easy for a new user to make a mistake by installing the wrong version of a package; but on the other hand, it's also more straightforward to create and distribute packages to other users than it is with RPM or APT.

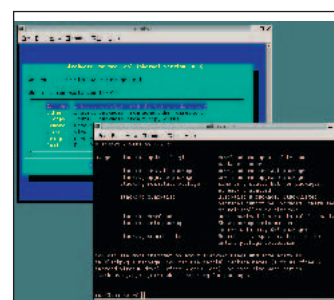
A recent innovation for Slackware packages – and one that's not yet installed as part of the main distribution – is the *slackpkg* program. This provides functionality similar to *apt* and *yum*, in that it allows packages to be downloaded and installed automatically, and handles package dependencies unlike the standard *pkgtool* program. We suspect that this

incredibly useful tool will find its way into the main distribution before long – it's one of the few areas where Slackware has been lagging behind the competition in recent times.

While it ships with an older 2.4.26 kernel, Slackware 10 has support for the newer 2.6 kernel tree built in. In the 'extras' section of the installation disk, Slackware includes the more recent kernel as well as a large amount of other software which isn't ready to include with the main distribution, including the *slackpkg* system mentioned earlier. You also get a more recent version of *GCC*, and tools to help maintain and build packages yourself, as well as extra drivers for less common, but still widely used hardware such as wireless networking kits. Another nice touch is the optional inclusion of packages dropped from the main distribution since the last release, allowing users of the older software to acclimatise themselves with the more recent versions before the old releases are removed completely.

Down and dirty

For a distribution that has changed so little in comparison to its peers over time, Slackware continues to offer what the original Linux users – and those



You can either opt for a full install by default, or pick and choose which packages to include on your new Slackware system.

today who are migrating away from the more graphically friendly distributions – want: a fully configurable system that isn't bogged down by the requirements of graphical or automated tools to have a standard configuration format. While you can install a tool such as *Webmin* to administer the machine, it's almost frowned upon to do so – putting such tools on top of a Slackware install is tantamount to admitting that you should perhaps be using a different distribution in preference.

However, if you're not afraid of getting your hands dirty, and finding out exactly how to configure a Linux machine, give Slackware a go. It's a solid, dependable distribution with little in the way of frills, which is just the way it should be. Take the plunge – Slackware is different from what many readers may be used to – it'll teach you a lot more than the more common distributions with graphical interfaces for everything. For install information, see page 105. **LXF**

LINUX FORMAT VERDICT

FEATURES	9/10
INSTALLATION	8/10
EASE OF USE	7/10
DOCUMENTATION	9/10

Although not for the faint-hearted, users who are keen to get a more in-depth knowledge of Linux could do a lot worse than to give Slackware a try.

RATING 9/10

