

NEW DISTRO

SUSE Linux 9.0 Professional

It's been six months since we last looked at SUSE's leading desktop distro, and, on schedule, the next version is here. Paul Hudson finds out whether it's worth the upgrade...

BUYER INFO

Powerful desktop distro with lots to offer everyone. Also consider Mandrake 9.2 or Fedora.

- **SUPPLIER** SUSE
- **PRICE** £60
- **WEB** www.suse.co.uk

As desktop distros go, SUSE 8.2 pretty much had it sorted – it was easy to install, packed with functionality, and easily the most comprehensively documented distribution that was around. Given all this, it's unsurprising that we gave it our coveted *Top Stuff* award, as it easily outclassed its competitors. In our exclusive feature last issue we travelled to the SUSE HQ in Germany to get a behind-the-scenes look at the development of the next iteration of SUSE Linux, and saw an exciting product just waiting for a chance to prove itself. Now, at last, SUSE 9.0 is available, and we have the first copy...

Software roundup

While there are lots of changes to SUSE 9.0 that aren't available elsewhere, it's clear that the majority of changes come

from the fact that it includes all-new versions of just about every package that's bundled. The headline package is, unsurprisingly, *OpenOffice.org 1.1*, which offers a raft of new features over its predecessor. If you're scratching your head and wondering whether SUSE have invented a time machine, yes, it is true that *OpenOffice.org* only came out in early October and, due to production deadlines, SUSE had their gold CDs for SUSE 9 available in the middle of September, which means that the final release of *OOo* may differ from the version SUSE 9 comes with. Fortunately, the fixes in the final code for *OpenOffice.org* are small, and are unlikely to affect anyone.

Also new in SUSE 9 is the soon-to-be-ubiquitous DTP program *Scribus*, which attracted a solid review in LXF45 and is likely to be a common feature in distros as new versions are released. The kernel has now been updated to 2.4.21 (with SUSE's usual 2.6 backports), KDE 3.1.4, and a few new faces too – *Kopete*, the KDE instant messenger client, is now included as standard, as is User-Mode Linux support for more advanced users.

Perhaps the biggest features in SUSE 9.0 are the ones that most people won't even see – in fact, we

probably wouldn't have noticed them if we didn't get a full tour around the features when we visited SUSE in August. For example, SUSE 9.0 includes an advanced set of programs and features geared towards musicians looking to utilise their machine as a recording and mixing station for their MIDI kit – while this is all Open Source, it was coded largely inside SUSE and this is its first airing in the community.

As with SUSE 8.2, 9.0 comes with five CDs and one DVD packed with programs ready for installation through *YaST*. Judging by the number of disc changes we had to do when performing a basic install it seems that SUSE have gone to great lengths to use up as much of the available CD space as possible, and it's likely that one of the next few releases of SUSE will require an extra CD for all the new packages.

Installation woes

Despite so much having gone into quality assurance, we still had several problems getting it to work on our

machines. Three machines, all of which are of standard build and had run Debian, Mandrake, and Red Hat in the past, failed to get past an early installation screen with SUSE 9. The last spare machine we had in the office finally made it past the installation, and succeeded in booting up into KDE.

Once things were working, we had time to look around the default install and were pleased to find that it's as comprehensive as ever – everything from *Qt Designer* to *The GIMP* was installed, along with tools that have sometimes been mysteriously absent from SUSE builds such as *flex*, *bison*, and *lynx*. Despite all these packages being installed by default, precious few services run at startup – only really the SSH daemon is there, which is pretty much standard.

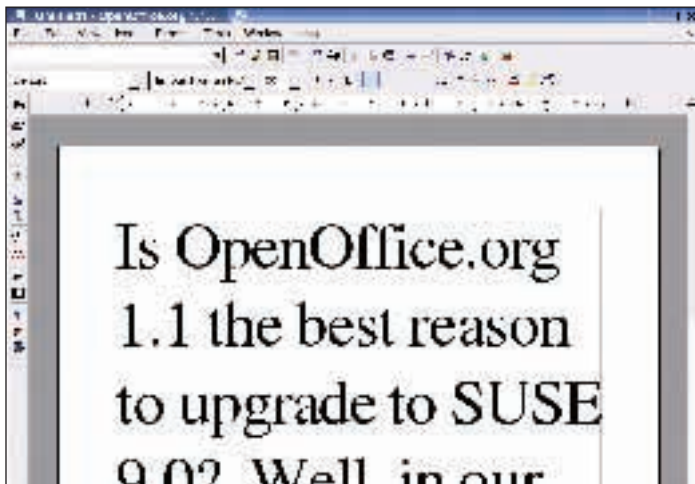
We imagine the installation should be a great deal easier for most people, though, particularly now that so much work has gone into making the distro support more WinModems as well as



The *YaST* interface is attractive and getting better all the time – if only there were fewer acronyms!



KDE 3.1.4 running on SUSE 9.0. Yes, it looks like any version of KDE 3.x running on any distro, but hey – it's only £50, right?



The headline package in SUSE 9.0 is OpenOffice.org 1.1 – an excellent upgrade to a top office suite, and should definitely help shift some boxes.



The new SUSE welcome screen looks pretty enough, but it mixes up SUSE and SuSE enough to give you a headache!

ADSL connections. Windows users looking to dual-boot SUSE will find NTFS resizing has now been implemented fully, which should hopefully eliminate one more barrier to installation.

Tuning and tweaks

Above and beyond the latest upgrades to the software bundled with SUSE, there are a number of fixes, tweaks,

and upgrades to the SUSE-specific code behind the distro. The key changes are visible in *YaST*, where various new modules have been added to ease administration. The main interface to *YaST* is very Mandrake-like now, which is good to see as Mandrake's design has always been very easy on the eye. However, the individual module screens are as grey and unappealing as ever, which

make them look less friendly and easy to use than they actually are.

Configuring *Samba*, *NTP*, *DHCP*, and other complex servers is now easy thanks to the improved layout of *YaST*, and even home network admins should be able to get a powerful server up and running based entirely on the manual bundled in the box. Having said that, the manual is still a requirement because it's easy to drown under the wave of acronyms that *YaST* relentlessly throws out without explanation.

Real-world changes

Even once you take into account the big changes in the packages as well as the *YaST* changes, there's even more to SUSE 9.0 than first meets the eye. Perhaps the most interesting change for most users will be the addition of a snapshot of the 2.6 kernel readily available for more adventurous users. While it might not be stable by any means, at least it gives people the chance to get a glimpse of the future – programmers can make sure their code is compatible, and everyone else can just tinker with the latest and greatest Linux has to offer.

Another big change for SUSE is the availability of an Athlon 64-enhanced port from launch. When Opteron was launched back in April, SUSE was the first distro available for that, so it's unsurprising that they've trumped the competition again with SUSE 9.0. The Athlon 64 version is available in a separate box, which is a minor annoyance, and actually costs £25 more, which could be annoying for some users – we're not sure quite what is in the box to justify the extra cost, but, as it's the only thing out for Athlon 64 at the time of writing (although Mandrake 9.2/64 is due out soon), SUSE can pretty much charge what it pleases.

Moving on to the documentation, SUSE 9.0 has the biggest ever manual seen in SUSE Linux, which is saying a lot given that the documentation in the past has always been of the highest quality. This latest tome is a massive 1050 pages long and covers topics from the mundane to the esoteric and as wide-ranging as system installation and configuration down to chatting with your friends over *Kopete*. If anyone ever complains about the cost of 'free software', perhaps SUSE should clout them around the head with this really useful manual.

SUSE 9.0 > SUSE 8.2

The sheer weight of changes made in SUSE 9.0 make it a very viable upgrade from 8.2, particularly if you're a long-standing SUSE user. If you're using another distro and are thinking of switching, the choice will take a little more consideration – SUSE is not as easy-to-use as Mandrake, despite all the new effort that has gone into SUSE 9.0, however on the flip-side it is much more stable once you get it working. We're confident the installation problems we had won't be seen much in the outside world, because a lot of the machines we tested it out on were two or three years old – not exactly the latest kit!

It will be interesting to see how SUSE's new branding strategy pans out, as SUSE 9 was produced and finalised before the new branding was made public. As a result, references to "SuSE" (note the lowercase 'u') are throughout, alongside the old-style chameleon and a 8.2-like KDE theme.

The new software included with SUSE 9.0 makes it a competitive upgrade for some existing users, however you do need to question whether it's worth laying out cash just to get the latest versions of what are otherwise free packages. Yes, the manual is as good as you will find, and the system is fairly rock-solid once sorted out, but given the headline change in SUSE 9.0 is the inclusion of OpenOffice.org 1.1 – something SUSE 8.2 users can download and use for free – it really shows that even SUSE mustn't think a great deal has changed on its behalf.

Nevertheless, this is the best SUSE distro available, and also continues to arguably be the finest all-round Linux distribution available. While it has its problems, these are easily outweighed by the easy install and administration, comprehensive documentation, and large selection of packages. **LXF**

LINUX FORMAT VERDICT

FEATURES	9/10
EASE OF USE	8/10
DOCUMENTATION	10/10
VALUE FOR MONEY	7/10

A little troublesome at first, but it's well worth the hassle to get this working so you can enjoy all the latest apps and utils that make SUSE number one.

RATING **9/10**

