

The State of Ubuntu 7.04 Is Strong

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With companies and individuals everywhere failing to find the wow in Windows Vista, Apple's OS X riding iPod sales and snarky commercials to steady growth, and long-time Microsoft partner Dell announcing plans to market a Linux desktop to the mainstream, it seems certain that the days of Microsoft's desktop monopoly are numbered.

Granted, that number is probably a large one, but as evidenced by eWEEK Labs' tests of Ubuntu Linux 7.04, the state of the Linux desktop - not to mention that of other Windows alternatives - is too strong to hold off heterogeneity forever.

Ubuntu Linux 7.04, which Dell has chosen to headline its desktop Linux foray, has made impressive strides toward claiming a spot on mainstream desktop and server machines, both by piling up advances made across the Linux and open source community, and by building in advances of its own.

For instance, we're glad to see that in Ubuntu 7.04 - also known as Feisty Fawn - the NetworkManager application, which we like for the way it handles switching among wired and wireless networks and managing VPN connections, has gone from being an optional add-on to a part of the default install.

As implemented in Feisty, however, NetworkManager boasts much improved handling of static connections, which earlier incarnations of NetworkManager didn't adequately address.

Ubuntu's best features remain its excellent software management tools, its well-organized community and its large catalog of ready-to-install free software applications. We're also impressed with the steps that Ubuntu has taken to work with proprietary software, which, while more tricky to distribute, is in many cases what's needed to fit the bill.

We installed the freely available (but not open-source) VMware Server on one of our test machines by browsing for and selecting it in Ubuntu's Add/Remove Applications tool. We did have to visit VMware's Web site to register and generate a serial number for the product, but we did not have to compile drivers for our kernel - as we're accustomed to doing on other Linux platforms. Instead, Feisty's software management system pulled down the appropriate drivers for us, making it fast and easy for us to enable virtualization on our test machine.

Ubuntu 7.04 is available in desktop and server flavors. The server variant is solid, but, aside from its suitability as a platform for VMware Server, Feisty doesn't do much to rise above the pack of other free Linux server operating system options.

As a desktop option, Ubuntu 7.04 is an excellent fit, and is worthy of consideration as a Windows replacement. Most ISVs do still target Windows exclusively, and even though the Linux-supporting alternatives are getting better all the time, this is still a troublesome issue for potential migrators. Once users become acquainted with the Linux applications they require, however, it's much easier to install and update these applications on Ubuntu than it is on Windows.

Ubuntu 7.04 is available for free download at www.ubuntu.com/products/GetUbuntu. In addition to the standard Live CD Ubuntu install disk, an alternative installation disk that features a text-mode version of the installer is available. The text-mode installer loads faster than the Live CD and offers expanded installation options,

such as the ability to install Ubuntu in an LVM (logical volume manager) configuration.

Feisty's Live CD install disk now ships with a interesting-looking migration tool that will attempt to find user accounts and related data on the hard drives of machines slated for upgrade. We tried it out on a Windows XP Service Pack 2 instance we maintain in a virtual machine for running Windows software on our Linux clients, but the installer failed to find our user information.

We think that Ubuntu's migration tool would be more useful if it were separable from the installation routine, and if we could run it directly on Windows machines. What's more, it might be worthwhile for the Ubuntu team to investigate whether it could co-opt Microsoft's own settings migration tool to ferry user data onto new Ubuntu installations.

Ubuntu 7.04 is available for desktops and servers in x86, x86-64 and PowerPC versions. Ubuntu's server variant is also available for Sun Microsystems' UltraSPARC architecture. eWEEK Labs tested the x86-64 version of Ubuntu 7.04 on an Althon 64 workstation, and tested the x86 version on a Lenovo ThinkPad T41 and in a couple of VMs.

We loaded up a VM with the previous Ubuntu release, version 6.10, and were impressed by the way that Ubuntu's built-in update manager notified us that a new version was available for upgrade. After a few clicks and about an hour of waiting for packages to download and install, we were up and running on Feisty.

Our tests with the x86-64 version of Ubuntu went smoothly for the most part, but we'd like to see Ubuntu offer a 32-bit version of Firefox in its software repositories. Key plug-ins for the Web, such as Abobe's Flash player, are available only in 32-bit form, so users of 64-bit Ubuntu must turn to a matching version of the browser. We found instructions on

Ubuntu's helpful user forums for installing 32-bit Firefox, but this should've been an option out of the box.

As we mentioned above, Feisty comes preinstalled with a spruced-up NetworkManager, which satisfies the "network-roaming" goal that the project had designated as "essential" at the release blueprint hosted at blueprints.launchpad.net/ubuntu/feisty. The Ubuntu team set out three other essential goals, none of which made it into the 7.04 release.

For two of those goals, the team had hoped to enable hardware acceleration by default in all graphics cards that supported it, and also enable by default snazzy composite desktop features where possible. The fact that accelerated graphics occasionally rely on proprietary hardware drivers and sometimes won't work at all forced the team to push back these goals to a later release. As with NetworkManager in previous Ubuntu releases, these eye candy options remain optional, which is fine by us.

Another much more important but equally deferred goal in Feisty is the so-called "bulletproof X" proposal, the need for which became clear after an Ubuntu driver update miscue last year that rendered some users' graphical interfaces unusable, and which required some command-line twiddling to repair. The idea behind bulletproof X is that in such a case, Ubuntu would step down to a failsafe graphics mode from which a user could visit the project's Web site and follow instructions to fix the issue.

We were happy to find that Ubuntu now offers up a graphical interface for configuring the distribution's Xorg 7.2 X server - every popular distribution ships with such a tool, and we've long lamented the absence of one in Ubuntu.

Ubuntu's display settings auto-detection generally works well, but without a graphical configuration tool, making changes to supported

resolutions or setting up multimonitor configurations has required config file editing. The new tool, called displayconfig-gtk, is only a few months old at this point, and is not installed by default, but the tool worked well for us in tests.

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