

Everything about LindowsOS appears to be designed to make Windows users comfortable, from the menu layout to the icon placement on the desktop.

OS OF THE FUTURE?

LindowsOS 3

After two limited releases, aimed at 'Insiders' and OEMs, Michael Roberts' latest project finally gets a public airing. **Andy Channelle** pushes through the crowd of muttering cynics to peer beneath the spin and see if its worth your time and money.

Whatever its faults, should Lindows be lauded simply for encouraging more users to switch to Linux? Also try Xandros.

- **DEVELOPER** Lindows
- **WEB** www.lindows.com
- **PRICE** US\$119 (\$129 for CD edition)

Maybe it's impossible to come to a review of a product that has generated so much publicity (from legal battles with Microsoft to an sadly non-existent tie up with AOL) without a number of preconceptions. In this case, Lindows is the GPL-baiting 'OS of the future' that had more than a slight whiff of dotcom marketecture from a company more adept at generating headlines than great software. It was also the product that would make us all pay – via "Click-N-Run" – for the applications we would normally expect to be included in a standard distro; and promised to

seamlessly integrate Windows applications with the Linux desktop.

Quietly dropping the "Windows compatible" tag wasn't a handicap – Lindows.com (the company behind the product) has had notable successes in convincing retailers of bargain price PCs to begin shipping LindowsOS (the operating system) as a rival to the established market leader. Wal-Mart in the US and Evesham in the UK have products based on the OS, but version 3 is the first available 'off the shelf'.

What is it?

LindowsOS is a Debian-based distro built around a 2.4.x kernel, Xfree86 and KDE. Stripped to its essentials, the download version (tested here) is a mere 350MB – a small download on a cable modem – and installed in just under 10 minutes on an entry-level PIII desktop PC. Such a swift installation seems, and is, remarkable, especially when the user intervention involves little more than a couple of clicks and the entry of one password. There is, however, a reason for this which we'll come to in a moment.

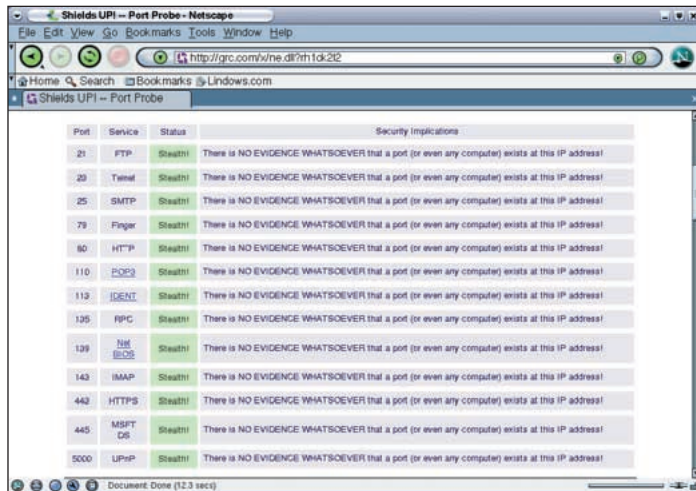
For your US\$119 (\$129 for the CD edition) you get the distro, web-based technical support and a year's membership to the Lindows Click-N-Run warehouse, a software repository containing over 1,700 items including a number of non-free applications such as *StarOffice*, *Photogenics* and the non-GPL *Tuxracer*. At the end of your year you'll need to cough up another (currently) \$99 to remain within the Click-N-Run program, though generously you have "a lifetime license to run the software already installed."

Right, back to the marvel that is the Lindows installation. It really is trivial, simply asking where you want to put the OS – there are no partitioning options, you can install on an existing partition or take over the whole disk – and then requesting a system password. Remove the CD, reboot and you're running Linux and a tightly branded version of KDE 3.0 with a look that (if you can believe it) actually improves on the already impressive Keramik/Crystal combination. It also kicks off with lovely alpha-blended menus which, though almost

completely pointless, do make me smile whenever I use them. The boot sequence provides only a few lines of feedback which, considering the target audience, is fine.

One of the big controversies about Lindows was that you would be forced to run as root and, as this is designed to be a 'connected' OS would lead to the world and his dog having access to your precious system. While this is still the case, the first dialog that appears on screen after installation gives you the option of adding users. This has the air of a compromise, and an explanation of the dangers of running as root would be a welcome addition to this dialog, but it's not the disaster I was expecting. You can also add users in the normal fashion through the K- or rather L-panel. Another option on the opening dialog box also allows you to change resolution, but as Lindows correctly identified and configured my graphics card to its realistic limits I didn't need to venture there.

The most notable feature of the installation is that, like a similar Windows install, you get the OS and



Shields Up reports that LindowsOS is running in Stealth Mode, and is 'invisible' to the rest of the Internet.

that's about it. Browsing and email is taken care of via Netscape, word processing (very basic) with *Kwrite*, *XMMS* for MP3 playback and there are a few other games and utilities, but no office suite, graphics package etc. After the options in Mandrake 9, this can be a bit of a disappointment, but again this is aimed at the mainstream user weaned on Windows, so a package selection section on the installation would probably be seen by some users as unnecessary clutter. And anyway, we've got access to all those Click-N-Run apps haven't we?

Well, er no. Not on the first system I decided to check anyway. The problem was that Lindows failed to recognise my Netgear network card (the first distro to have such a problem) due, I finally found out, to it being built on a NatSemi chipset. This is not just disappointing, it's a serious problem because there is no graphical 'Add New Hardware' section within the excellently constructed Lindows menu system and the only support option requires a working network connection. Of course this would have been noticed in the more verbose installation systems that Lindows eschews. To most users, who are likely to end up with LindowsOS pre-installed on a new machine, this won't be a problem, but for me it was a disaster. Time to break out a new machine – at least we know that the installation will be simple!

Round two

Next challenger for LindowsOS is a Toshiba Satellite 3000X4 laptop, untouched but for a little additional memory and pre-partitioned disk.

Again, the installation went smoothly and after rebooting I clicked the Netscape icon with not a little trepidation... The next moment I was directed to the *Lindows.com* website, a quick check to make sure it wasn't a locally cached page, and I'm away. Click-N-Run, here I come!

The menu structure of Lindows is great, even if it is sparsely populated. Applications are grouped under logical headings such as Audio and MP3, Email and web browsing, like a more refined version of Mandrake's Kpanel. After listing the installed application entries there's a 'Click-N-Run More' option which, when clicked, fires up the Click-N-Run application (a *Mozilla*-

Steamy Lindows

Interaction rather than compatibility

Lindows received a lot of press at its inception for claiming it would allow Linux users to run Windows apps straight from the box. In the first two versions of LindowsOS, this ambition was scaled back somewhat and there was a pretty stable *Wine* release which, indeed, allowed limited running of applications designed for Win32. The situation has changed in version 3.0 with the company, perhaps sensing an impending rush of support queries on potentially unsolvable issues, abandoning any pretence of Windows compatibility altogether and slashed *Wine* from the main release. There are instead promoting software that allows users to interact with their Windows-using colleagues – whether over a network (via *Samba*) or using interchangeable file formats, ie by using *StarOffice* instead of *MS Office*. *Wine* is,

however, still available via Click-N-Run and runs a few applications well while simply ignoring others, as with a standard *Wine* install.

The other big Lindows story of recent months was there 'tie up' with Netscape/AOL which led some to suggest the media giant was on the verge of embracing Linux for its main Internet access client. This was revealed to be an embellishment of high order. Lindows.com had, in fact, signed a deal to include Netscape's branded version of *Mozilla* (which does include AOL's messenger client for Linux) in their first general release.

Both these tall-ish tales demonstrate that Lindows' developers know the benefits of decent marketing which, if many industry pundits are to be believed, is where Linux has been going wrong all these years!

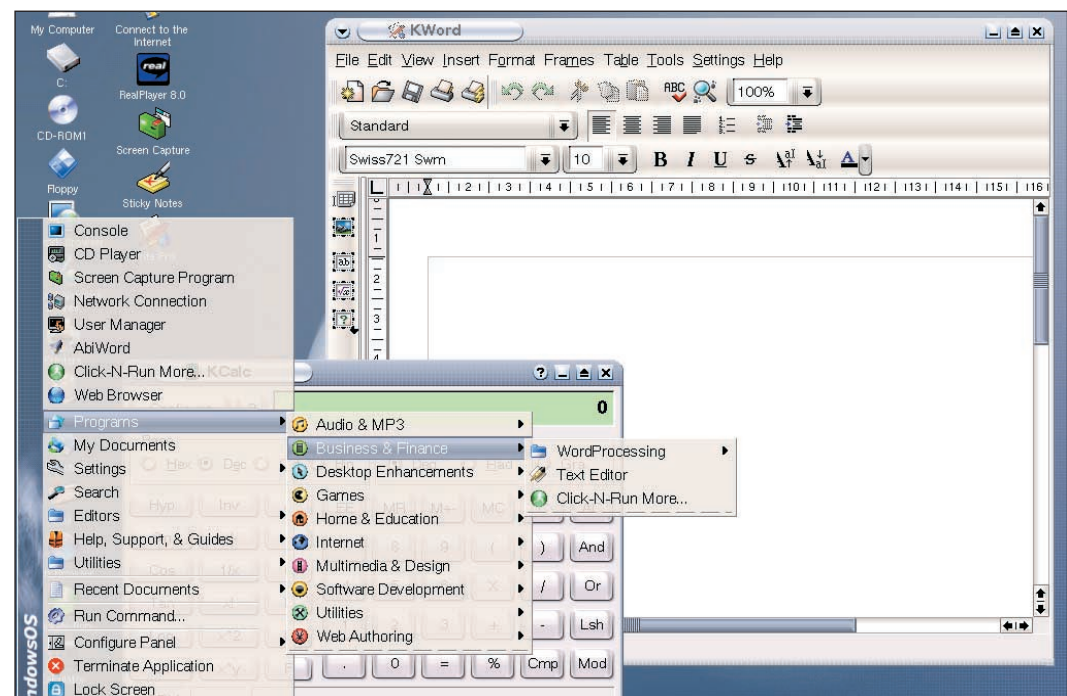
based affair) in a relevant section of the warehouse. From that screen you just click an application and it's installed. And that's it – no dependencies, no conflicts, no missing libraries. It's eerily similar to *apt-get*; in fact, it is *apt-get*, it just has a brilliant front end tacked on.

On a whim, I opened up a console and typed **apt-get update**. Nothing. Now Click-N-Run is definitely based around *apt* so it had to be installed. I poked around a bit and discovered

that the apt hosts list was incomplete (or broken), so after adding a few lines to the list I was able to do:

```
apt-get update
apt-get install synaptic
synaptic
```

and I had a rival to Click-N-Run. Sure it's not quite as elegant or integrated and it doesn't have the likes of *StarOffice* available, but it is free and the range of applications available dwarfs Click-N-Run enormously. You can see why the Lindows team might



Desktop defaults to an elegant Keramik/Crystal combination and transparent menus. God bless you KDE coders!

ReviewsLindows

« not want the whole world to know about *apt-get*, but it's the main benefit of running a Debian distribution.

The next big check was security; running as root inevitably makes a person feel paranoid, especially if you're bombarded with security alerts every other day. The installation configures a basic firewall and, a quick check with Shields Up at www.grc.com revealed that Lindows runs with all ports invisible. It's pretty much locked down which, again, is good (bearing in mind that a standard Mandrake install ships with just NetBIOS in "stealth mode"). I would still be wary of running as root though, if only for the possibility of accidentally messing the system up myself.

Conclusion

One of the stated aims of most desktop orientated distros is to provide ease of use for the beginner while allowing for the growth of their skill over time, but not alienating those who want to get into the guts of the operating system. LindowsOS definitely succeeds on these counts, though in order to do so it makes some compromises. However, the average computer user with undemanding needs such as web browsing, email and basic office tasks will have no problem fitting right in, and if they do decide to uncover the hidden geek

No place like GNOME

Imitation fails to flatter KDE

In the cause of simplification, LindowsOS commits the heinous crime of shipping with only one desktop, KDE. Amazingly, after the row surrounding Red Hat's Bluecurve project, hardly anyone has made a noise about Lindows.com remaking KDE in its own image – perhaps because they just ignored GNOME rather than trying to unify the two camps?

Undoubtedly Lindows choice of KDE and only KDE might alienate some

GNOME fans, but I don't think Michael Roberts had hardcore GNOMEettes in mind when he conceived the project. Sticking with one desktop means the target audience (a phrase you'll hear a lot in relation to Lindows) doesn't get confused by endless options. While this quest for simplification is honourable in that it will bring more users to Linux, it does have its drawbacks – as with my Network card debacle.

If you already use KDE, why change?

within, they won't be disappointed.

The whole experience is designed for those familiar with Windows, desktop icons need to be double clicked, 'Home' is called 'My Documents' and the primary hard disk is labelled 'C:'. Though this goes against the grain of most Linux distributions, I think it's probably a good thing and my guinea pigs (all casual Windows users) understood the demands of the UI instantly. They all also appreciated the look and feel of the desktop, though they (like myself) were confused by the two network-browser icons which appear to do the same thing.

There were a couple of problems, the biggest and most significant being Lindows' inability to recognise my depressingly mundane, standard issue

Blueyonder network card. This is something that needs to be addressed if Lindows is serious about capturing a share of the home market, and with the considerable effort already thrown at the installer, there's really no excuse.

KDE's CD player was also broken, crashing within three seconds of launching, and the lack of even the most basic 'accessories' – including a calculator – was a disappointment. I think the reasoning behind the last of these is that C-N-R-ing something as small and simple as the calculator or RealPlayer plugin for Netscape gives users a positive impression of the service, though even these might involve a significant amount of online time for dial-up users. Lindows is definitely designed for broadband

customers in mind.

As a way of getting hold of Debian and *apt-get*, this is a most impressive distribution. On first glance it looks expensive, but many of the potential users will pay the cost as part of a cheap PC package.

When you factor in the access to proprietary software too, it begins to look a little better. The crunch will come in the second year: will users be persuaded to stump up for another 12 months of Click-N-Run, or will they have stumbled upon *apt-get* in the intervening time? Either way, LindowsOS looks like a positive step forward, and if the company can continue getting its wares onto sub-£300 PCs it could become very popular very quickly. [LXF](http://www.linuxformat.co.uk)

VERDICT

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

A great product with just one or two (probably short-term) teething troubles. Get it with a bargain Evesham PC, fire up apt and you have the easiest Debian distro on Earth.

LINUX FORMAT RATING
 **7/10**

Click-N-Run vs Synaptic

Are the best things in life free?

The Click-N-Run interface is built on *Mozilla*. Once online, the package database is accessed in the same way as a standard website and software grouped into obvious 'aisles'. The database contains some 1,700

applications and, the company says, is growing all the time. Once an installation is started, you can click a tab on the browser window to see the status of your task, or pause it to resume in a later session with the toolbar. *Synaptic*,

on the other hand, offers access to all the standard Debian packages (numbering about 9,000 last time we checked, and growing almost by the day) including, very interestingly, most of the bespoke Lindows software such as the

rebuilt *Keramik* artwork. Both systems work well, though at the time of writing *Synaptic* was citing *KOffice* as broken on the standard Debian mirrors. Of course, the big difference between the two is price. The choice is yours!

