

A Look at Xandros Desktop 3.0

NEW DESKTOP

Xandros, the successor to Corel OS, is one of many distributions that claim to make life easier for Linux newcomers. We took a look at the latest release, Xandros Desktop Version 3.0. **BY CARSTEN SCHNOBER**

Like the last version of Xandros, Desktop OS 3.0 [1] is based on the current Debian Sarge version. When version 2.0 was released a year ago, Xandros executives would never in their wildest dreams have thought that the underlying Debian version would still be in *testing* by the time they got round to the next major release. The major changes to the latest release are the new KDE version, a Kernel update, X.org instead of Xfree86, and a smattering of software updates.

Version 3.0 of Xandros Desktop is available in two variants. The Deluxe Edition costs about 79 Euros or US\$ 89.95, the standard package about half of that. Both versions include a 10-page printed *Getting Started Guide*; Deluxe additionally has a more comprehensive manual. Users of the Standard

Edition can purchase the manual as a PDF.

The installation CD for both packages is identical, however, Deluxe has an additional *Application Disc* with a bunch of free software and Crossover Office, which allows users to run Windows programs such as Microsoft Office. The support included with the packages also differs. On registering, users of Xandros Deluxe can look forward to 60 days support, whereas users of the Standard Edition only have 30 days.

Debian Clone

Xandros may be based on the free Debian distribution, but it does change Debian in many respects. For example, Xandros has its own installer routine (Figure 1). The *Express Install* option simply prompts the user for a few vital items such as the root password and the name of the first user account. However, the installer is not much help if you have any other Linux installations on your hard disk. With the exception of Windows partitions, *Express Install* will just issue a warning before hijacking the whole of your hard disk for Xandros.

The *Custom Install* gives you more options. Users can specify a target partition for the install in the partition manager and also select which software to install. Default profiles called *Minimal*, *Standard*, and *Complete* facilitate the decision, although users can select or deselect individual program packages.

After restarting to complete the install, the system comes up with a GUI boot screen where users can choose between Xandros, any Windows installations they may have, and other Linux distributions. Xandros is one of only a few distributions to use the Lilo bootloader rather than Grub.

Due to the different approaches that Lilo and Grub have, only Lilo allows users to run Udev to set up dynamic device files for hard disks – such as `/dev/hda1` – when booting the system. In contrast to Lilo, Grub needs the device file to load the kernel – as Grub cannot find this file, Xandros will not boot with Grub. This can cause issues, if you attempt to specify Xandros as a boot option within a pre-installed distribution that uses Grub.

KDE Desktop

Xandros uses KDE exclusively as its desktop environment. Although the Xandros server has other desktop environments such as Gnome or XFCE as downloads, a departure from the default is not recommended; most of the Xandros distribution tools are not stand-alone programs but modules for existing KDE applications.

Besides KDE options, the Xandros control center allows users to configure the Internet connection and the boot manager (Figure 2); it even has user management. In the control center, users can specify whether to launch various network services, such as SSH or the Samba server, automatically on booting, or manually.

The *Xandros File Manager* (XFM) includes a network browser that supports direct access to NFS and Windows shares (Figure 3). This applies both to directories and printers. Additionally, the file manager has an integrated burning program that allows users to drag and drop files directly from the file system onto CDs or DVDs.

Windows converts will discover that the file manager behaves just like they are used to. The user does not get to see the file system. Without removing this

Xandros Desktop OS 3.0 Details

Kernel	2.6.9
Desktop	KDE 3.3.0
X Server	X.org 6.7
Mozilla	1.7
Firefox	1.0
OpenOffice	1.1
Glibc	2.3.2
GCC	3.3.4
Crossover Office	4.1 (Deluxe only)
Price	Deluxe: Euro 79 / US\$ 89.95; Standard: Euro 39 / US\$ 49.95

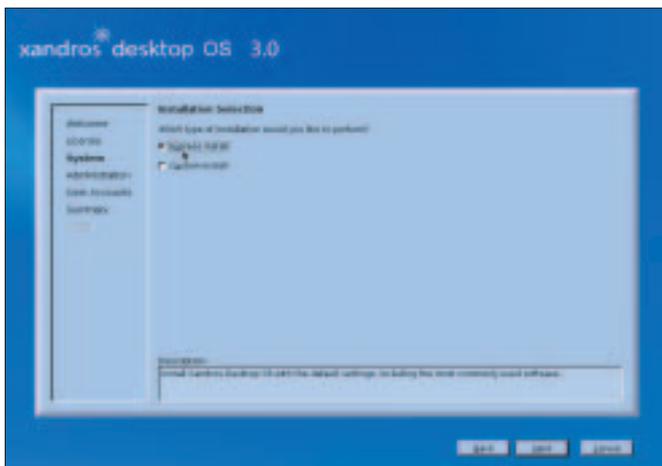


Figure 1: The Xandros installation routine makes most of the decisions for the user.

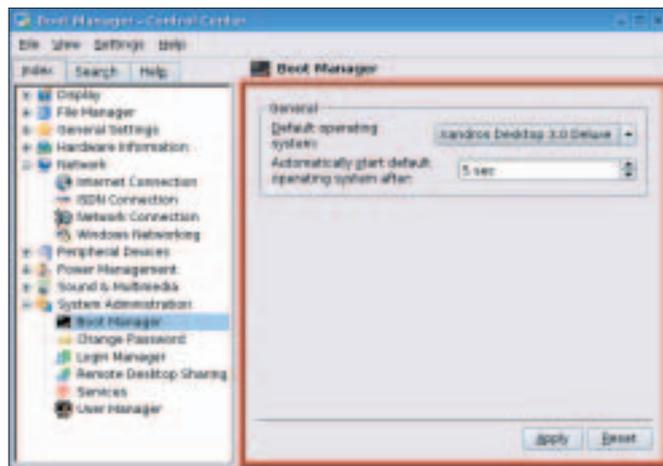


Figure 2: Xandros adds system configuration to the KDE control center.

restriction, the user will only be able to see his or her home directory, plus any network shares. USB storage devices are also displayed here when plugged in.

Package Management

Xandros has its own software package installation software. *Xandros Networks* (Figure 4) is more than just a GUI-based front-end for the Debian package management tool, APT. The program searches the configured package sources at regular intervals for updates and new software. If the server has something new on offer, the tool pops up a KDE panel applet to let the user know.

Besides the distribution CDs, Xandros Networks also recognizes the official Xandros repository as a default source. If you need more, you can enable the *Debian unsupported site* option. This takes you to a few packages that Xan-

dro's has taken from Debian and modified to suit the Xandros distribution; Xandros does not support the software in this category.

But again, the distribution lacks the variety of programs that the original Debian distribution has. If you do not want to do without this variety, you can optionally add Debian repositories as sources. This said, Xandros explicitly advises against doing so, as there is no guarantee that non-Xandros optimized packages will work smoothly with the Xandros distribution.

Xandros Networks also has commercial add-on packages available as downloads. Users of the Standard Edition can use their credit cards to purchase Crossover Office or the PDF-formatted manual. Additionally, programs such as StarOffice are up for grabs. What does not make sense is the fact that free soft-

ware such as Tuxracer or GnuCash is only available to registered users.

The restricted selection of software in the Xandros repositories really affects localization. Although the Xandros server has international language packages for programs such as Mozilla and Koffice, the KDE desktop has not been localized. This is bad news for users with little or no knowledge of English, whether they are looking to install or just work with the distribution. Users can download non-English KDE packages from the Debian server, but they are no big help, as Xandros tends to add its own modules to KDE applications, and these modules are not covered by the native KDE localization process.

Private Sphere

Nevertheless, the extensions mentioned thus far do give Xandros some advan-

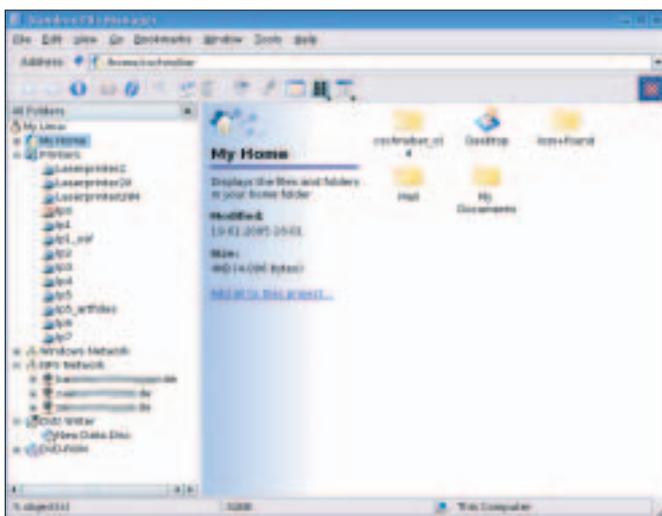


Figure 3: The Xandros File Manager includes a built-in network browser and burning program.



Figure 4: Xandros Networks handles package management.