



A look at the new Freespire distribution

FREE TWIN

Linspire is pushing a new non-commercial version called Freespire. We took the Freespire beta for a test drive. **BY MARTIN LOSCHWITZ**

By the time the first version of Linspire [1] finally hit the shelves, this desktop distro had already negotiated some major obstacles. Besides the fact that Microsoft wasn't happy with the original name, "Lindows," Linspire's creators had to admit that they were not going to be able to achieve their original goal of recreating the look and feel of Windows. But Linspire survived this slow start and continues to achieve success in its effort to bring Linux to a mass market consumer audience.

Linspire, which focuses on ease of installation and ease of use for newcomers, provides commercial components such as drivers for ATI or Nvidias graphics cards, as well as other commercial software, removing the need for search-

ing for video or audio codecs in order to watch movies. In fact, Linspire has all major commercial codecs.

The Click'n'Run Warehouse (CNR) is another major Linspire feature. Customers can use the CNR front-end to download and install software. However, you need to register (for free) before you can use CNR. If you decide to update your CNR status to "Gold" for around US\$ 50, you are granted access to additional software.

Linspire recently surprised the Linux world by announcing a new community variant of their distribution under the name Freespire. According to the press releases, Freespire will be a community distribution comprised entirely of open source software – with no commercial components. This tactic is reminiscent

the approach used by other distros such as Suse or RedHat that have placed the development of a major part of their systems in the capable hands of the FOSS community. Freespire is based on Debian GNU/Linux. Linspire makes many promises about their new creation. "Freespire," says the project homepage [2], "is powerful enough for the most sophisticated Linux user."

After all, Linspire is competing with itself by producing a free distribution that so closely resembles the company's flagship commercial product. Users can download Freespire for free. Compare this to the price of US\$ 49.95 for the Linspire Standard Edition.

What does Freespire have to offer? Is Linspire just trying to push the CNR Warehouse? With this in mind, we decided to take a closer look.

Installation

You can download a CD image of the Freespire beta release from the Freespire server at [3] or via BitTorrent. The CD contains about 700 megabytes of data. If you have a broadband connection, you should have no trouble downloading the file and burning it onto a CD.

The CD Start menu gives users a number of options. Besides the option to install the distribution, you can launch a live system, which is useful for newcomers who want to try before they leap. The CD Start menu also lets you change the partitioning of your hard disk.

The installation routine is tight, guiding the user through the system setup with a firm hand. After the welcome splash, users can choose the keyboard layout then opt to dedicate the whole disk to Freespire or launch a neat hard disk partitioning tool (Figure 1). Unfortunately, the tool demonstrated a tendency to crash in our lab, taking the installer down with it and forcing us to reboot and start the installation again from scratch.

After setting up the disk, users can enter the host name for the computer, their own names, their choice of username, and a matching password before clicking on *Finish* and *Yes I'm sure* in the next dialog to launch into the file copy phase of the install.

After copying the files to disk (incidentally, while this is going on, users are treated to "info" windows full of ads for



Figure 1: The Freespire installer gives newcomers a handy tool for partitioning the hard disk.

CNR Warehouse), setup prompts you for a few system configuration values. You can accept the default values in most cases.

Finally, the routine displays an overview window with the option to set up an additional user account, although setting up a non-privileged user in addition to the computer administrator is not mandatory. If you don't set up another user, the first user you set up automatically has *root* privileges (although *sudo* adds an abstraction layer). This setup can be dangerous, especially when surf-

ing the Internet, and Freespire deserves criticism for this approach.

Free or Non-free

After logging in at the display manager, with a theme designed to reflect the Freespire look (Figure 2), you are treated to the kind of Linux system you have grown to expect, and one that looks very similar to the Linspire desktop. The most obvious difference is the start button, which sports a blue Freespire logo instead of the green Linspire icon. Freespire uses version 3.5.3 of KDE.



Figure 2: Logging in to Freespire Linux.

The distribution has the usual collection of applications for daily chores: besides OpenOffice, the fairly spartan KDE menu offers a *Web Browser*, which is a pseudonym for Firefox, a KMail client, and the Kopete instant messenger. LSongs [4] serves as a replacement for Amarok. Generally speaking, Freespire has most of the typical Linspire applications including LPhoto [5].

The menu includes RealPlayer "Gold," giving users the ability to launch web-hosted movies automatically. Freespire has no trouble with video formats: WMV and AVI files are supported, as are MP3 or WMA files. All of these formats require non-free codecs, confirming my suspicion that Freespire has a very loose definition of "free."

I started asking myself how seriously Linspire is sticking to its claim of developing Freespire on the basis of free components only. The project defends the inclusion of non-free software by stating that it wishes to give the user maximum freedom of choice, and that includes proprietary codecs, drivers, and applications. This said, Linspire CEO Kevin Carmony has promised a Freespire variant without a single proprietary component some time in the future.

Downloading Software with apt-get

It is easy to see that Freespire is Debian-based; components such as *dpkg*, and *apt-get* are a dead give-away. Linspire advertises Freespire as supporting easy software downloading based on *apt-get*. You need to run *apt-get update* first to tell *apt-get* to download a new package list from the Freespire server. After doing so, it really is easy to install new software by giving the *apt-get install package* command. The data takes its time crossing the wire, at speeds of just 140 Kbps – a speed hardly likely to make DSL break a sweat. It is difficult to

Component	Version
Kernel	2.6.16.7
Glibc	2.4
GCC	4.1.1
X.org	7.1
KDE	3.5.3
OpenOffice	2.0.3
Firefox	1.5.0.5



Figure 3: CNR Warehouse gives users the ability to install additional software by pointing and clicking; special features are available for an extra charge.

understand why Freespire doesn't use mirrors.

Packages downloaded by apt-get are not straight from the Debian repositories, but have been specially modified for Freespire. The distribution has a good selection of packages; besides a smattering of popular Linux favorites, these include Gnome and Xfce as alternative desktops. This would theoretically give users the ability to replace the default KDE desktop with their preferred desktop. The ability to install software via apt-get definitely makes Freespire more flexible than its commercial Linspire counterpart.

Talking of Drivers

The commercial Linspire distribution will automatically install proprietary drivers on PCs with Nvidia or ATI graphics adapters, and it will set up 3D acceleration at the same time. Freespire does not follow suit here: instead, it uses the Xorg drivers, *nv* and *ati*.

This does not mean that users with

Nvidia or ATI hardware have to miss out. In fact, you can run *apt-get* at the console to download *fglrx-installer*, and *los-kernel-extra* (for ATI), or *nvidia-driver-source*, *nvidia-driver-utils*, and *los-kernel-extra* (for Nvidia). After doing so, it is quite simple to modify the X configuration to use the new drivers, thus bringing accelerated graphics to the X server. Follow the same approach to install drivers for various WLAN and modem cards. With some effort, you can finally add support for hardware components that Linspire supports out-of-the-box.

CNR Warehouse

Right after you log in for the first time, you will probably notice the icon with a moving blue arrow in the KDE kicker. This is the icon for the CNR Warehouse update module, which is telling you that CNR has new software for you.

Clicking the icon does not launch the Update Wizard as you might expect; instead, users are taken to the normal CNR Warehouse front-end and prompted to log in. In fact, you need to register with CNR (for free) before you can download any updates.

After registering and logging on, you are in for another surprise: in our lab, *My Products* below *Available Updates* didn't contain a single update – and the icon with the blue arrow disappeared when we got back. You can't

help suspecting that the flashing icon is only there to get people to register with CNR.

CNR also gives users the ability to install additional software. A click will put the Adobe Reader on your disk, for example (Figure 3). However, CNR still appears slightly disorganized; the program offers to install an older version of Firefox, although this program is already installed on your disk as the *Web Browser*. And, again, the download speed for software from CNR is anything but convincing.

Conclusions

Freespire Beta 2 left us with mixed impressions. The system is fairly usable, and current versions of most major programs are provided. The installation is simple and unlikely to faze even newcomers, and the Freespire desktop is intuitive.

We were left with the question of what Linspire is actually trying to achieve with Freespire. After all, you can recreate the full Linspire feature set with Freespire, and the look of the two systems is confusingly similar; Freespire has not even ditched most of the proprietary programs included with Linspire.

In contrast to Debian and Ubuntu, Freespire gets on the user's nerves with its permanent ads for CNR. Other than the icon for the CNR site and the default presence of the commercial drivers and codecs, our lab failed to discover a single detail to disambiguate Freespire from other Debian derivatives. It is possible to install these proprietary video codecs on Debian or Ubuntu, and the same can be said of drivers for graphics adapters and modems.

Overall, Freespire lacks a unique selling point: if you have done without Linspire thus far, there is no genuine reason for you to test Freespire. ■

Freespire RC1

Linspire published Release Candidate 1 of Freespire shortly before this issue went to press. The release does not add any major changes compared with the Beta 2 we looked at in this article, however, it does remove a number of bugs and improve stability, especially with respect to CNR.

INFO

- [1] Linspire: <http://www.linspire.com>
- [2] Freespire project: <http://www.freespire.org>
- [3] Freespire download: http://wiki.freespire.org/index.php/Download_Freespire
- [4] Lsongs: <http://lsongs.com>
- [5] Lphoto: <http://lphoto.com>