Jolly Interesting Netbook Distro

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This alternative interface for netbooks ditches the desktop metaphor. **BY DMITRI POPOV**

Many mainstream Linux distributions like Fedora, Ubuntu, and Mandriva provide support for popular netbook models. Consequently, they run on your little companion pretty

Figure 1: The JoliCloud USB Creator makes it easy to create a bootable USB key.

much right out of the box. However, the desktop metaphor that works so well on conventional PCs and laptops doesn't translate very well to the netbook computer.

Why? Because netbooks are designed for radically different usage scenarios. Realizing that, developers have been trying to build an alternative interface that would provide quick access to key applications and let you operate your netbook with a minimum of effort.

The Easy Mode of the original Asus Eee PC 701 was a first attempt to replace the conventional desktop with a more efficient interface. The Ubuntu Netbook

Remix (UNR) goes a step further and provides a sleek interface that fits perfectly with the netbook philosophy. In fact, the UNR interface works so well that you might wonder what else can be done to improve it. Quite a lot, actually, and the Jolicloud distribution [1] is set to prove that.

To begin with, it's important to remember that Jolicloud is still at an early stage of development, which means that some features are not fully implemented and the entire system can still undergo major changes. Additionally, this means you shouldn't install or use Jolicloud on your production machine; the usual "use

it at your own risk" warning applies here as well.

Foundations

Jolicloud's developers don't try to reinvent the wheel, so they chose to build Jolicloud on the solid foundation of Ubuntu Linux. Under the hood, Jolicloud sports a tweaked and optimized kernel that supports many popular netbooks on the market. This means that most of your netbook's hardware, including the graphics card, wired and wireless interfaces, and card reader will work right out of the box. Unlike Moblin, Jolicloud is not limited to netbooks based on Intel Atom processors, so you can use the distro with older models, including the original Eee PC 701.

The Jolicloud distro is available as an ISO image, and a handy Jolicloud USB Creator utility can help you create a bootable USB key (Figure 1). The USB creator is available for Linux, Mac OS X, and Windows, so you can make a USB key on any platform at hand. Then you can use the USB key you created to boot Jolicloud in the Live mode or install it on your netbook. A Live boot is perfect for taking Jolicloud for a drive before you commit to a full-blown install. The installation procedure is identical to Ubuntu, which is not a big surprise because Jolicloud is based on the popular distro. Either use the entire disk for Jolicloud or install the distro alongside the existing system.

Getting Started

When booted, Jolicloud greets you with a slightly tweaked Ubuntu Netbook Remix interface (Figure 2), although Jolicloud's developers plan to replace the UNR interface with a custom launcher later. To launch and enable the Jolicloud interface, you have to click on the *Getting Started* icon in the *Favorites* section and create an account that gives you access to the personal dashboard, automatic updates, software library, notifications, and so on (Figure 3). When creating an account, you are prompted to link your netbook to it. Jolicloud allows you to link multiple machines to the same account, so if you choose to install Jolicloud on another netbook, you can link it to the existing account.

Jolicloud's primary goal is to make system maintenance and software instal-lation as simple as possible. When you launch Jolicloud and log in to your account, you are dropped into the *Dash-board* section, which, among other things, contains the *Updates* subsection (Figure 4). As the name suggests, this
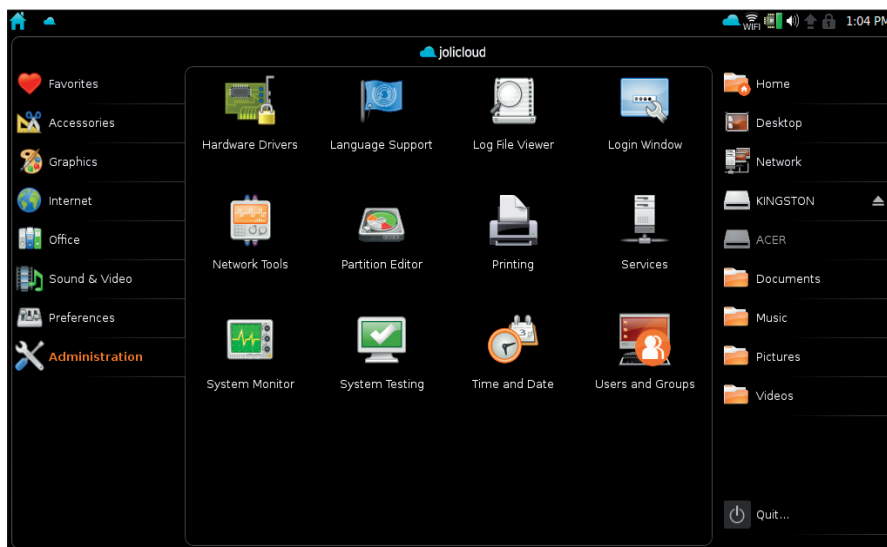

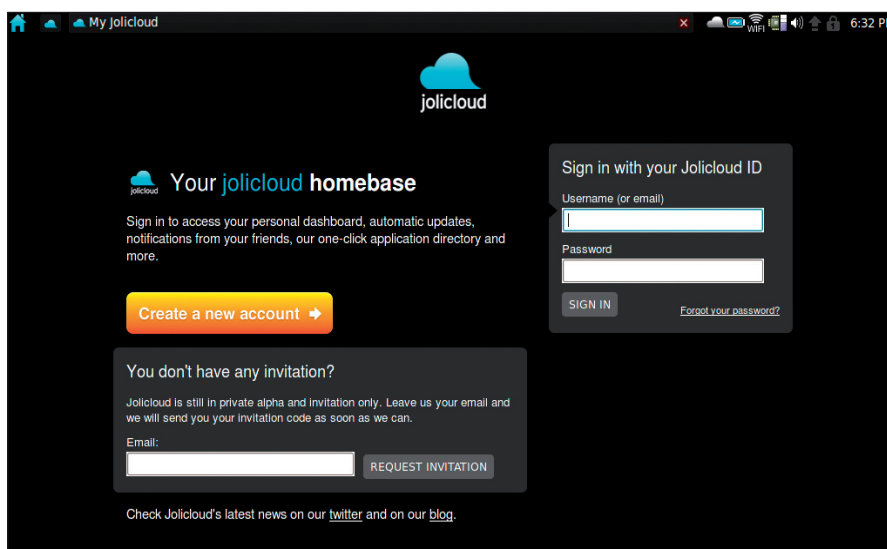**Figure 2: Jolicloud is based on the Ubuntu Netbook Remix.**

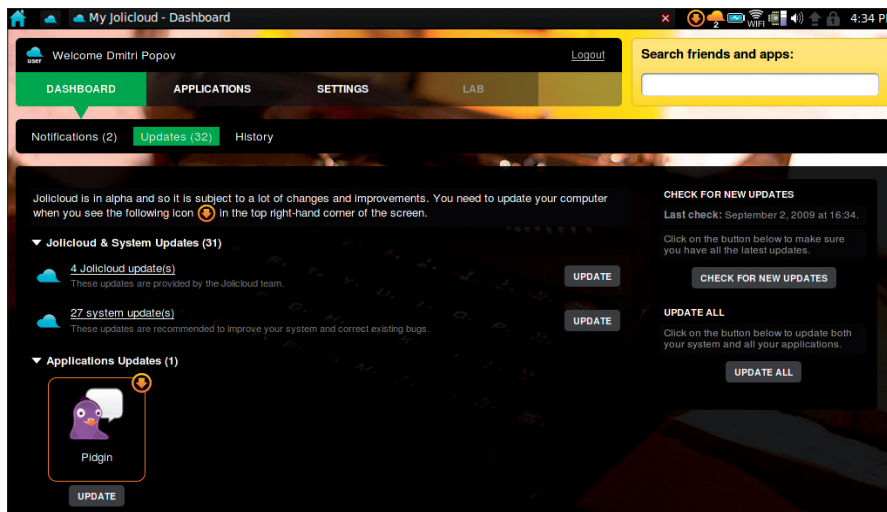**Figure 3: Before you can start using Jolicloud, you have to create an account.**

Figure 4: Jolicloud lets you keep your system and software up to date with consummate ease.

subsection offers a quick and easy way to update your system and installed applications. When you hit the *Check for New Updates* button, Jolicloud returns a list of available system and application updates. Now you can install all updates in one fell swoop by hitting the *Update All* button. Of course, you don't have to check for updates manually: As with any distro worth its salt, Jolicloud can automatically check for updates and notify you when updates are available.

Applications

Jolicloud comes with a few popular desktop Linux applications, including the Firefox web browser, the Pidgin instant messaging client, the Transmission BitTorrent client, and the F-Spot photo manager (but strangely, not OpenOffice. org or other productivity applications). However, if you want to unleash Jolicloud's potential, you should look at its own software library.

The *Applications* section acts as a software library and manager that lets you quickly locate and install the applications you want (Figure 5). All available packages are grouped by their type (*Graphics*, *Internet*, *Office*, etc.), and you can sort them by popularity or date. Instead of browsing the software collection, you can use the built-in search feature. Once you've found the application you like, click on it and hit the *Install* button.

In addition to desktop software like OpenOffice.org, GIMP, and Skype, Jolicloud offers a selection of web-based ap-
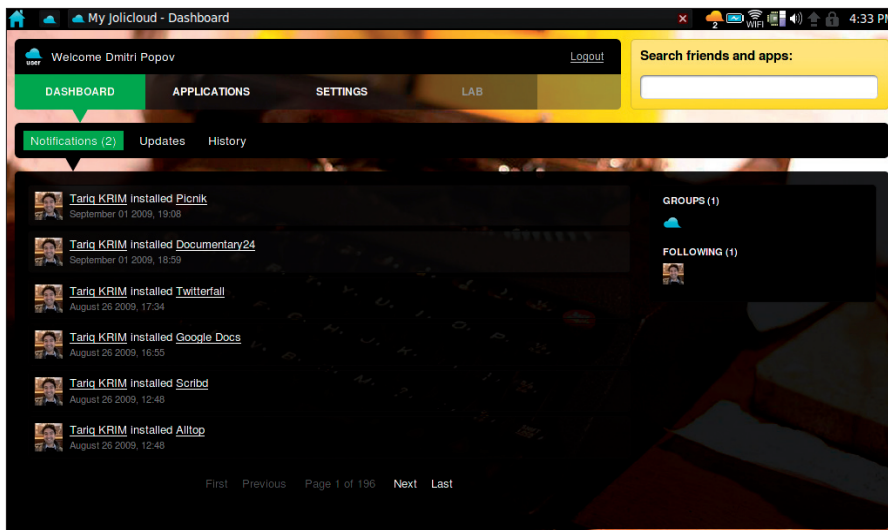

Figure 6: Jolicloud lets you get social with other Jolicloud users.

plications such as Twitter, Facebook, Google Maps, and others. Once installed, these applications act as conventional desktop programs. To achieve this, Jolicloud uses Mozilla Prism [2] software, which lets you run web-based applications and services in their own windows.

Although Jolicloud makes it easy to install applications, you have to switch to the UNR interface to launch them. Switching back and forth between two interfaces is obviously not the best solution, but this issue should be fixed once the UNR interface is replaced by the custom launcher.

Social Settings

Jolicloud also sports a few basic social networking features. Similar to Twitter and Identi.ca, you can follow other Joli-

cloud users and they can follow you. To find a person you want to follow, you can either use the *Search friends and apps* box or browse the list of newly joined users in the *Settings | Latest Members* section. Updates from users you follow appear in the *Dashboard | Notifications* section.

In the current version, you get notifications when others install software or follow other users. This feature provides a great way to discover useful applications. Better yet, notifications link directly to the applications they mention, so you can install these right away (Figure 6). The social networking part of Jolicloud is not yet fully implemented, but it has the potential to turn the distro into a rather useful social tool for its users.
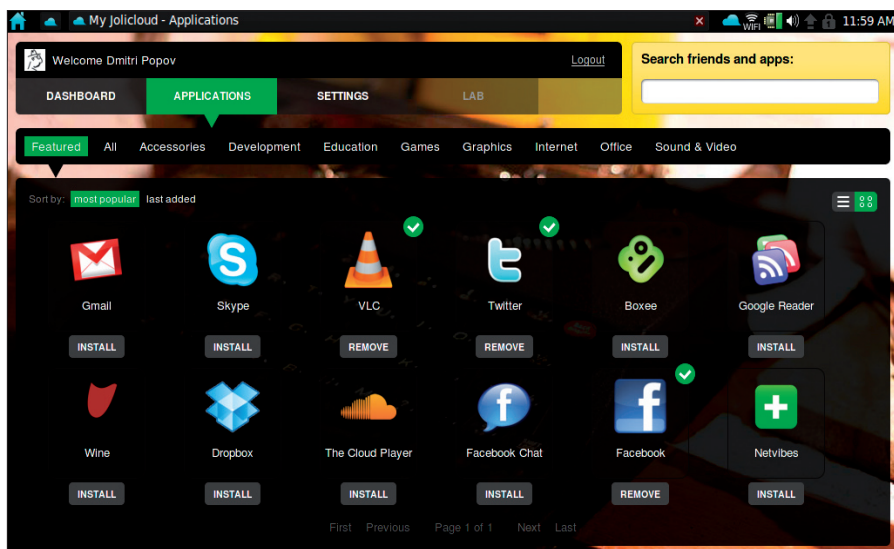
Final Word

Because Jolicloud is still far from complete, it's too early for the final word, but even in its current form, it looks promising. Streamlined system maintenance and easy software installation make Jolicloud a great system for non-technical users, and the solid hardware support ensures that Jolicloud will run on most popular netbooks currently on the market. Once it's ready for public consumption, though, it remains to be seen how Jolicloud will fare – but keep watching. ■

Figure 5: In the Applications section, you can locate and install desktop and web-based applications quickly and easily.

INFO
[1] Jolicloud: *www.jolicloud.com*
[2] Mozilla Prism: *prism.mozilla.com*