Suse Linux 9.3 put through its paces

NINE POINT THREE

The latest version of Suse Linux Professional was released in mid-April. As we have come to expect, the box has a large collection of software, some new and a lot of improved Yast modules, and an extensive documentation. Read on to find out what else has changed in Suse Linux 9.3.

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9.3. You may prefer to download the latest version off the Internet, or read the original release notes at */usr/share/doc/release-notes/*.

Users of computers with Nvidia graphics cards beware. Make sure you reboot your PC after completing the online update, before installing the Nvidia drivers via YOU. If you fail to do so, the desktop may fail to load following a kernel update.

On the Desktop

The box has the latest versions of the major GUI desktops: KDE 3.4 and Gnome 2.10. Novell would have loved to have added a stable 2.0 version of OpenOffice, and the splash screen actually displays this version number. What you get is in fact the pre-release version, which is officially numbered 1.9.79. Gimp version 2.2 is also on board, and is installed with the CMYK

At first glance, Suse Linux 9.3 Professional [1] might not appear to offer a lot in the way of new features. Except for the new boot screen themes (in green for a change), KDE and Gnome do not seem to have been through any radical changes. But don't be fooled by this first impression. The Suse developers have actually made major progress over the last six months. Suse Linux 9.3 Professional includes many new features – and new bugs to match.

Installation

The YaST-based install has not changed, with the exception of two details: before you launch into the install, you first have to accept Novell's license agreement. And there is another surprise waiting for those who prefer manual partitioning. Novell now no longer supports the IBM Journaling Filesystem (JFS) for technical reasons. Although you can still mount existing JFS partitions, there is no way to create a new JFS filesystem.

On our three lab systems, the installer correctly identified all our hardware, integrating it into the system automatically in some cases, and at the click of the mouse in others. At the end of the installation, YaST offers you an online update and displays the release notes for

Suse Linux 9.3 Professional	
Price	£ 64.95, US$ 99.95, EUR 89.95
Support	90-day installation support
Website	*http://www.novell.com/products/linuxprofessional* *http://shop.novell.com*
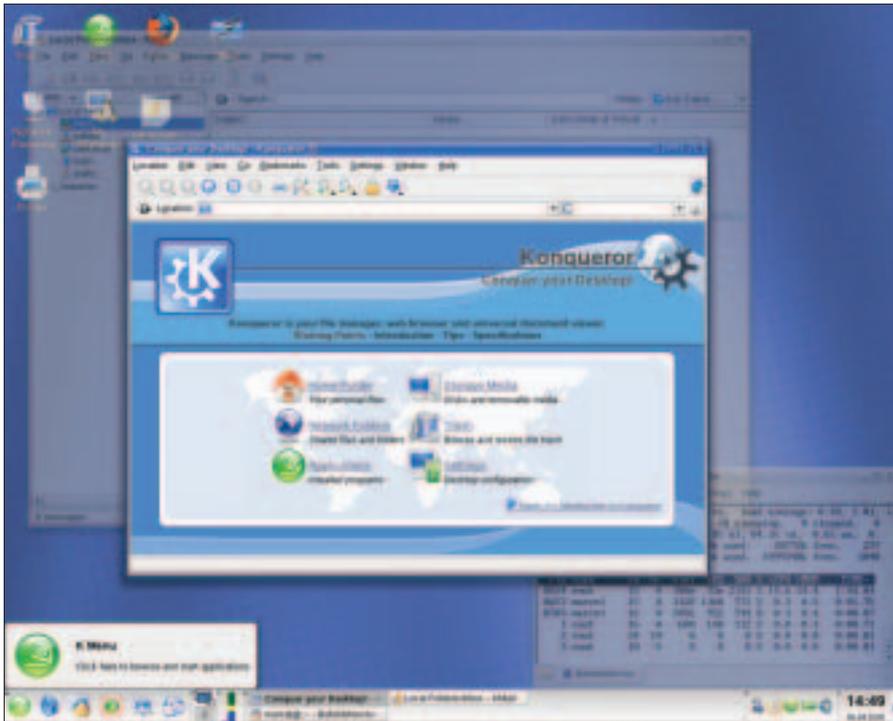
Figure 1: If your machine is powerful enough, you can enable KDE's new look with genuine window transparency.

supports this and CPU power to spare, KDE also offers transparent windows, but this feature is disabled by default.

The most visible changes can be attributed to the new KDE version 3.4. One new feature is the *System* icon on the desktop. The icon calls the *media:/* URL and displays the system disks. Konqueror displays the names of any labeled partitions, and Suse adds the disk capacity to the name if the label is missing: for example *32G Medium* or *131M Removable Medium* (see Figure 2). The Firefox web browser has also found a spot on the Suse desktop, ousting Mozilla as the alternative to Konqueror.

Under the Hood

If you have not noticed any changes so far, try launching Amarok and loading your own MP3 collection. This should make some of the changes fairly obvious. When you click an MP3 file in Amarok, nothing happens at first. But if you load the KDE jukebox via the console, a terminal window appears with an important message: *Could not load mpeg-decoder*.

It seems that Novell decided not to include an MP3 decoder on the distribution media at the last minute. In contrast to Red Hat, Novell has decided to restrict the required packages to the YaST Online Update.

In contrast to this, the distribution is the first to include binary drivers by ATI for newer Radeon adapters. This said, only one of the two packages you need is on the CDs: the *km_fglrx* kernel module. As with many other packages, there was no room on the CDs for the *fglrx*

plug-in by default. See the box titled "Suse 9.3 Version Numbers" for a summary of the version numbers for some major components.

The first change you will notice after the install is that the Suse developers have replaced the KDE splash screen with the boot theme screen. Although this gives the boot phase a more standardized appearance, is doesn't do anything to speed up the process. If you prefer to use the original KDE splash screen, or one of your own design, you can select a theme from the collection in the KDE Control Center under *Appearance and Themes | Splash Screen*.

There have also been a number of changes to the appearance of the KDE

desktop (see Figure 1). For example, when launched, Konqueror gives you an overview screen with links to the trash can, folders, settings, storage media, and programs. Hovering the mouse over one of the icons on the left-hand side of the panel reveals a cute info window for each icon.

Unfortunately, Konqueror seems to have developed an ugly bug. As many beta testers have documented, the browser occasionally refuses to load a page, complaining that the machine can't be reached. On the other hand, Firefox will display the same URL without any problems. We experienced this issue on one of our lab systems after starting the network manually.

Suse has finally departed from its own style of window dressing and replaced this with a slightly modified version of the default KDE style, *Plastik*. Assuming you have a graphics adapter that

Suse 9.3 Version Numbers

- KDE 3.4
- Gnome 2.10
- Gimp 2.2.4
- Acrobat Reader 7.0
- Kernel 2.6.11.4
- Glibc 2.3.4
- Gcc 3.3.5
- Samba 3.0.12
- MySQL 4.1.10
- PostgreSQL 8.0.1
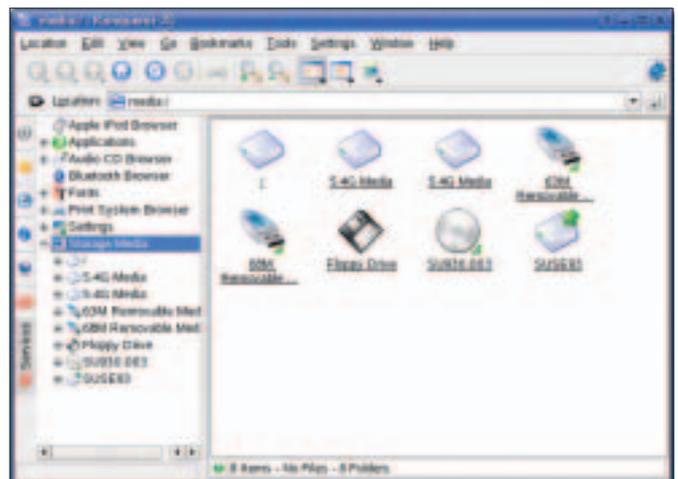
**Figure 2: Suse Linux 9.3 references the disk label, or the size and type, when mounting drives.**
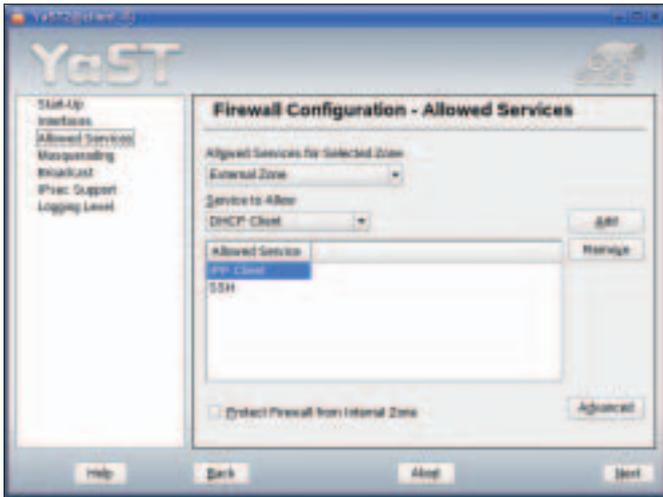
Figure 3: Novell has completely reworked the YaST Firewall module.

package, but it is on the DVD. The drivers are not installed automatically and not displayed for installation.

There are also some new Epkowa drivers for Epson scanners: Epson Perfection 1250, 1250 Photo, 1260, 1260 Photo, 3170 Photo, 4180 Photo, GT-7200U, GT-7300U, GT-9400 and GT-F600. To set up one of these scanners, run the YaST Scanner module and then launch the Iscan program.

Novell uses HAL and the D-Bus architecture for Suse 9.3. Hotpluggable devices such as USB sticks, external hard disks, and CD/DVD burners will benefit most from this. Suse 9.3 is vastly improved in this area, in comparison to its predecessors.

There have been changes to various YaST modules. For example, three separate tabs for *User data*, *Details* and *Password settings* make creating and modifying user accounts much easier. Novell has completely reworked the Firewall module (see Figure 3). You can now define various zones and enable IPSec, for example. There is also a list of services, which allows admins to point and click to enable or disable services.

The printer module is also affected by the firewall settings. As usual, Suse sets up the machine as a CUPS client as part of the default install, but 9.3 fails to allow the required port in the default setting. It is easy to overlook this detail during the install, so make sure you launch the printer or firewall dialog when you are finished, and add *IPP-Client* to the list of allowed services (Figure 4).

Novell has also introduced a lot of changes for network devices. Devices

can now be enabled manually, via hotplug, at system boot time, and by attaching a network cable. There is also a checkbox where system administrators can allow users to enable network devices.

Last but not least, there are also two new YaST modules. *Software | Media Check* allows you to check CDs and DVDs for errors. This feature is also available during the install phase, but only in text mode. To use it, simply quit the graphical install and select *Check Installation CD-ROM/DVD* in the Linuxrc main menu.

The *Installation into Directory for XEN* item allows you to support virtual XEN installations. XEN an open source solution that allows multiple virtual Linux instances to run on a single Linux system.

KDE versus Gnome

KDE is still the default Suse desktop. However, an overview screen prior to the install does give you the option of selecting a standard Gnome system. Novell continues to work on integrating KDE and Gnome in this Suse release.

In contrast to Red Hat, Novell is not primarily concerned with standardizing the look and feel but is focused instead on the handling. Both environments now have a more or less identical menu structure, the only differences being that Gnome uses a strictly alphabetic order, whereas KDE simply sorts the menu entries, but not the menu categories.

Novell have also done a good job with the common desktop in Suse

9.3. KDE or Gnome entries do not appear as alien or duplicate elements on the other desktop. The Susewatcher and Suseplugger icons now integrate nicely into the Gnome panel.

Gnome handled a test with a network folder we created under KDE without breaking a sweat. And Nautilus will open the KDE-created Samba folders without any trouble after prompting you for your username and password.

OpenOffice integration in GTK+ and QT is mainly error free, although there appears to be a minor bug in the GTK version of OpenOffice. On two of our three lab systems, OpenOffice did not have anti-aliasing the first time we ran it on Gnome. But this problem disappeared after installing a new font for *Interface User* via *Tools | Options | Fonts* and restarting OpenOffice. We were unable to reproduce the bug later.

The desktop search engine, Beagle, which is also included with Suse Linux 9.3, only worked under Gnome in our first test. The reason for this is that the tool builds on the D-Bus infrastructure, and only Gnome gives you the full feature set. Beagle and the accompanying *best* front-end are at the alpha stage at present.

But still, the Beagle tool, which was written in Mono and is a mixture of *locate* and *grep*, turned out to be quite reliable and quick in our initial testing. As the service is disabled by default, you first need to create an empty *.runbeagle* file under Gnome before you can start searching. There is a separate plug-in for Firefox-based web searching.
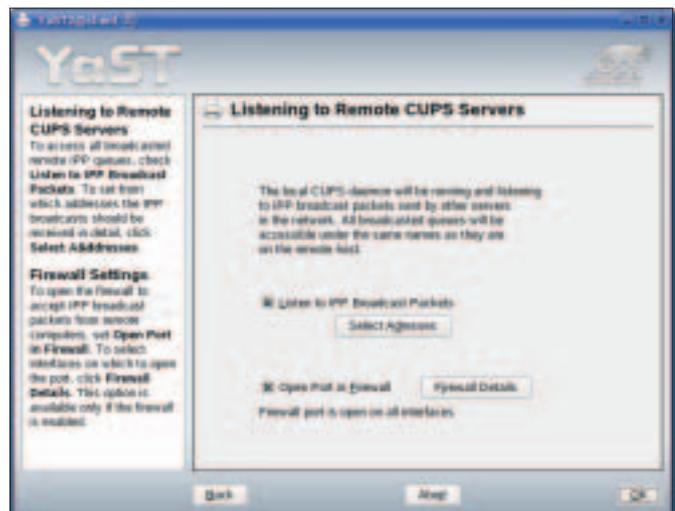
Figure 4: Add the IPP-Client to the list of allowed services.
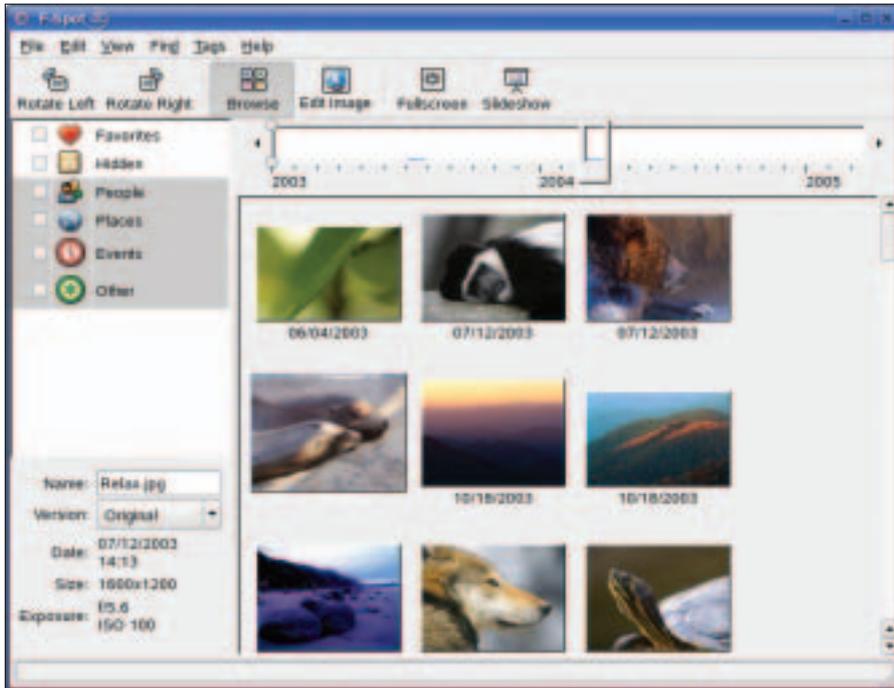
Figure 5: F-Spot gives Suse Linux 9.3 a fast image viewer and photo manager.

As a workaround for KDE users, you should launch the search engine under Gnome once; this will allow it to run on the KDE desktop. To do so, launch *beagled* in a shell, and then run the GUI front-end by giving the *best* command. You can then press [F12] at any time to use the search tool.

Following the standard installation, another Mono program resides below *Graphics | Photography*: the F-Spot viewer (see Figure 5). Just like KDE's Digikam tool, F-Spot searches a freely configurable folder and any subfolders below it for images when you first launch it and shows the results as an album.

In contrast to Digikam, F-Spot does not organize images in individual folders but displays your whole collection. You can use either a timeline and/or category assignments for selection purposes. If required, the program will grab images directly from your digital camera. F-Spot is quick, but it can't display PNG images, and this impacts its usefulness as a general purpose viewer.

Is the Update Worthwhile?

If you already have Suse Linux 9.x or a similarly recent system, the update is only worth the effort if you are unhappy with your current setup. The following considerations are designed to help you make up your mind.

OpenOffice "2.0" (as mentioned earlier, this is actually the 1.9.79 pre-release) looks clean and fresh, although there have been no drastic improvements to the launch times of the individual components – two or three seconds is all you can hope for. The Office Suite crashed a few times in our testing, but it did manage to rescue the documents we had not saved. The new database module makes life easier for Access converts, but it can't compete with the feature-richness that Knoda gives you.

If you use external media on a regular basis, the update is definitely a good idea. Novell has solved the issues that bugged USB sticks under 9.2. When mounting a partition, Suse Linux no longer uses the ridiculously long device IDs, but – if they exist – the partition labels. In the case of external media without a label, Suse uses the */media/usbdisk* mountpoint. The system mounts USB sticks without partition tables correctly. Switching CDs and DVDs is a bit of a nuisance as the mount point is named after the media label. And this leaves *cd /media/dvd/* pointing at a black hole.

Mounting large external drives with capacities of several Gbytes is still a frustrating experience. To allow media to be dismounted at any time without running the *umount* command, Suse Linux uses the *sync* option for filesystems. However,

this implies a lot of administrative overhead for disks that use ReiserFS: the disk synchronizes continually and thus runs a lot slower. A workaround would be to mount the disk manually. The best idea is to use the mount point selected by Suse Linux to mount the disk. It is not necessary to temporarily dismount automatically mounted partitions to do this.

Laptop users will definitely benefit from an update to Suse Linux 9.3. The power management functions for ACPI computers in 9.3 are vastly improved. Suspend-to-disk now works with Nvidia drivers, and takes about 20 seconds on a Dell Inspiron 8600, for example. These computers even support standby mode as intended by the manufacturer on 9.3. According to Novell, creating a separate Ext2 or Ext3 partition for */boot* improves the speed of the suspend process. This said, after following Novell's advice, we did not notice any difference in our testing.

Resuming after suspend-to-ram is still pure luck for most machines. Luckily, Suse Linux 9.3 has a few tools that can wake up even the most obstinate of machines from hibernation. The */usr/share/doc/packages/powersave/README.suspend2ram* file, which also has list of tested laptops, gives you more details.

Conclusions

Novell's Suse Linux 9.3 is a feature-rich, and robust Linux distribution. At first glance, the new version does not seem much changed from 9.2, but a lot of work has gone on under the hood. The distribution is definitely a good choice for new users. An update makes most sense for laptops and computers that use external storage media on a regular basis.

There were no big surprises when we put Suse 9.3 through its paces in our labs. If you have trouble installing the system, you might like to read the article on "Known issues and special features in Suse Linux 9.3" from the Suse support database [2]. ■

INFO

[1] Overview: *http://www.novell.com/products/linuxprofessional*

[2] Suse support database: *http://portal.suse.com/sdb/en/index.html*