



Penguins on 45: Linux Live CDs

The concept of a live CD is quite simple: you drop a CD in the CDROM drive, reboot the computer, and the operating system on the CD gets loaded into memory. Linux tends to proliferate and there's a confusing selection of possibilities. I hope to clarify those possibilities some today.

The best known and probably the best all around live CD is Knoppix. It's very mature and reliable, with a big choice of applications. It includes Open Office, which can work with almost any file created by Microsoft Office. MEPIS is another excellent desktop replacement with excellent application support (Flash, Java, and sound just work, and that's uncommon with Linux live CDs). It also includes Open Office. MEPIS requires a machine with a lot of horsepower - I would recommend at least 1 GHz and 192 Mb of memory.

Getting and using a Linux live CD: go to the URL for the Live CD you want to try (there's a list on the next page). Find the "Download" section (it might also be called something like "Get Knoppix" if Knoppix is the CD you're looking for) and grab the ISO file for the most recent version of the CD (use BitTorrent if you know what it is). An "ISO" is a file that contains an entire file system, the one to be written to the CD. The latest Knoppix CD as of this writing is called "KNOPPIX_V3.6-2004-08-16-EN.iso" where "EN" indicates the English language version. Downloading will probably take a while: most ISO files are in the 600 to 700 Mb range. Make sure you have the hard drive space as well. Don't try it over dial-up, but with DSL or cable you're usually looking at two to three hours download time.

You should just be able to double-click on the ISO file and your CD burning software should come up and offer to write a copy to CD. If this doesn't work, please look at the help for your CD burning software: there are too many versions to address them here.

Once you have the CD, restart your computer with the new CD in the CD-ROM drive. If your computer doesn't restart in Linux, restart again and this time look at the BIOS settings: make sure that the CDROM drive is listed as a boot device, and is listed before the hard drive. Once all of this is done, boot and enjoy!

For those more familiar with Linux: For recovery I use Knoppix mostly ("knoppix 2" at the boot loader will leave you in text mode), INSERT appears to be very good, and LNX-BBC is well-established but may have been abandoned - both fit on a credit card

CD. Among the 8 cm and credit card sized desktop replacements, Vector (8 cm), Damn Small (credit card), and Feather (credit card) are good - the biggest sacrifices you make are browsers (often Dillo) and office software. FreeSBIE is worth a look if you want a taste of FreeBSD, and the "Ultimate Boot CD" is an excellent resource for any computer technician - it's not itself a Linux product, but includes many utilities and even several Linux boot discs.

If you want to see a thorough list of available live CDs, take a look at the list at FrozenTech (<http://www.frozentech.com/content/livecd.php>).

I list several of the better discs I tried on this page.

Linux:

Damn Small Linux: <http://www.damnsmalllinux.org/>

Feather Linux: Appears to be VERY similar to Damn Small, but Feather manages a prettier desktop.

INSERT: http://www.inside-security.de/insert_en.html Best for rescue and security. Includes captive for rw NTFS.

Knoppix: <http://www.knoppix.org/> Best for: desktop, demo, rescue.

LNX-BBC: <http://www.lnx-bbc.org/> Best for rescue (fits on a credit card disk). It's getting a little old.

MEPIS: <http://www.mepis.org/> (downloads are hard to find: look at <ftp://ftp.ibiblio.org/pub/linux/distributions/mepis/>) Best for: desktop, demo, but needs a fast machine.

Morphix: <http://www.morphix.org/> Several variants - different sizes and different purposes, usually good.

Overclockix: <http://overclockix.octeam.com/> Sloppy, but very pretty. Close the open ports after you boot! (Don't use this if you don't know what that means.)

Phlak: <http://www.phlak.org/> Intended for security, fairly good.

Slax: <http://slax.linux-live.org/> Relatively small, fairly good.

Vector Linux: <http://vectorlinux.com/> A very good lightweight desktop.

Non-Linux:

Free SBIE (FreeBSD): <http://www.freesbie.org/> May have some driver problems (I couldn't get network going), some menus in Italian. Otherwise good.

Ultimate Boot CD: <http://www.ultimatebootcd.com/> Cumulates test software and utilities for PCs on one disk. Highly recommended for technical people.

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