

Mageia 4

Graham Morrison takes on the 64-bit version of one of the strongest distributions to appear in recent years. Vive la différence!

DATA

Web
www.mageia.org
Developer
The Mageia Community
Price
Mostly Free Software

We dove straight into a fully fledged installation off the 64-bit DVD, rather than playing around with the live CD first. As ever with Mageia, the installation process looks fantastic. It recognised our drives and made it clear which drive we'd selected and what the consequences of installing might be. We used the manual partitioning option and created a new root partition from free space on our drive, although clicking on Done quickly brought up the formatting dialog without any final chance to check the settings – a security blanket we'd got used to with Ubuntu.

We were also able to choose between a vast array of desktops, which is a defining feature of Mageia 4. KDE and Gnome were the main options, but clicking on 'Custom' brought us to the 'Package Group Selection' screen, familiar to any former Mandrake user. This page gives you a great overview of which packages are going to be installed, enabling you to freely change what you'd like. From here, for instance, you can install Xfce, Mate, Cinnamon, RazorQt, E17 and LXDE without resorting to the package manager after boot. We've never seen such a comprehensive selection of desktops from a single DVD, and we clicked on them all – which is perhaps why it took 80

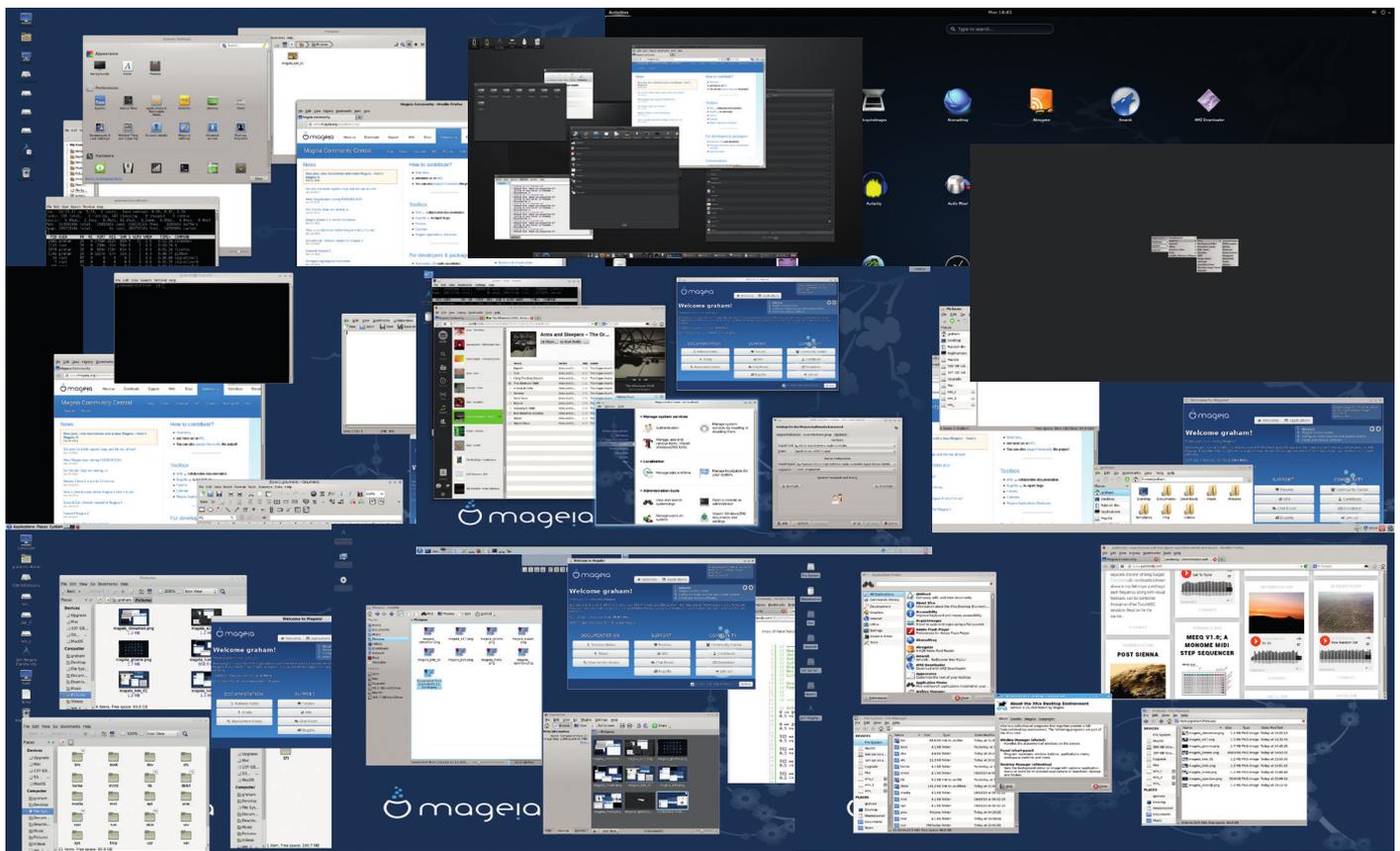
minutes and 5.5GB to install from the DVD. After package installation had completed, we did have problems telling the installer not to install a bootloader – see the box on EFI And GPT Partitions – but otherwise, this was a first-class process.

Boot camp

Our first boot was delayed for a considerable time in the Checking For New Hardware state, but this didn't happen with second and third boots, so we're guessing this had something to do with the many USB devices we've got connected to our system. Logging into the default KDE desktop bought back many happy memories of Mandriva, mainly because Mageia uses a similar blue colour scheme. But it's also that Mageia is augmented by many of the same tools that made Mandriva so good. The Mageia Control Center, for example, still has its own icon in the toolbar and provides easy access to software installation, hardware configuration, networking and system management, in exactly the same way DrakConf used to in the olden days.

We also really like the MageiaWelcome application, which presents itself when you first reach the desktop. This is a great tool for beginners, featuring

Mageia defaults to a great KDE desktop, but also offers the most unrivalled selection of alternatives we've ever seen in a distribution.



direct links to release notes, errata, how-tos, the wiki, forums and chat rooms. Unfortunately, the last link will only take you as far as launching X-Chat, leaving the beginner to discover for themselves how IRC works and where to find Mageia's support group. Not a great feature.

KDE 4.11 is the version shipped with Mageia 4. The launch-menu is the classic 'click and execute' style, as you'd find on Windows 98, but we miss the pervasive search of the application launcher – enabled with a right-click whilst the widgets are unlocked. Sound works perfectly through the GStreamer back-end to PulseAudio, and it detected our complex array of kernel audio devices without difficulty.

We wish a KDE distribution would be brave enough to drop KDE's default blue 'Active Window Glow', inherited from the Oxygen window decorator, but this can also be changed when you know where to look. There's a great selection of the best KDE applications including Amarok, Digikam, Kopete and KMail, but its office suite is deprecated in favour of LibreOffice.

Desktopification

The available software from a default installation is fantastic, making Mageia a great one-click install option for a comprehensive Linux/Open Source software suite. Having tools like Audacity, FileZilla, Ekiga, Scribus and Abiword just a click away is great for office environments, or for friends and family, although we'd like to see VNC added to the mix. Our installation had Kdenlive running in the background, for some reason, taking up 99% of a single CPU core. We then took a quick tour through the various installed desktops; it's great that you're able to do this after only just installing the system from a DVD.

Cinnamon was nicely accelerated, although the bottom panel was a little small on our high-resolution screen. Enlightenment 17 was its minimalist self, although asking us for our preferred size of window title bar was a nice touch. We'd have to question Inkscape's high-priority placing in the toolbar, but Enlightenment on Mageia feels fantastic – slick, polished and lightweight.

Next up in the login menu is Gnome 3.x, which we have to admit is starting to make sense after years in the wilderness. Apart from the background and the welcome window, this is the default Gnome experience. IceWM follows Gnome in the desktop selection menu, and this gives perhaps the most basic desktop experience of the lot. The background image isn't scaled, for example, and there are no icons in the launch menu. But that's IceWM, and it's good to have it here for low-powered Linux machines. We prefer LXDE for the lightweight experience because it has just a few more niceties, such as icons, but they both work well in Mageia. Mate, too, is a fuss-free two panel desktop. It's quick and will feel familiar to anyone used to an older version of Windows, and looks great with reasonable sized anti-aliased fonts

EFI AND GPT PARTITIONS

It's a little unfair to pick on Mageia for not working with GPT and EFI, because this is a problem that's only just beginning to emerge for many distributions. But its release notes do boast 'experimental support for UEFI', so we're going to mention it. GPT and EFI replace the old partitioning and boot schemes that we've used for 20 years, and it's only now that PCs are appearing on the market that default to EFI rather than a legacy BIOS option. With Mageia, one of the biggest problems we found installing on one of these systems was that you couldn't choose to ignore the bootloader. The only options were to install Grub, Grub 2 or even Lilo! We wanted to skip this stage so we could sort out our EFI bootloader ourselves, but in the end, the only way forward was to install Grub 2 onto the partition itself, rather than the non-existent MBR.

After installation, we were able to get Mageia booting off GPT/EFI without too much difficulty. Using gummiboot, a very simple bootloader, we copied the kernel and

initramfs images from Mageia's `/boot` folder into our EFI partition, and created a simple configuration file for gummiboot that pointed to the location of both, as well as set the root device for our installation. As we were using Nvidia's proprietary drivers, we also had to include `nokmsboot` as a boot option within the configuration file too. But after this was set, booting was perfect and we had no further issues. We'll just have to keep an eye on any kernel updates so we can copy the files over again if necessary.



EFI support in modern distributions is becoming increasingly important

and panels. Openbox wins for absolute minimalism, so we'll just say it works. More interesting was RazorQt, and this is the first time we've tried this nascent Qt desktop from a default installation. Perhaps because we had so many others installed, we could choose between four different window managers. The Razor desktop became our favourite low-resource option simply because KDE apps felt almost native in this Qt environment. Finally, there's Xfce 4, which we also love, because of its great default options.

This amazing selection of desktops available from a single installation DVD is

Mageia's killer feature, and serves a great purpose for people who may be finding their way with Linux desktops. And this is definitely a distribution we'll keep around for updates, because it bundles all these desktops together. But Mageia 4 is also a serious distribution, full of tier-one free software and a modern emphasis on kernel updates and security – Shorewall is running, for example. It's also one of the few distributions where suspend and resume has worked. With a few caveats about EFI installation and custom control panels, Mageia 4 is highly recommended. 

“The amazing selection of desktops available from a single DVD is Mageia's killer feature”

LINUX VOICE VERDICT

Despite a few rough edges, this has to be the distribution to choose if you're a serial desktop swapper.

