Ubuntu 14.04

Unity and kernel tweaks make up for what is otherwise a fairly low-key release, says **Mike Saunders**.

Canonical has its fingers in many pies at the moment. Go over to **www.ubuntu.com**, for instance, and the first thing you're greeted with is a big "the cloud platform of choice" message, accompanied by some blurb about OpenStack. Hover over the Download link and the first options are Cloud and Server – almost as if the desktop is an afterthought. On the other hand, Canonical is still pushing Unity, its mega-convergence interface that will (eventually) run on your desktop, phone and TV.
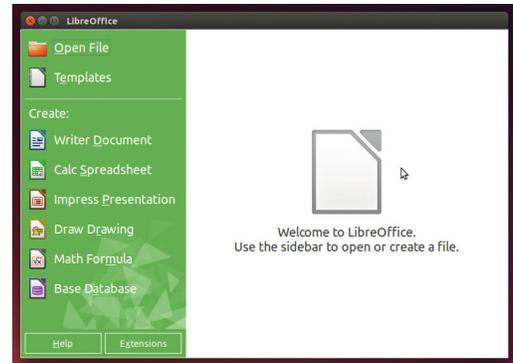
Ubuntu 14.04 is an LTS (Long Term Support) release, which means it will receive five years of updates and is designed for use in large enterprises where even the smallest changes can cause massive disruption. So don't expect world-shaking new features here: there's no Mir or Unity 7, and by and large the distro is a bunch of small (but useful) updates rather than anything revolutionary.

For starters, it's built on kernel 3.13 with support for TRIM. This boosts performance on machines with solid state drives, and given that these are becoming more common, it's a welcome improvement. If your machine has Nvidia Optimus graphics, you can now switch between the high-power Nvidia chip and Intel's battery friendly alternative – although you'll need to restart X for the changes to take effect.

GUI fiddlings

Interface-wise, much work has been done on Unity to make it more usable with HiDPI displays, such as those on the Retina MacBook Pro and Chromebook Pixel. Menus and launchers now scale better without looking teensy-tiny on super high-res displays. And
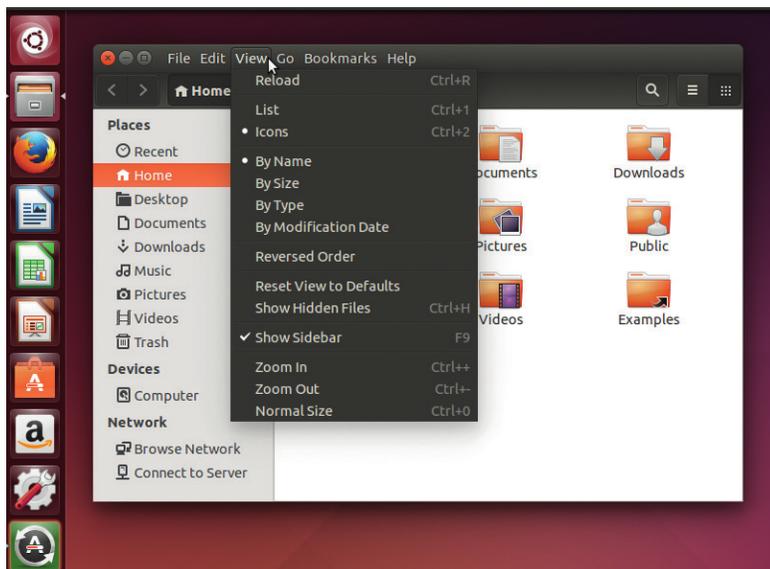

LibreOffice 4.2 sports a new start screen that's more attractive and useful than in previous releases.

speaking of menus: if you utterly hated the global menu bar, whereby all windows showed their menu entries in the top-left of the screen, Mac OS style, you can now disable this and revert to a traditional format via Appearance > Behaviour > Show The Menus.

It's still a bit unusual: menus are displayed in the program's titlebar, and you have to hover over the titlebar before you can see them. You can still click and drag anywhere on the titlebar (even when the menu is displayed) to move a window. When you resize a window in Ubuntu 14.04, its contents are updated automatically – there's no yellow box like in previous releases.

Unity has taken a lot of flack over the years, but Canonical has persisted with tweaks and fixes in every release, and it's now at the point where we're pretty happy using it. Software-wise, Ubuntu 14.04 ships with LibreOffice 4.2.3, Firefox 29 and Thunderbird 24. Rhythmbox remains the default music player, while Totem is used to play videos. If you're looking at this LTS release on a server, you'll find Apache 2.4.7, MySQL/MariaDB 5.5.37, PostgreSQL 9.3.4 and PHP 5.5.9. And for programmers there's GCC 4.8.2, Clang 3.4, Python 3.4 and Perl 5.18.2.

There's nothing that screams "install me" in Ubuntu 14.04, but it's worthy of an LTS release, and Canonical hasn't tried to rush ahead with anything that isn't ready. It's easy to ask for more in a new distro version, but when a company has to support it for five years, it makes sense to take a more conservative approach. **LV**

Global menu haters rejoice: it's now possible to have menus back in individual applications (albeit in their title bars).

LINUX VOICE VERDICT

Performance boosts, Unity tweaks and software updates make this a solid, if not hugely exciting, release.

★★★★☆