

Android x86 4.4

Can a mobile OS work well on the desktop, or is this just the first step on the path to madness? Mike Saunders pops in a USB key and finds out...

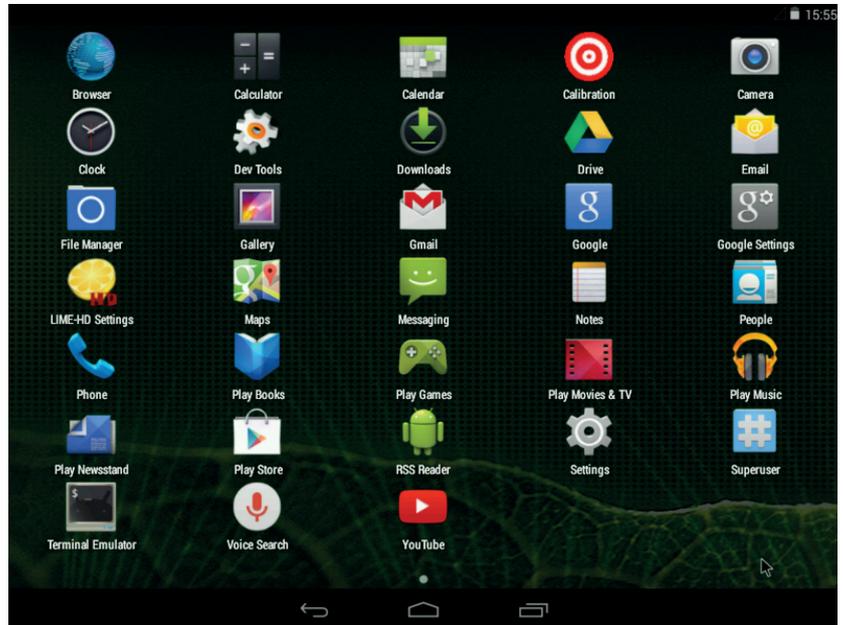
It's a funny old world. The Linux kernel was born because its creator wanted to run a Unix-like OS on his home PC. And while Linux hasn't yet conquered the desktop, it has made big inroads into the server market over the last decade or so. More recently, Linux has been gigantically popular in the mobile space thanks to Google's Android, and now we've come full circle: running Android on your desktop. Back in issue 2's FOSSpicks section we had a brief look at the 4.4 release candidate from a "curious dabbler" perspective, and now we want to see if it's really usable as a day-to-day OS.

Android x86 is available as an ISO image, but you can easily convert it to run from a USB key with *UNetbootin*. Both formats let you install it to your hard drive. We dug out our trusty old ASUS K52F laptop, which served as a reliable workhorse for many years, to see how well Android supports common PC hardware. The ASUS machine has never had any major problems running normal Linux distributions – but we didn't know what to expect from a significantly different platform.

Well, the results were good. Video performance was great, sound and the webcam worked out of the box, and the Fn keys for controlling audio levels and screen brightness also did their job without manual intervention. The touchpad responded well to multi-touch gestures, and in terms of power management, Android didn't use significantly more battery juice than the previous Xubuntu 13.04 installation.

Familiar territory

Although Android x86 isn't an official product from Google, and is developed and maintained as an unofficial port, it comes with the usual host of Google programs: Maps, YouTube, Drive, Gmail, Play Music/Games/Newsstand and so forth. Handily, a terminal



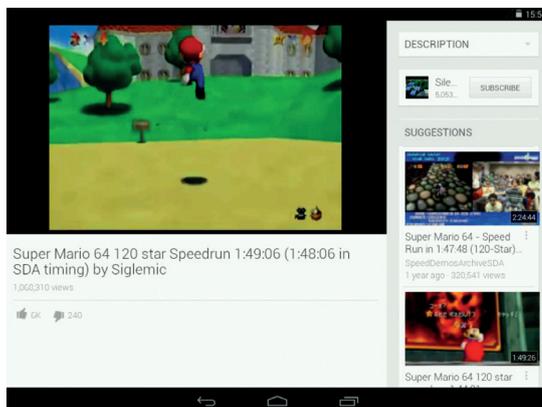
A host of apps is included, including the usual suspects from Google.

emulator is installed – but don't expect much in the way of a typical GNU/Linux userland. It's essentially *BusyBox* with a smattering of tools such as OpenSSH.

So, what's Android x86 like as a desktop OS? If you're familiar with it on a mobile phone or tablet, you'll pick it up in seconds: it's almost exactly the same. (Indeed, many of the dialogs refer to "your tablet" during configuration.) Clicking and swiping to bring up the System and Action bars feels a bit strange at first, as does switching applications, but fortunately Alt+Tab is still available for those of us who prefer a more traditional approach. The biggest potential obstacle is the inability to resize windows – or show anything side-by-side. It's not a huge deal on smaller screens, but it doesn't make much sense if you have a 27" monitor.

Ultimately, Android x86 is too limiting for regular desktop Linux users, but it's a great Windows alternative for non-technical types. If you've got friends or relatives desperately trying to get off XP, and all they do is some light browsing, email and watching YouTube videos, this is exactly what they need. It doesn't have the richness of a full Linux installation, but it has fewer moving parts to break, and almost anyone can pick it up quickly.

DATA
Web www.android-x86.org
Developer Google and community
Price Free under OSS licences



It's no replacement for Arch Linux, but Android x86 does a decent job for light browsing and communication tasks.

LINUX VOICE VERDICT
Surprisingly good, and a great "my first" Linux distro for non-savvy users who do everything on the web.
★★★★☆