Wacom Intuos Pro

Graham Morrison continues his journey to becoming an old master by getting his hands on a tasty graphics tablet.

We've become smitten by drawing things on our Linux desktops, and we've had quite a few emails from readers to say they feel the same. We could probably form some kind of clandestine art club for geeks held in the candlelit cellar of The White Hart every other Thursday. But until now, we've only really been dabbling with applications like *Gimp* and *Krita* while clicking around with a regular mouse.

This isn't bad. It's how lots of great digital artists have created lots of great art. But mice feel neither especially creative nor particularly precise. Which is perhaps why nearly every designer we've ever met favours the graphics tablet. These things have been around for a long time, and come in two parts. The first is the stylus, which acts as your virtual pen. It feels and weighs the same as one, only it's made of plastic and doesn't leave a mark on paper.

The second part is the tablet itself, which acts as your writing surface.

> **"Nearly every designer we've met favours the graphics tablet over the mouse."**

For artist, this surface is important, because they want to duplicate the feel of the surfaces they'd typically draw upon, so they need to offer just the right amount of friction to give the artist enough control and feedback over their movement.

Esoteric hardware like this is exactly the kind that doesn't normally have good support for Linux, especially when Apple's OS X is the traditional domain for those artistic types. But the primary reason for this review is that we're happy to report that there are some excellent drivers for many of the devices from the market leader, Wacom. The drivers themselves are developed by the Linux users themselves, rather

The Intuos Pro can work both wired and wirelessly with the bundled battery, expansion and USB dongle.

Along with the stylus stand you get 10 nibs – five standard, one flex, one stroke nib, and three felt.

than Wacom, which is an important distinction. But these devices have been in development for over 10 years and the developers are able to keep up with any major development in tablets. They're considered some of the best tablets with the best compatibility you can get. Wacom was also more than happy to send us a device for review, knowing we were only going to consider the Linux compatibility, so it sounds like there's a good relationship between the two. But it's probably worth remembering that Linux support is always going to be limited to the community, rather than the official channels (who do at least link to the Linux drivers).

Rococoagogo

We've been sent the medium model in the range – there's one smaller and one larger, but they all perform identically. The tablet itself is relatively large, occupying about the same footprint as a 15-inch laptop (it's 380 x 251 x 12mm) and weighs just under a kilogram, making it relatively travel friendly. We don't think a larger one would be a benefit. Size is important, because you need the space to place the tablet almost directly in front of your screen, and it's far less likely to give you RSI than a mouse. There are buttons and a touch-sensitive dial on the left,and a USB connector on the right, although you can change the orientation to suit whatever works for you. You can also operate this model wirelessly by adding the bundled rechargeable battery and wireless extension with the tiny wireless dongle plugged into your PC. We had no problem getting this to work, but neither did the USB cable bother us too much.

If you've not used a tablet before, they take a little getting used to – the main difference being that movement is now absolute rather than relative. Place the stylus in the same place and the cursor will appear in the same place, although this can be changed. You can move the cursor around the screen by hovering

Tablet apps

We used the Intuos with as many Linux desktop applications as we could find, and they generally all worked well. Our favourite was *Krita*, purely because it was the only application to really make the most of all the tablet's features, and its brush and pencil models can trick the mind into think you're really drawing. *Gimp* is also great to use with the tablet and doesn't tax your CPU in the same way. You do need to customise how it interprets the tablet though, which can be done from the Edit > Input Devices menu option by enabling 'Screen' control for the pen, pad, eraser and stylus input. *Inkscape* is the same and also has some great drawing modes, plus the advantage that you're creating vectors rather than bitmap images. We also had very little problem using the tablet as our default input for a desktop, although we couldn't find a way to enable the touchpad feature which works on other operating systems.

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the stylus a few millimetres above the touch surface, just as you when sketching with a pencil. The package includes a variety of other nibs, removed using a chrome tweezer, which attempt to emulate the characteristics of a flexible brush, or a softer pencil, although they have no effect on the data. Prodding the surface with the stylus is the equivalent to a left click of the mouse and two further buttons on the stylus have a default configuration of right and middle mouse clicks.

Prometheus unbound

Our next step was to try the tablet with some drawing software, and given our recent experience, the first we wanted to try was *Krita*. However, we were surprised to discover it crashes immediately, spitting out an error; "Rel Vert Wheel 11 -> 6" to the standard output. What our system was missing was the all essential **xf86-input-wacom** for the windowing system, which is a standard package installation for every distribution we looked at. With that installed, *Krita* launched without any issue and we were immediately able to start drawing.

The texture of both the nib on the stylus and the tablet itself contrive to create a feeling akin to a pencil on paper. The more you increase the pressure, the darker the impression on the virtual canvas (although this is entirely governed by your software), and the defaults have you pressing quite hard to get the darkest lines.

Krita has a tablet configuration setting that enables you to adjust the curve of the pressure you apply, so you could make more of a mark by pressing lightly, for example, or less of a mark by pressing harder. The resolution of the tablet means you can create incredibly fine lines, smaller even than a cross-hatched Escher drawn in Indian ink. The tilt function also worked perfectly within *Krita* by changing the shape of the brushes that support the feature. Using the 2B pencil brush gave results almost identical to sketching with a pencil, and we wasted a long time playing with this. By default, *Krita* has also configured

the quick brush and colour palette to appear when you press the first button on the stylus, and the Canvas Move mode for the second button. The eraser wasn't set to erase by default, but this can easily be changed, and some people prefer to use a keyboard shortcut anyway.

We wanted to experiment more with the options provided by the drivers to the operating system, and to access those we installed a package called **kcm-wacomtablet**. This is a setting panel for KDE and there's an equivalent for Gnome, but you can equally perform all the same options using the **xsetwacom** command installed with the driver. The KDE settings panel lets you adjust all the various options and apply them to profiles, which can be easily switched. This lets you create a configuration for *Krita*, for example, and switch easily to a different profile for working with *Gimp*. You can adjust the pressure threshold curves, re-assign any of the buttons surrounding the surface and change the functions of both the buttons on the side of the stylus and the nib and eraser, which is useful as you may want to use the eraser as a different kind of brush, for example. All of this worked without any problems, and you can easily see how a tablet like this could maximise your productivity when you've got everything configured to your liking. In fact, we loved the whole experience so much that even without really having that much interest in art, we'd seriously consider buying a Wacom tablet for the joy of just doodling with it. Ⓛ

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LINUX VOICE VERDICT

It's expensive but it's professional. And for once, the Linux drivers are a joy to use. Highly recommended if you have any artistic leanings.

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