

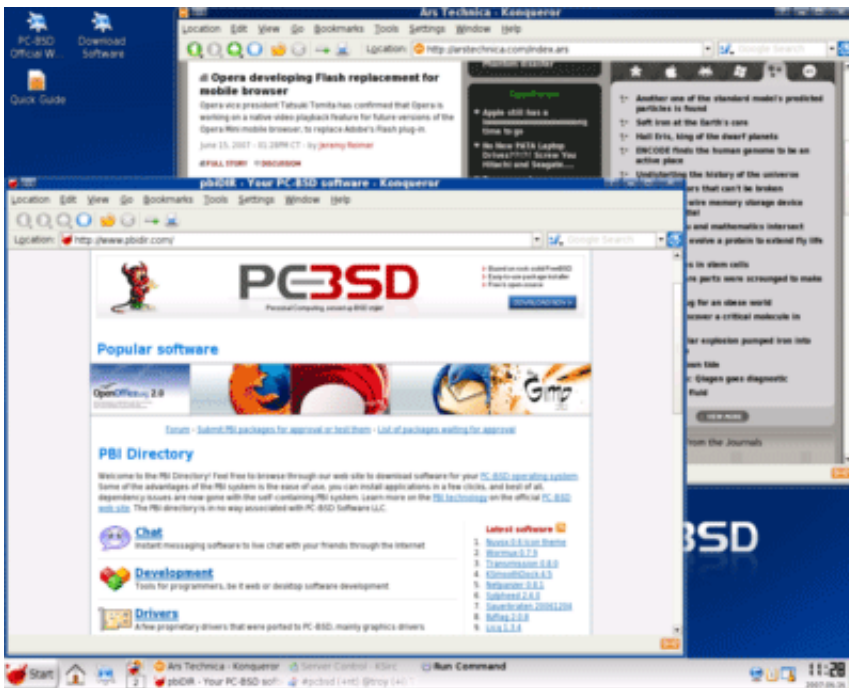
24-hour test drive: PC-BSD

By [Troy Unrau](#) | Published 4 years ago

Looking for converts

As I mentioned earlier, PC-BSD was obviously designed for Windows converts. Some of the changes the developers have made include defaulting to double clicks and changing the run command shortcut to WINKEY+R. Some of the artwork, such as the Start button, has been tailored to Windows converts. Aside from the start button, most modifications were done simply by choosing a different set of KDE defaults or simply changing the theme, iconset, etc. There are a number of positives from this, mostly related to end-user support. PC-BSD has a support company that offers commercial and residential support via phone and e-mail, but since they really have not made any changes to the fundamental operation of most of the software, their users can just as easily get support from the regular KDE or FreeBSD user communities.

Upon initial installation, there are three icons (plus the trash bin) on the Desktop, one of which is a quick user guide to the system. I found it quite useful, even as a seasoned *nix user. Among other things, the guide explains how to install additional software, update the system, where to get support, and so forth. The other two icons send you to the PC-BSD official web site and the downloadable software collection. The screenshot below shows the default appearance of the PC-BSD desktop along with a shot of the software download web site. Konqueror is the only web browser installed by default, and there is no office suite included—but the software repository easily and quickly provides a way to get your software fix.



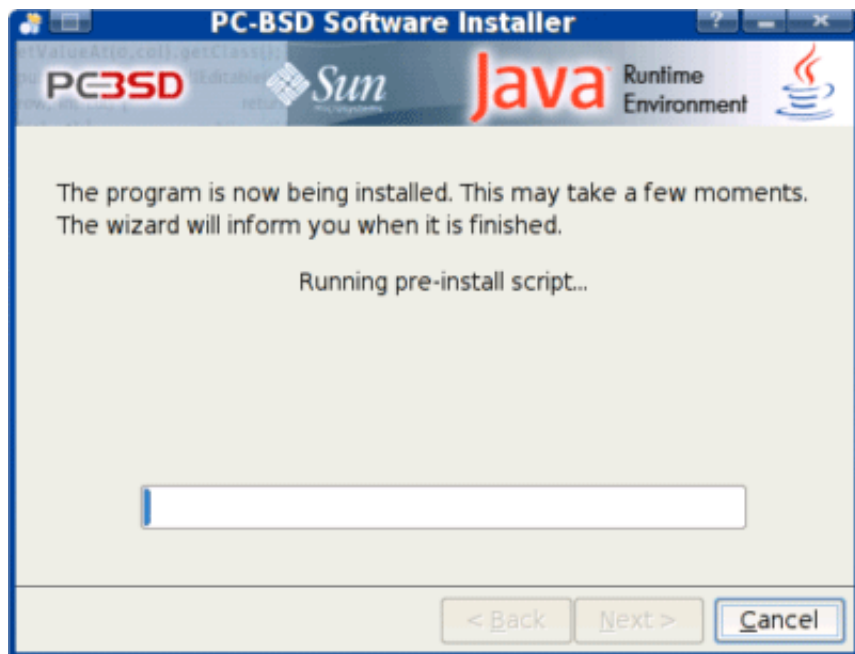
PC-BSD 1.3 default configuration, and PBI software repo website

I tried installing a number of packages from the PBI files, which I learned were analogous to Mac's .dmg files, or KDE's klik bundles—a single downloaded file that contains all the necessary files and libraries to run the software. They were installed into /Programs, and symlinks were created throughout the rest of the system in case the software relied on some hardcoded paths.

Software installation reminds me of using InstallShield on Windows, with each program containing custom artwork in

the installation. Since this was essentially a FreeBSD system, any software that works on FreeBSD will also work on PC-BSD. I then tried PC-BSD's packages for the commercial NVIDIA driver. It installed cleanly, suggested I reboot the system to take effect (needed to load new kernel modules, but hid the details), but told me that if there were any problems after reboot that I should choose the emergency shell and type a single, simple command to revert the changes. I really appreciated that advice as I didn't want to have to use sed to edit files again. The installation worked perfectly.

I tried a number of other programs ranging from Flash to Amarok to Wine, all of which installed and worked perfectly. The screenshot below shows how easy the Java installation went after downloading the appropriate .PBI file. Removal is just as easy through a built-in interface that shows all of the PBI installed programs..



PC-BSD 1.3 default configuration, java installation screen

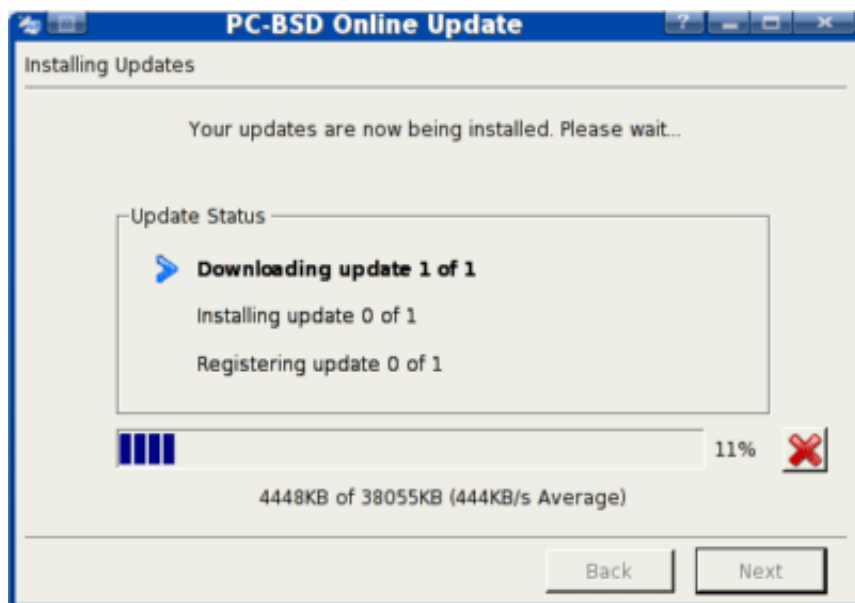
System administration for many of the more common tasks are integrated into KDE's Control Center application, and are clearly labeled under the system administration section. These programs perform functions such as allowing you to download the source code for the entire installation with a single click or to download and configure the FreeBSD ports system just as easily. I did not actually test these functions as they take quite some time to fully download, and I cannot imagine they would be useful to dialup users.

Now that I have mentioned FreeBSD's ports, I can tell you that yes, the system does come with the full set of command line development tools ranging from compilers to headers. Just about everything you need to make a useful FreeBSD development system is there. The ports system is quite powerful and has inspired entire Linux distributions (see Gentoo), but it is often faster just to grab a compiled package. If the package you are looking for is not in the PC-BSD PBI repository, then you have the option of using regular FreeBSD packages or ports to fill the holes.

This is especially useful for command line tools that long-time linux users have come to expect which may not be installed by default. Since I was attempting to build parts of KDE 4 in my experimentation, I needed cmake. Issuing the command 'pkg_add -r cmake' automatically fetched and installed the cmake package for FreeBSD. I tried compiling a few things just to see how it went and, except for occasionally having to specify "gmake" instead of "make" when following manual build instructions, I would recommend this installation as a unix development system.

Lastly, while I did not try to do any major upgrades to the installed system, I did try out their system updates tool. It was simple and easy to use and I went from PC-BSD version 1.3.1 to 1.3.3 with no problems. There is a

straightforward update tool included, but the guidebook I mentioned earlier also contained manual updating instructions should you feel the need to attack it from the command line instead.



PC-BSD 1.3 default configuration, system update screen

While this may not be the case for everyone, all of my hardware was detected, except that the automatically selected "nv" driver didn't work for me. This may be a result of using the older X.org release 6.9 rather than the newer versions, but I'm told this will be fixed in the next release. Once I installed the commercial NVIDIA driver, I noticed that Composite was available. The PC-BSD developers tell me that the next release will have a checkbox option in the installer to use Beryl, an option that is sure to be appreciated, even if it will be short-lived due to the pending release of KDE 4.0. Since I was testing on a desktop, I had no opportunity to try and get wireless working, which I'm told can be quite an adventure.

In the end, I would suggest this distribution to new users provided they had someone to call in case of a driver malfunction during installation. I would also recommend PC-BSD to seasoned Unix users that have never tried using FreeBSD before and would prefer a shallower learning curve before getting down to business.