24-hour test drive: PC-BSD

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A different flavor of BSD

PC-BSD is not a Linux distribution, but rather it could be considered among the first major FreeBSD-based distributions to live outside of the official FreeBSD. Like most distributions, it has implemented certain features in a way that attempts to distinguish it from the competition, and I will focus mostly on these differences. This test drive is intended to give an overview of what PC-BSD is and why one would consider using it.

First and foremost, PC-BSD is an attempt to make a user-friendly Unix. Many Linux distributions have a similar focus and attempt to achieve it in different ways, and PC-BSD should be considered alongside these distributions. Additionally, PC-BSD's developers went to great efforts to make users who are transitioning from Windows more comfortable—more on that later.

The version I tested was PC-BSD 1.3, which is based on FreeBSD 6.1, X.org 6.9, and KDE 3.5.5—none of which are the latest release. The use of older releases fits nicely with PC-BSD's focus on releasing an OS that is stable, secure and friendly. There is a testbed release available for those willing to live on the edge (and bleed a little) that includes more recent software... and the problems associated with it. PC-BSD appears to be available only in the 32-bit x86 flavor.

Hardware test bed:

- AMD Athlon 64 3200+
- MSI RS-480-M2 motherboard
- 1GB RAM
- 250GB SATA hard drive
- PCIe NVIDIA GeForce 7600

The installation process

The install program is fast and simple, with limited options for installation. Upon first boot, you are dropped into a ncurses menu that lets you launch the graphical installer, drop into an emergency shell, and so forth. The installer can optionally be run in VESA mode if your video card is not properly detected and initialized (such as the case with my PCIe NIVIDIA GeForce 7600). The fallback mode can be selected from the installation menu.

Once in the graphical installer, you are given a very easy-to-use installation procedure that happens to be a single program running inside Fluxbox. This is only noticeable to the trained eye, as the only clue that you even have a window manager is a one-pixel line running along the bottom of the screen that turns into a taskbar when your mouse gets too close. The installer allows you to choose a "Desktop/Laptop" installation versus a "Server" installation, and it includes things such as automatically setting up the OpenBSD PF (Packet Filter) firewall, which it refers to as the Personal Firewall. Same letters in the acronym... very clever.

There is no package selection, and as a result, installation is very fast, as it's simply a matter of watching the installer extract some tarballs. No configuration is really performed at the time of installation, except for those questions the installer asks. The total time to install was around 20 minutes.

Installation went smoothly until the reboot for me, due once again to my X driver problem. If I was not a *nix professional, I would have panicked at this point. Since I am, I was able to boot into safe mode, log in as root, remount the filesystem as read-write, and try to edit my xorg.conf file. In safe mode, I found that something was wrong with the line terminations when using vi, so I had to use less to view the files and then construct a sed substitution to change the video driver from "nv" to "vesa." Upon reboot, everything worked swimmingly. I should note that the bootloader PC-BSD installs is the FreeBSD default bootloader, which detected my existing SATA drive and always allowed me to boot into my preexisting operating systems if I ran into trouble.

I had selected the option during install to automatically log me into my main user account on boot, and it did just as I requested. I must note that KDE seemed to load much faster on PC-BSD than I'm used to; probably around three times faster than my Kubuntu installation on my other drive (which either says something bad about kubuntu or something great about PC-BSD). In fact, the whole system felt very snappy.