

Mint – Effortless Linux

Seth Kenlon

Linux Mint has from its inception been recognized as the first Linux distribution for users who want their operating environment to “just work”. The art and design of its desktop rivals the most meticulously-designed of the more ubiquitous (and non-free) operating systems, and it manages to combine the user-friendliness of OS X with the familiarity of Windows.

Mint’s latest release is the tenth version of their software and it looks and feels polished and comfortable even to a new user. Booting into Mint is as easy as using the disc included with this magazine; simply place the disc in your optical drive and tell the BIOS of your computer to favour the optical drive before the hard drive as the boot device (if you’re unsure how to do this, consult your computer’s owner’s manual, or read the boot screen as it will often tell you what key to press to see a boot menu or the BIOS settings; usually it’s [F2] or [Delete]). Booting from a CD or DVD runs your computer from that disc, so your hard drive is not affected at all – so it’s completely safe to try Mint before you decide to actually install it.

If you do choose to install it, you will find the installer simple to understand and quite friendly. It will take you step by step through the procedure of replacing your old system with a Linux Mint system. Of course, if you choose to do this, you will want to backup all of your personal data first.

Once you have installed Mint, you’ll be ready to start using it. It usually helps to think of a new computer system modularly. Don’t try to understand the big picture all at once, but concentrate on the common tasks you performed on your old system and learn how to get them done as efficiently (or, as is often the case with Linux, more efficiently) on Mint.

The first screen you see when you reboot into your new Mint system will ask if you wish to install the Multimedia Codecs that you will need to play back all the common media files you might have. If you have .mp3 files and .wma files and so on, you will want to install all of the codecs. If you fail to do this at startup, you can always do it later, but doing it after the first boot does make it easier.

Using Linux Mint

Mint utilizes familiar interface notions to make your transition to Linux easier. Notice the icons on the desktop; one taking you to the computer itself, where the system exists, and the other taking you to your home directory, where all of your personal data will be stored. If you’re moving data from an old system into Mint, plug in your backup drive. Mint helpfully opens a new window for that drive, and you’ll be able to drag and drop your old data from the hard drive into your new home.

Linux systems tend to pride themselves on logical organization of data, and you’ll notice that most of them, Mint included, have pre-made folders in the home direc-



Figure 1. Using Mint is easy with its friendly application menu

tory that are clearly labeled with the most common categories for personal computer data; the Desktop itself (which would therefore contain everything you see on the desktop), Documents (for office files and ebooks and so on), Downloads for everything you pull down from the internet with Firefox or your browser of choice, Music, Pictures, Videos. There's even a folder that you can use to share data with other computers in your house or dorm room (called Public), and a folder for Templates that you might want to use in your office suite. Take this opportunity to organize the data you're migrating from your old computer to the new one.

The internet

Seeing as the internet is largely built upon Linux and Unix technology, it's no surprise that Mint is a rich internet platform with applications that excel at social networking, web browsing, downloading, file sharing, and everything else you can think to do online. These applications are so good at what they do, so you'll probably be familiar with many of them already.

Firefox is the web browser that sets the bar for all others. It is included with Mint, and is accessible from the single Menu button in the lower left corner of the desktop screen. Clicking the menu brings up the minimalistic yet full-featured launch menu of Mint. Since Firefox is expected to be an application you'll use frequently, you'll see it listed in the current "Favorites" screen of the menu. Click on its icon to launch it.

Similarly, Thunderbird and Pidgin, the popular Email and Instant Messaging applications are listed as favorites.

To see more applications that have not been marked as favorites, click the *All Applications* button at the top right of the menu. This breaks the menu into two columns; one for categories of applications and one for the specific applications themselves. For quick access, this portion of the menu does not require clicking; simply move your mouse cursor over a category icon and it will change which applications are listed.

Hovering over the *Internet* category reveals a number of stellar applications, some without rival. Giver is a quick and easy way to share files with people on a network. If two computers have Giver running on them, then those two computers can swap files back and forth with a simple drag and drop. Why email a document or photo or music file to someone you're connected to on the same network? Give it to them instead!

Gwibber is a Twitter client that lets you update your twitter status and which users you follow. This sounds simple, but the beauty of it is that it also interfaces with Digg, StatusNet, Ping.fm, Qaiku, Facebook, FriendFeed, Google Buzz, Flickr, and of course Identi.ca. It's a social networking extravaganza that saves you from having to have multiple tabs in a web browser open to each social site you frequent.

Xchat might introduce you to a whole new world of social networking that pre-dates all of the popular social sites: IRC. Internet Relay Chat is a network of chat rooms where computer enthusiasts talk and share ideas, ask questions, or just hang out. It can be a little overwhelming at first, but if you visit a friendly sociable chatroom like #linuxmint-chat (the default chatroom when you first launch Xchat from Mint) then you'll find people pleasant and patient as you get the hang of it. #linuxmint-help is a great place to get support should have a question about how to get something done.

Transmission is the wildly popular Bittorrent client that makes sharing large files a breeze. With it, you can download torrent files and use peer-to-peer technology to download files from multiple sources. You haven't downloaded a Linux distribution until you've downloaded it via Bittorrent! In addition to being an efficient way to share software, it's also a revolution for independent artists, who previously had no efficient way to share their band's albums or their group's videos but now have the power of the entire internet at their disposal.

Multimedia

Linux also does multimedia, and Mint excels at it due to its staunch refusal to bow to legal gray-areas, dictating in the vaguest terms, which media codecs software providers are allowed to use and which they must pay royalties for, and so on. Mint chooses to provide the user with the software decoders required to play media, because it assumes that if the owner of the computer (you) has purchased media then it's your right to play it. It doesn't seem to be a revolutionary idea, but you'll find that with Mint, all the decoders you need are already included. That's something you won't even get with Windows or Mac.

There are many different media players in Linux; some cater to people accustomed to old players like WinAmp or Sound Jam, while others appeal to people used to

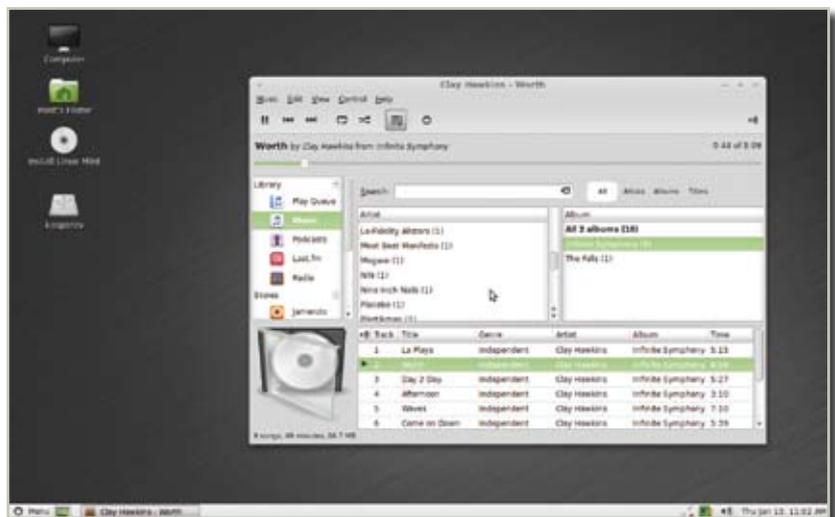


Figure 2. Rhythmbox is a robust and easy-to-use music player

iTunes, and still others are robust and powerful for people who want to play media from the command line. Included with Mint by default is Rhythmbox, a music player that uses a database to keep track of all the ID3 tags in your music, and uses the “Music Library” model that has been made popular by iTunes. For people who organize their own media, there is the more basic (but even more powerful) Mplayer.

There’s an application to record your voice via your computer’s built-in microphone, called simply Sound Recorder, and an application to burn CDs and DVDs, called Brasero. You’ll find an emphasis has been placed on ease-of-use in all of these applications. There is almost no learning curve here; if you have used multimedia players before, or disc burning applications, then you’ll be able to adopt these applications quickly and easily.

Office Tasks

Computers aren’t all fun and games, of course; sometimes you actually have to get some work done on them. For this, you’ll be looking for a good office suite. Mint includes the world-famous OpenOffice.org suite, used by businesses, production studios, schools, and home users alike for typical business and correspondence tasks.

OpenOffice.org can be found in the menu under the *Office* category and has three different components to it. There is the Word Processor,

which you can use for writing letters, articles, newsletters, or just jotting down to-do lists and notes to yourself. The spreadsheet component is good for budgets, creating charts, or processing formulas. And the presentation component is ideal for creating slideshows and, well, presentations.

If you require even more in an office suite, check the Package Manager on the left panel of the menu. There are always add-ons to OpenOffice.org that you can install to better customize your computer for yourself.

Customization

There are endless ways to customize your Linux environment. Entire books could be written on the subject. The easiest place to start, in Mint, is with the Control Center. This is listed on the left panel of the main menu, under the “System” heading.

The Control Center is your gateway toward changing default Mint into *your* Mint. With so much to change, it’s hard to believe that this is only a fraction of what’s possible on Linux. All of the standard options are here, though; you can change your personal profile, the wallpaper on your desktop, the color scheme, the look of all the buttons, sliders, and scrollbars, which applications should handle different types of files, the screensaver, configure printers, sound, power management on laptops, desktop effects, and so much more.

The other way to customize your system is by adding new software to it. Mint comes with a great collection of software but there are thousands of software packages and components you could feasibly add. Amazingly, all of this also comes for free.

Unlike using Windows or Mac, there’s no need to search the internet for compatible software that may or may not be from a trusted vendor. On Linux, you have an application “store” (in which everything is free, however), that you can go to for your software: the Package Manager, located in the main menu in the left “System” panel.

The Package Manager itself is fairly simple to understand. On the left are categories of software, such as “Multimedia” or “Graphics” or “Word Processing”. On the right are the applications that fall into each category. Place a check mark in the box next to the applications you wish to install, and then click the *Apply* button in the top toolbar.

Sometimes an application will require other smaller applications or libraries to be installed in order to run (for instance, 3dchess requires something called “xaw3dg”), but the Package Manager will take care of this for you. All you have to do is confirm when it tells you what will be installed, and hit *Apply*. If you decide you don’t like an application, you can go back into the Package Manager and select which application you want to remove, and the Package Manager will uninstall the application and its dependencies.

More Information

The Mint community is a friendly and welcoming group, so integrating yourself into www.linuxmint.com forums and chatrooms would be a great way to not only meet new people but also to get help on the areas of Linux you are still learning about. The community surrounding Mint is so enthusiastic about their operating system, in fact, that there is even a podcast devoted to it, at www.mintcast.org – and, as with so much else in the Linux world, it’s free of charge. ■



Figure 3. The control panel allows you to customize Mint nearly any way you want