DSL 2.1r1 on old Laptop

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[4]The developers of Damn Small Linux have announced [5] the availability [6] of the first release candidate of version 2.1. My gentoo install is quite dated on my aging laptop, and due to speed and other certain hardware considerations (like a whiny harddrive after a couple hours of compiling), it isn't likely to be updated again. I decided to see if dsl could run on this ancient Dell laptop [7].

Damn Small Linux [8] is a damn small linux distribution, literally. For those who don't know, it's a 50mb livecd that is also installable onto your harddrive or an usb key. It's a fully functional system consisting of an graphical interface featuring the fluxbox window manager and many useful applications and utilities/tools.

The Change log [9] for 2.1r1 includes:
1. Improved SATA boot time support (see f3)
2. USB 2.0 boot time support fixed typo
3. Torsmo replaces asmem, wmcpuload, & wmnet to better support both window managers.
4. Ted replaces Flwriter
5. Updated xtdesk improved dragging when double click enabled.
6. New Icontool GUI controls many icon features.
7. Added missing tools section to jwm menu.

Well, the first test, to see if it would boot with only 80mb ram.

I needed to download and dd the bootfloppy img due to the fact that this laptop is so old, it doesn't support booting from the cdrom. How long before it's a fish sinker? Well, that may be inevitable, but it's not a fact today. My old

laptop did in fact boot dsl on a p1 with only 80mb ram. However, (you knew there was a however, right?), the video/display wasn't very readable when just hitting enter at the boot prompt. I decided to reboot and try some of those fb modes the F2 options screen suggests is for laptops. Crossing my fingers I tried fb1024x768. When that didn't work, I tried fb800x600. That was the ticket. I was in. I was thrilled. I was comforted by the telltale "beep, beep" of the pcmcia network being activated (although it turned out to be short-lived). Then I was asked about which x server module to use, xvesa or xfbdev. I chose xfbdev and was asked about my lang and mouse. At the answering of those questions, X started and looked beautiful and my scroll ball mouse device worked too. Damn Small Linux scores again!

 [10] [11] [12]

Fly in the ointment:

My old and commonly recognized pcmcia wireless network card (linksys wpc11 rev3 that uses orinoco) was incorrectly detected as some Bromax unsupported/unknown card. One can modprobe orinoco and it'd get loaded without error. Still no wlan or eth0 device was available. Also not correctly setup was my netgear FA411 wired pcmcia netcard (that uses 8390). However, we did have some luck with a 3Com/Megahertz 3CCFEM556B. So, whoops. One strike against. Have to, a laptop just isn't any fun if the wireless doesn't work. It's not just me, please see   this post [13] for confirmation.

Sound is another small issue. Actually it isn't. It wasn't correctly detected or setup, but in all fairness, it never is. It works fine in Linux, but I have to pass some specific options to the kernel for it to work. It's an old dell latitude XPIcd and I always have to use /sbin/modprobe sb io=0x230 irq=5 dma16=5. I can't tell you how long I spent finding that solution my first Linux install on this thing! 😀 So, we'll give dsl the brownie point there.

But how would it perform on such a low resource system?

Well, overall, most excellent. Most light applications, like emelfm, Ted or xpaint opened within a few seconds. Dillo took about 9. Sylpheed required 3 or 4. However, mozilla took about 70 seconds to open and another 4 or 5 to render the dslos.com [14] start page. It took about 6 second to render other sites at that point and there was a marked delay or unevenness (is that a word?) with scrolling. Of course, this isn't really a reflection on damn small, just an interesting note. Another thing, xmms was running at the time, which was requiring some cpu cycles to stream that default classical station it was playing. In addition, we're still running from the livecd at this point as well. I'd have to install Opera if I was going to install this onto my hard drive for sure, but given the fact that the pcmcia stuff is somewhat broken, I think I'll forgo the install and wait for the next rc.

 [15] [16] [17]

Conclusion:

I found dsl to work rather well on this old laptop. Applications functioned well and looked quite nice, save mozilla. The video was great looking, the mouse device, cdrom and floppy worked fine of course, and the sound works with a bit of nudging. Some pcmcia cards work and some that should don't. The torsmo looked and worked great. I never did find that gui icontool in the menu (oh, ok, founnd it... hey, that's neato). In addition, I think there should be some kind of battery monitor. Once they sort out the pcmcia stuff, I'm sure it would perform much better from the harddrive.

 [18] [19] [20]

Linux Reviews -s

Source URL: http://www.tuxmachines.org/node/3882

Links:

[1] http://www.tuxmachines.org/taxonomy/term/63
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[3] http://www.tuxmachines.org/taxonomy/term/102
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