

LINUX DISTRIBUTION  
**CentOS**

Can the self-titled community enterprise operating system compete with Red Hat's commercial offering? **Graham Morrison** boards the enterprise...

**BUYER INFO**

An open and compatible rebuild of Red Hat's Enterprise Linux version 3. Also consider White Box EL or Lineox.

- **SUPPLIER:** cAos Foundation
- **PRICE:** Free
- **WEB:** www.centos.org

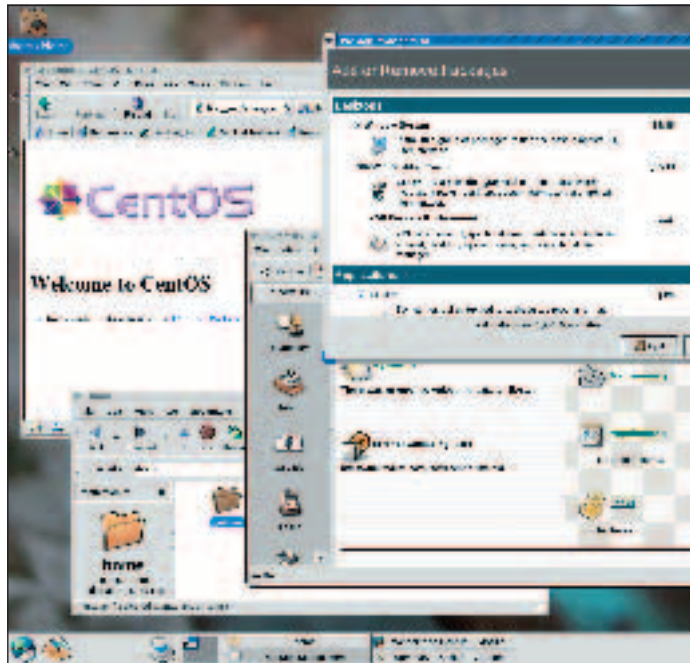


When Red Hat changed its business model by spinning off Fedora and concentrating on Enterprise Linux, it looked as though many cash-strapped organisations that needed cheap server systems were in trouble. This vacuum has so far spawned several projects, with interesting names like Tao Linux, Fermi Linux, Lineox and White Box, that aim to create their own distributions built on the Red Hat Enterprise Linux (RHEL) source that's freely available from Red Hat. While they all offer the same basic functionality, CentOS is one of the more established distributions, with releases covering both RHEL2 and RHEL3, and providing as much cross-compatibility as possible.

This latest release of CentOS is a strict rebuild of RHEL3, observing Red Hat's own guidelines on its intellectual property rights (which mainly deal with logos and trademark policy). It's actually built from the SRPMs that Red Hat provides as the source for its enterprise system, and as such operates and looks almost identical to its commercial counterpart.

Being an enterprise version means that the distribution uses older, theoretically more secure and stable versions of installed software. By default, for example, CentOS is built around such stalwarts as the 2.4.21 kernel, *Mozilla 1.4.3* and *Gnome 2.2.2*, and while this may not appeal to the average desktop user, it's this methodology that's at the heart of every enterprise system.

CentOS 3.3 is available as a three-ISO download, with a further three discs if you need the source code. There's also a choice between 64-bit and 32-bit versions. This 3.3 release is equivalent to the third RHEL3 update, while the previous 3.1 release was



**CentOS has the same look and feel as Red Hat, just a different logo.**

analogous to RHEL3 update 2. While CentOS is based on the ES version of Red Hat's distribution, the CentOS team has removed the CPU limits and restrictions Red Hat uses as an incentive to upgrade to its top of the range AS version. This means you can run CentOS with as many CPUs as you like. RHEL documentation is no longer available on the third ISO but is still available through the CentOS website and, being derived from Red Hat, is comprehensive and well written.

**Installation and use**

Installation is clear and simple using a rebranded version of Red Hat's *Anaconda* installer, and it works in exactly the same way, requiring very little user interaction. Within no time at all, the first reboot produces a helpful welcome wizard that guides you through some basic system configuration, such as adding users and setting the system time, after which you're presented with the default Gnome desktop.

Perhaps the single most important benefit to using a system based around RHEL is the projected five-year

support lifetime. Considering the rapidly changing world of Linux, where it's difficult to even remember what kernel version we were using five years ago, this kind of longevity is unprecedented. Of course, with this being a free project, relying on the goodwill of a number of individuals to provide critical updates for an integral part of your system is foolish, but for a non-profit-based organisation that can't perhaps afford Red Hat's licensing fees, it's a great opportunity. What you still get are the stability and the security of the RHEL releases, without the associated cost.

The biggest disadvantage to a long lifecycle is most apparent when you're running a workstation. Software versions are always going to be a few major revisions behind, which won't matter for the majority of enterprise users but may make a difference to people used to bleeding-edge software. There's also a distinct lack of third-party contributions, which again restricts the breadth of software available pre-packaged for CentOS.

Considering so few people actually work on this distribution and without recompense (with the recent demand

on their servers for the latest release, they were actually out of pocket until donations caught up), updates are surprisingly timely. They're distributed through YUM repositories and are usually available within 48 hours of Red Hat's corresponding security errata. CentOS is also community driven, as opposed to some other enterprise distributions that rely on a single person, which means that developer support is always available, though the usual caveats apply. This is important when considering things such as platform migration, or using proprietary software in CentOS that's designed for RHEL.

As a free clone of Red Hat Enterprise Linux 3, CentOS shares the stability and security implicit in building the distribution from the same source. As a result, CentOS is almost identical and is only really missing the certification and the support of Red Hat's commercial enterprise. With an active community and fast updates, it's the perfect answer if you need an enterprise-class solution without the associated cost. The only real competition is from the increasing number of similar projects and how they approach updates and support.

Of course, the CentOS team plans to redistribute the upcoming RHEL4, but there are other groups, such as Lineox, that already have a clone of the RHEL4 beta available. This is perhaps where CentOS wins because the team is unwilling to sacrifice quality in the face of updates and competition, and that's exactly what you need in an enterprise solution. **LXF**

**LINUX FORMAT VERDICT**

<b>FEATURES</b>	<b>8/10</b>
<b>EASE OF USE</b>	<b>7/10</b>
<b>DOCUMENTATION</b>	<b>7/10</b>
<b>PERFORMANCE</b>	<b>9/10</b>

As an enterprise solution for very little outlay, there's not much to say against it, although there's no guaranteed support for critical systems.

**RATING** **8/10**

