Game on

Find out how Linux could be the ideal solution for your old Dos games

Not many people switching to Linux will do so in order to play games. It comes as no surprise that just about all commercially released games for PCs run on Windows alone. For that reason, many Linux fans keep a dual-boot setup on their PC: Windows for games, Linux for everything else. Still, there are options for game playing on Linux and we shall take a look at some of these this month.

If you want to run a game from Windows you have only two options; reboot the computer into Windows, or run a copy of Windows from within Linux in a virtual machine, such as the freely available VMware Server.

The first option gives you the inconvenience of having to shut down your system, but otherwise is the most simple way of doing it. While virtualisation is great for running applications, it's next to useless with all modern games, since 3D acceleration is not yet provided in the virtual operating system.

One alternative method is to use Cedega, a commercial product from Transgaming Technologies. This is based on Wine (http://winehq.org), which lets programs for Windows run in Linux directly, requiring no [Microsoft](http://search.proquest.com.zdroje.vse.cz/docview/213499947?pq-origsite=summon) software at all. While Wine is a general-purpose framework, Cedega is instead dedicated to making games work, with a tailored configuration for individual popular games. Some will run without any real issues at all, some will have minor glitches or problems that require workarounds, and some may not work at all. The latest version of Cedega is compatible with many popular Windows games, including World of Warcraft and Elder Scrolls IV.

Cedega is far from perfect, but is a very good option for those who want to play those games that run flawlessly. In order to download the product you must first subscribe to the Cedega newsletter for a minimum of three months, at a cost of $5 (approximately £2.50) per month. While subscribing, you are entitled to download any new releases or updates.

Dosbox

There are hundreds of great classic games that ran under Dos (see screen 1). With newer Windows systems (including XP and Vista) no longer providing a real Dos environment, many of these games will no longer work at all in Windows directly, leaving them otherwise unplayable.

This is where Dosbox comes in. It's a Dos emulator that is capable of behaving just like a real [Intel](http://search.proquest.com.zdroje.vse.cz/docview/213499947?pq-origsite=summon) 386 PC; it emulates a soundcard, mouse, and various graphics modes (including VGA and SVGA, for later high-resolution games).

Although emulating a computer is generally very taxing on resources, processors have increased so dramatically in speed since the last Dos games were produced (around 10 years ago) that even a modest modern PC should run the most demanding Dos games at full speed. On [Intel](http://search.proquest.com.zdroje.vse.cz/docview/213499947?pq-origsite=summon) x86 processors, it can use a special 'dynamic' emulation mode, which will run the games using much less CPU time; quite possibly a fraction of the standard platform-independent alternative.

As a fully virtual environment, Dosbox doesn't affect your Linux system at all, and it means no reboots are needed; you could even run several games independently at once. Dosbox is completely open source and freely available, and runs on Linux, Windows and OSX. Some games companies have even re-released old Dos games with Dosbox included, as it is the only way to get them running on a Windows XP or Vista system.

The dosbox website (http://dosbox. sf.net) includes a database of all popular Dos games. Almost all run perfectly, with absolutely no issues at all. There are also pre-compiled binaries available from the website. You do not require a copy of MS-Dos; Dosbox has its own implementation of Dos built in. If you use Ubuntu you can get hold of a package with apt-get or Synaptic, though unless you are using Gutsy Gibbon, the package is likely to be an older version:

$ sudo apt-get install dosbox

The legal status of the distribution of old Dos games is questionable. Many websites offer downloads of 'abandonware', software that is no longer maintained or possible to buy, or from companies that no longer exist. If you have old Dos games lying around on CD or floppy, you can of course use these directly in Dosbox.

ScummVM

Perhaps one of the greatest 'point-and-click' games ever released was The Secret of Monkey Island, together with its sequel Monkey Island 2: Le Chuck's Revenge, released in the early 1990s by Lucas Arts. These games were available for Dos, the Apple Mac and the Commodore Amiga. Their influence was enormous and led to a series of similar well-made games, such as the popular Simon the Sorcerer and Day of the Tentacle.

The games were developed using a games engine called Scumm; they were written for the engine, and then the engine was ported to the different architectures in order to run them. ScummVM (www.scummvm.org) is an open-source project that implements the engine, letting you run the games directly in Linux without any hardware emulation (see screen 2). As such, barely any processor power is required to play the games, and they can run in a window or in full-screen mode.

The list of supported games is quite long, and now not only includes most of the games based on the Scumm engine, but also many games released by Sierra, such as the King's Quest series, and some others such as Gobliiins, Beneath a Steel Sky, Broken Sword and Simon the Sorcerer, which are based on other engines.

Revolution Software's Beneath a Steel Sky and Flight of the Amazon Queen from Interactive Binary Solutions have generously been made available as freely distributable downloads, so that they can be played with the ScummVM engine.

As with other supported games, ScummVM does not require (or would ever be able to use) the binary executables from games; it just needs the data files. Head over to ScummVM's website to download the files for these two games. Alternatively, in Ubuntu, search for them in the Add/Remove Applications utility to get everything downloaded and installed for you.

ScummVM comes with a tool to keep all your games' data files together, allowing you to load up the utility and from there pick which game you want to play directly. It also gives configuration options, such as advanced graphical scaling to help smooth out the low resolution graphics found on some older games.

Interactive fiction

If you had an 8-bit computer back in the 1980s, such as a ZX Spectrum or a Commodore 64, you will no doubt have come across text adventure games, and may remember classics such as The Hobbit. These reached a peak in the late 1980s, but began to decline commercially as 16-bit computers, such as the Commodore Amiga, provided much better graphics and sound for action games, and point-and-click graphical adventure games, such as those mentioned above, took over.

Although these text-based games (see screen 3) had their run commercially, the development of them continued ­ and still does today. With computers being obviously much more powerful than those of the 1980s, the size, complexity and quality of the games produced today has increased dramatically. Rather than simply 'text adventures', the term 'interactive fiction' is now used instead to cover the broad range of titles available.

The majority of interactive fiction requires a Z-Code interpreter, which is a piece of software to run platform-independent code, similar to the way in which ScummVM works. There are several options, but the quickest is perhaps Zoom or Frotz, both of which are available for Linux and OSX. All that needs doing is to download the data file; these are free of charge. There are many websites dedicated to Interactive Fiction, with reviews and recommendations of titles, together with links. A good starting place is the Wikipedia article on Interactive Fiction (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Interactive\_

fiction), which has links to several highly rated titles, and Baf's Guide to Interactive Fiction (www.wurb.com/if), which has ratings and downloads for hundreds of titles.

Native games

Of course, not all games have to be played via emulators or virtual machines. There are many addictive games that run natively in Linux, from card and puzzle games to arcade and simulation and FPS 3D. Gnome and KDE come with a few simple games, and many others can be downloaded. In Ubuntu, browse through the games section in the Add/Remove Applications utility. Some popular free titles include Freeciv, OpenTTD, Frozen Bubble, Glest (see screen 4), Enemy Territory, Alien Arena 2007, America's Army, Battle for Wesnoth, and Pingus. PCW

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