



Tips & Tricks

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Warm Up To Penguins

The Penguin Goes Massively Multiplayer



Computer gaming took a huge leap forward when it went from solo to multiplayer play. It's so much more satisfying to blast a hole in your opponent's chest when you know it's a live human on the other end of the controls rather than a computer AI. But if deathmatches and peer-to-peer play were the first evolution of computer gaming, MMORPGs were a quantum leap. Suddenly, rather than playing against one or two other humans, you could match your skills against thousands.

MMORPGs actually have their origins many years before you might expect. During the earlier years of computer networking, when pay services such as CompuServe and GENie ruled the modems, there were a number of games available where hundreds or thousands of players could compete at the same time. But these early games had primitive graphics and laggy response, largely a result of the snail-slow dialup

connections available at the time.

All MMORPGs have certain common characteristics. To begin with, they are multiplayer, but on a huge scale. Most MMORPGs have millions of active users; tens to hundreds of thousands of those are online simultaneously. Most involve slowly building a character that you've created by developing skills and acquiring weapons or tools that make the character more capable, and battling computer-generated foes. You can also form alliances with other players, or, when you're powerful enough, battle them, as well.

While traditional game developers may have been slow to adopt Linux as a platform, the MMORPG developers have been more accommodating. Although the 800-pound gorilla of multiplayer gaming, World of Warcraft, is not available as a native Linux application, there are several major games that are. We tried out a few and used four test systems that included two laptops of varying vintage, a VMware image, and a Pentium 4-based desktop with an Nvidia GeForce 6200. All of the games ran on this last system, which relied on Ubuntu 8.04 as its OS.

EVE Online (www.eve-online.com) is probably the most eye-catching of the Linux-capable MMORPGs. Based in a universe of stranded space colonists, you form alliances, fight pirates, mine resources from asteroids, and develop your skills. The graphical feel of the game is impressive, and the performance was smooth. The user interface seemed a little awkward at times as we played our way through the tutorial, but it was nothing that rendered the game unplayable by any means. You play EVE from a third-person perspective looking at your spaceship; you can either motor along on your engines, warp to different locations, or use gates to jump halfway across the galaxy to one of the thousands of systems that make up the EVE universe.



EVE has approximately 250,000 active subscribers, who pay \$14.95 a month to access the game. You can download the client from the Web site and register for a 14-day free trial to kick the tires. But at least on Linux, you should make sure that it will even run on your hardware before you invest any money, because it's highly dependent on having the right graphics card. Of the four systems we tested it on, it only ran successfully on one, and only after we replaced our outdated VGA board with the GeForce 6200. That makes sense: CCP Games, EVE's developer, recommends at least a GeForce 6 Series card to run the game. Radeon owners are plum out of luck. If you're lucky enough to have the right hardware, however, the installation is very straightforward.

EVE Online is an

**example of a current
MMORPG that runs
natively on Linux.**

Eternal Lands (www.eternal-lands.com), currently in beta, is as close to a WoW clone as you're going to find with a Linux client. Like WoW, you create a character; choose the race, skills, and other attributes; then go off to fame and fortune, starting with the obligatory bunny-killing to build experience as a new player. Eternal Lands also meshes well with the Linux philosophy: The game is open-source and free to play, although accessing certain servers or character races requires a donation. The UI is very straightforward, and the graphics are clean, if a little simple. Installation was simple, as well. Like most of the MMORPGs we tested, it begins in a tutorial area that lets you get a grasp of the basics of gameplay before thrusting you into anything dangerous.

Eternal Lands is also played from a third-person perspective. You're always looking at the world from behind your character, although you can adjust the camera height above the ground from which you view the scene. Playing the game involves some quick mouse-clicking, and it was a bit hard to keep our victim in sight when in combat.

Another fantasy-based MMORPG worth checking out is Runescape (www.runescape.com). There are millions of Runescape players around the world, and joining them is free. Of the games we looked at, Runescape is unique in that it runs entirely through a browser interface using a Java applet that runs in the browser. We had no trouble getting it working under Firefox 3 once we downloaded and installed the Sun Java plug-in.

The graphics in Runescape will remind you a lot of what gaming was like on PCs in the early '90s. The characters and scenery are adequate but nothing spectacular. The gameplay is straightforward, using a click-to-move system combined with a sidebar you use to select actions. In addition to the normal monster-bashing, you can also advance by developing skills and selling crafted items to other players. During the tutorial, you'll learn such diverse skills as how to bake a loaf of bread and how to catch and cook shrimp. The game is supported by banner advertising above the game window in the browser; paid subscribers get a version without the ads.

If you want a massively multiplayer experience but could do without the "RPG," Second Life is ready to run on your Linux box. Gameplay in Second Life is usually third-person, but you have the option to view the world through the eyes of your avatar. It can be awkward to do this, however, and you'll lose the ability to do certain things such as build or interact with objects. The avatars, though clearly computer-generated, can be surprisingly lifelike. Players end up spending nontrivial money for flowing hair and "skin" with highly detailed textures.

But Second Life is also a thriving economy where you can freely convert game money to real money, letting you make a real living selling the virtual goods you create in the Second Life universe. Second Life is also unique in that it allows you to extend the in-game environment by programming new interactive objects such as vehicles and clothing.

The Second Life client itself is open source, as is the server. Getting it to run under Linux is very straightforward, assuming you have a GeForce 2, GeForce 4 MX, ATI Radeon 8500, or ATI Radeon 9250 with the most recent drivers. You can play Second Life for free or pay \$10 per month, which gets you an allowance of in-game currency. You can also earn currency by selling your goods or services, but if you're going to try your hand at creating virtual goods, some programming experience and a tool such as Photoshop or The GIMP is almost required. Be advised that Second Life does have adults-only content. There's also a separate teen-oriented grid.

Of course, if you must get your World of Warcraft fix, it's not hard to obtain on your Linux system. There are instructions available on how to install it using either the freely available Wine windows emulator, or you can use the commercial Cedega service from TransGaming (www.transgaming.com). Cedega has its own subscription fee (\$25 for six months or \$45 per year) in addition to your World of Warcraft subscription.

Linux-based gamers have never had more options for MMORPGs, and the quality of the graphics and gameplay is enough to bring you back for seconds. Perhaps Blizzard will get the message and provide a Linux client sometime in the near future, but until then, there's plenty to keep you entertained. ■

by James Turner

Now Hiring: Corporate Concierge

Google's known for its employee perks (gourmet meals served daily, onsite massages, \$500 takeout meal allowances for new parents), but now the Mountain View, Calif., company is hiring its own in-house concierge to cover its staff's other needs. Among the job duties are "making restaurant reservations, ordering flowers, [and] recommending places to dine." Funny, that's what we thought interns were supposed to do.

Source: www.alleyinsider.com/2008/6/google-hiring-corporate-concierge-to-further-pamper-staff

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