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Exploring Linux – Part 27: New Life for 32-bit Machines

by Alan German

When I wrote the previous part to this series I had just switched from using Ubuntu Linux to Linux Mint. That was back in the stone ages – January, 2014. Since that date Mint has been my Linux distro of choice and it has functioned extremely well. But, recently, the developers of many distros, Mint included, have decided to drop support for their 32-bit versions. No doubt this leaves some users disappointed, perhaps even angry, with the inability to upgrade to the latest – secure – version of their favourite operating system. However, for Mint users specifically, all is not lost.

Linux Mint Version 19.3 (Tricia) is a long-term support (LTS) version but, even so, the package will reach end-of-life status in April, 2023. As noted above, while newer versions of Mint are available, the problem for 32-bit machines is that mainstream Linux Mint dropped support for such processors as of Version 20 (Ulyana). However, recently, Mint's developers announced the Linux Mint Debian Edition (LMDE 5), codenamed Elsie, that offers a new lease on life for older computer hardware.

Previous versions of Mint have all been based on Ubuntu Linux; however, as the name indicates, LMDE has Debian as its base. The release notes for the package indicate that the intention is essentially to have a backup system should Ubuntu ever cease to be available. The benefits of this strategy for users of previous versions of Mint are that Mint is based on Ubuntu, and Ubuntu is itself based on Debian. In consequence, the basic features of the LMDE distro and many of its embedded applications will be familiar to Mint users.

While Mint's web site doesn't appear to provide an end-of-life date for LMDE 5, the Debian 11 (Bullseye) base system will be supported until June, 2026 so it seems reasonable to assume that this date will also apply to Elsie.

The desktop environment supplied with LMDE 5 is Cinnamon (Figure 1) which is my preferred version of Mint. An added advantage for those with older hardware is that both 32- and 64-bit versions of LMDE 5 are available.

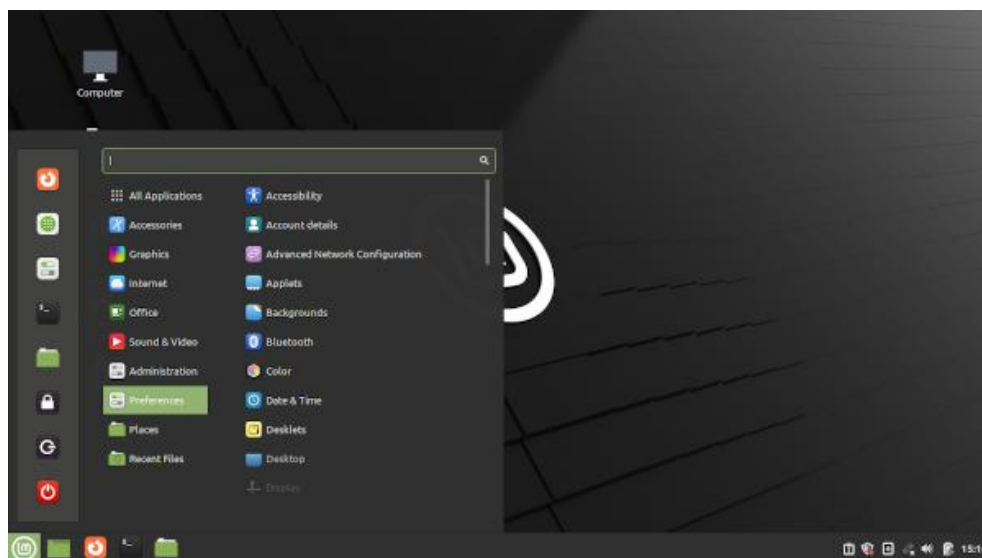


Figure 1 LMDE 5 (Elsie) Cinnamon Edition

Downloading the 32-bit version of LMDE 5, burning it to a USB drive, and booting from this drive so as to activate the installer, are standard operations; however, the installation process itself differs slightly from that used for Ubuntu-based versions of the operating system. In particular, the options for disk partitioning are different from those used by the mainstream installer and Mint's installation guide has not been updated to reflect this.

Initially a screen asks where LMDE is to be installed and provides options for *Automated installation* and *Manual Partitioning*. In my case, the manual partitioning option was preferable as I wished to overwrite the existing Mint partition with the new version. The next screen (Figure 2) displayed all of the hard drive's partitions and, while it was obvious that the partition to be used for my installation was /dev/sda6, there was no indication of how this should be achieved.

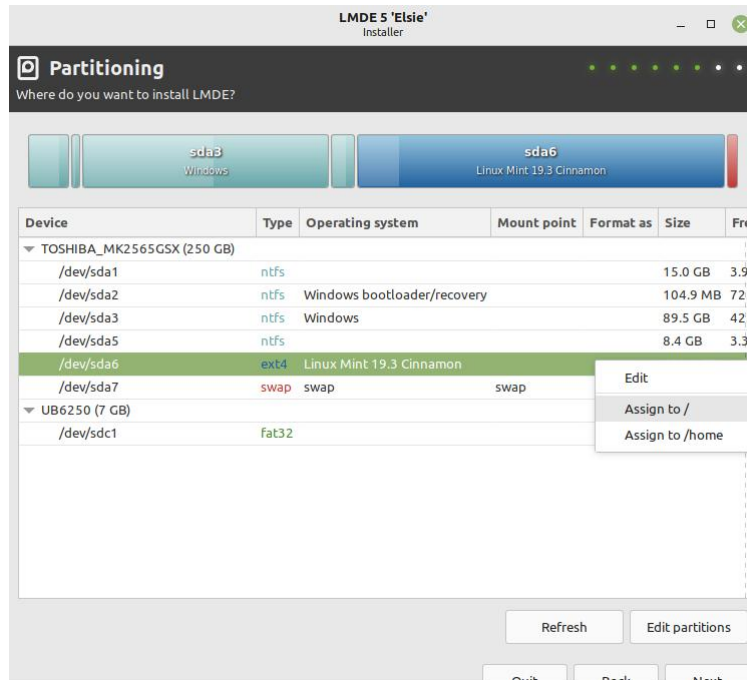


Figure 2 Right-click to select the installation partition

The method appears to be to right-click the mouse on the desired partition. This displays a pop-up context menu with one of the options being Assign to /. This allows the selection of the partition as root for the installation process.

The rest of the installation is familiar with a subsequent reboot providing the dual-boot GRUB menu and LMDE 5 being loaded by default. As suspected, many of the expected applications, such as Firefox, Thunderbird, and LibreOffice, are indeed present out-of-the-box making Elsie a welcome and very capable update for 32-bit hardware.

Bottom Line

Linux Mint Debian Edition (Open-source)
Version LMDE 5 (Elsie)
https://linuxmint.com/download_lmde.php

