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Zonbu

The "Mini" Alternative

Small, "green" computers running Linux represent an alternative when it comes to performing simple tasks

Until recently if you wanted a small form factor computer you could buy a Micro-ATX from Dell or HP, or something small from Shuttle, but if you wanted something smaller you had to build it yourself. The problem with building a small and "green" system is that you need special parts that aren't exactly cheap. Small form factor computers have started to appear more and more on today's market with people actually considering them as an alternative for their large, power hungry and maybe "ugly" desktop computers. Especially when you aren't using your desktop for tasks that require a vast amount of processing power like applications, video editing, 3D modeling or gaming but rather for surfing the web, chatting, seeing a DVD, playing music or checking your email you really should consider switching to a mini system. This article presents six mini computers that will get your simple tasks done and most importantly you don't have to go through the financial pain of building them yourself. These systems are somewhat cheap, customizable and run on Linux. The first system is Zonbu priced at around \$249 or you can get it for \$99 if you pay for two years of online storage. The system's motherboard is a VIA Mini-ITX and it features 4GB on-board storage with the possibility of extending it up to 100GB with Amazon's S3 online storage. Zonbu runs a Gentoo based Linux distribution that won't trouble you too much when configuring it. Another mini alternative is DecTOP priced at just \$99. DecTOP is what's left of AMD's Personal Internet Communicator (PIC) project featuring an AMD Geode processor, a 10GB 3.5" disk and 128MB RAM. You have the possibility to add more RAM, but still, this is not exactly your gaming system but costs much less than a video board. You can install Linux or Windows CE on it, as it doesn't come with an installed OS. You also have the small and sleek Koolu (\$299) consuming less than 10W but the Net Appliance version still packs a punch for its size featuring an AMD Geocode LX 800 CPU, 512MB DDR RAM and 40GB storage. If size is the issue you can try Linuxtop (\$380) that runs out the box but relies on flash drives for storage and booting, as it has no internal storage. You can also try the fanless fit-PC featuring 500 MHZ AMD Geode LX800 CPU, 256 MB RAM and a 2.5" 40GB disk priced at \$285. This mini system comes with Gentoo and is also capable of running Windows XP. Its fanless design means that it should be "immune" to dust and splashes. One of the most configurable systems here is the SolidLogic Little Valley 5677 Mini-ITX system, starting at \$201.45. You can upgrade its RAM up to 1GB and its storage up to 8GB. The system can run both Linux and Windows XP, although these mini systems are better with Linux. This package comes as a kit containing all the components so some do-it-yourself is involved unless you want to pay an extra \$45. All these systems come with a very low wattage CPU and have very limited graphical capabilities. They can run Windows CE or XP but a small Linux distribution is much better for them as they take up less storage and resources making them run faster. If you want a lot of options when configuring your mini-system you can build your own but you have to solve the setup and compatibility issues on your own. But if you want to spare yourself the time and pain of building and configuring a custom mini computer you should take these prebuilt and affordable systems as an option.