or 128MB should be suitable for pretty much anything you'd care to try. Anything less and you may spend more time waiting around than actually being productive!

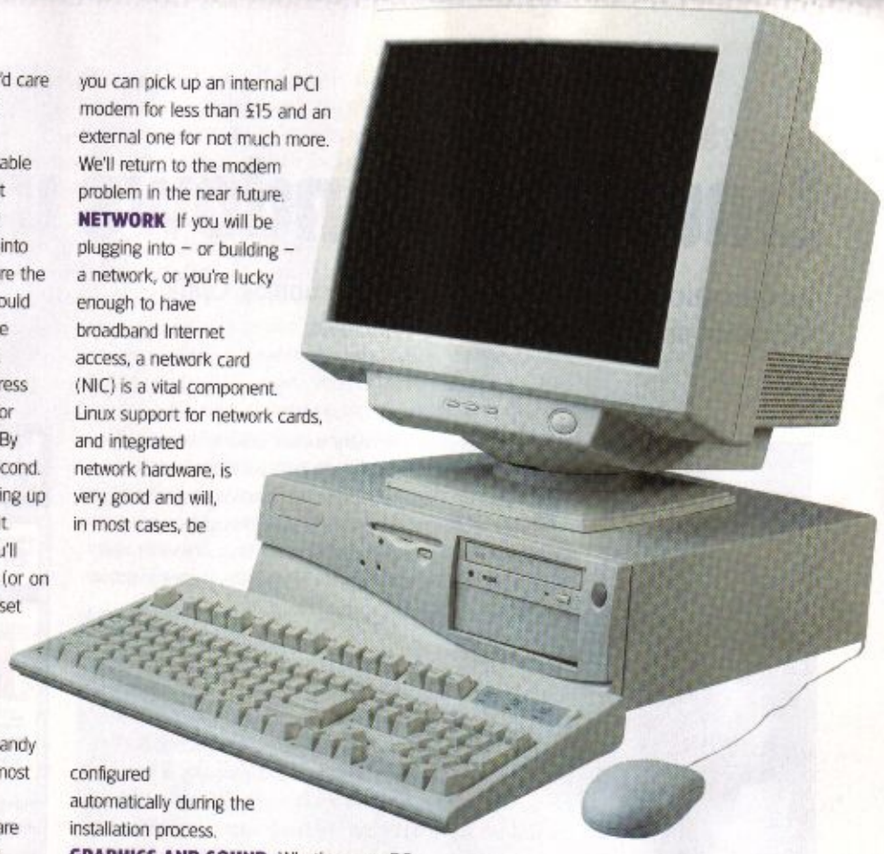
CD-ROM A CD-ROM drive is almost essential, and a bootable one is very handy if you're installing one of the more recent distributions. You can check whether a drive is bootable by slipping a Linux CD into it and rebooting the PC. If it boots into Linux, fine, if not all may not be lost; reboot again and before the operating system begins to load, hit the **<DEL>** key, this should take you into the BIOS (or look to see the boot up message which will tell you which key to press. Using the arrow keys, highlight Advanced CMOS Settings or the equivalent and press **<ENTER>**. You should now see a list that includes entries for 'primary', 'secondary' and maybe even 'tertiary' boot disks. By default the primary disk is the floppy disk, with hard disk second. Highlight the Primary entry and hit the **<ENTER>** key to bring up a list. If there is a CD-ROM entry, select it and Save and Exit.

If, on the other hand, your CD-ROM is not bootable, you'll need to create a boot disk. This is quite simple. In Windows (or on another PC), you need to access the first CD of your distro set and look in the /boot directory (SuSE) or /images (Mandrake and Red Hat) where you'll find a boot image which can be copied to a floppy disk and booted. This will then give you access to the CD for a full installation.

DVD drives and CD/RW (ReWritable) drives are always handy to have, and accessing them shouldn't pose a problem for most Linux distributions.

MODEM Modems, or a particular type of modem at least, are not a happy subject for Linux users and can cause the most difficulties for virgin installations. The reason is that many off-the-shelf PCs use a number of cost-cutting measures to keep the prices low, and one of the most prevalent is the 'Winmodem' which offloads much of the MOdulating and DEModulating onto Windows. Unfortunately, the majority of Winmodems are defiantly closed source and are incompatible with Linux (there are a few exceptions, see **www.idir.net/~gromitkc/winmodem.html** for an exhaustive run down of compatibility), but all is not lost as you can pick up an internal PCI modem for less than £15 and an external one for not much more. We'll return to the modem problem in the near future.

NETWORK If you will be plugging into – or building – a network, or you're lucky enough to have broadband Internet access, a network card (NIC) is a vital component. Linux support for network cards, and integrated network hardware, is very good and will, in most cases, be configured automatically during the installation process.



There are stripped-down Linux distros coded specially for much older machines, but for most home computing tasks on the main full-featured desktops like Mandrake or Red Hat, a minimum of 300MHz processor speed is essential.

GRAPHICS AND SOUND Whether your PC is equipped with an integrated graphics and sound system, such as Intel's ubiquitous i810 chipset, or a high-end AGP graphics card and pro-quality sound card, you should not encounter any problems during installation. The fact that graphics card developers such as NVIDIA are making serious efforts to get the best from their cards under Linux is a sign of how much impact the operating system is having in the computer industry.

PERIPHERALS Keyboards, mice, monitors and printers are all well supported. In fact when it comes to printers, many of the older models have better drivers for Linux than Windows, thanks to the efforts of Open Source developers trying to get the most of their existing hardware.

There are a number of issues with scanners and digital cameras that we'll address in the future, though if you have a recently purchased USB scanner or camera, you shouldn't suffer any insurmountable problems.

Most essential peripherals are supported by Linux these days.

Get with the common people

There are thousands of graphics cards, hard disks, CD-ROMs, Mice, etc. available to you; and the number of combinations that your average Linux distribution may encounter is staggering. Problems, you may think, are inevitable, but Linux vendors – in house and through supporting the Open Source community in general – have spent an awful lot of time making sure both cutting-edge and legacy equipment are well supported. If your PC is a 'standard' build, there is a good chance that your installation will run without a hitch. If you have a more esoteric feature-set, don't despair. There's still a very good chance that if hardware support is not available out of the box, somebody somewhere has stumbled upon the same issue and would be winning to share their solutions. LXF

NEXT MONTH

Now we've decided on a distribution, and confirmed our hardware is Linux-friendly, it is time to bring them together to create a functioning system. Don't worry, many people have done all the difficult stuff, so we can just take it easy with the installation!