

A patch in time

If you're already a devotee of PC-Duo, you'll be delighted to find that the latest version includes a simple, versatile patch management interface

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Patch management increases in importance as the sophistication and frequency of attacks on corporate networks increase. No system administrator could contemplate not bothering to install updates and patches. While Microsoft tries hard to keep the frequency of updates to a minimum, there's no getting away from the fact that patching occupies a fair portion of administrators' time and effort.

This means it's important to find software that can help you lighten the load. PC-Duo Enterprise is already well known as a network management suite from which you can choose modules necessary for your systems management tasks, and the latest version, Enterprise 2.3, adds patch management facilities to help you keep close control of this aspect of network management.

The suite snaps into MMC (Microsoft Management Console), so there's no need to learn a new interface as you can use all the modules from MMC's systems management framework. The modules within PC-Duo Enterprise cover areas such as inventory management, helpdesk tracking and software roll-outs (Figure 1).

Everywhere within the console, you see the objects in your environment organised by type in the left-hand

pane, and details of the objects you're viewing in the right. The nice touch about this is that you get two mini-windows in the right-hand pane, one showing you the concepts of the objects you're viewing, the other giving help about tasks you might want to perform. So if you're looking at the Asset Management console, you can see the tools and reports on offer, or get an overview of the Asset database and the package policy manager; or you can read the help topics on creating package policies and reports or on adding assets to the database.

Sometimes when you look at server software it feels as though the developers have tried to make the tasks look difficult. PC-Duo takes the opposite approach – everything is aimed at making systems management easy and putting it within the reach of mere mortals.

Pick and mix

Another strong point about PC-Duo is that you can buy the parts you require rather than being forced to get everything, whether you want it or not. The choices you can make start with Inventory Management. This can be used to collect over 600 different pieces of information about the way your client PCs are configured in terms of both hardware and software. Next, you get a Remote Control module that lets you take over a PC anywhere on your network or just watch what's going on. There's a Diagnostic module that compares the applications on a client PC to an application profile to see what changes have been made, and any damaged applications can be restored to their original formation. One of the most useful modules is Software Distribution, which allows you to install or update software. Reporting is also strong throughout the product – reports can be viewed in the package, in a web browser, or exported in formats including Excel and Word.

The latest version of the software continues the good work. One major plus in PC-Duo Enterprise 2.3 is a set of tools and reports that help you manage Microsoft service packs. The patch management elements in PC-Duo are designed to provide a user-friendly interface to Microsoft's Software Update Services (SUS) infrastructure, and can also be used even if you're not using Active Directory.

By using PC-Duo's patch management facilities, you get a central location for the management and

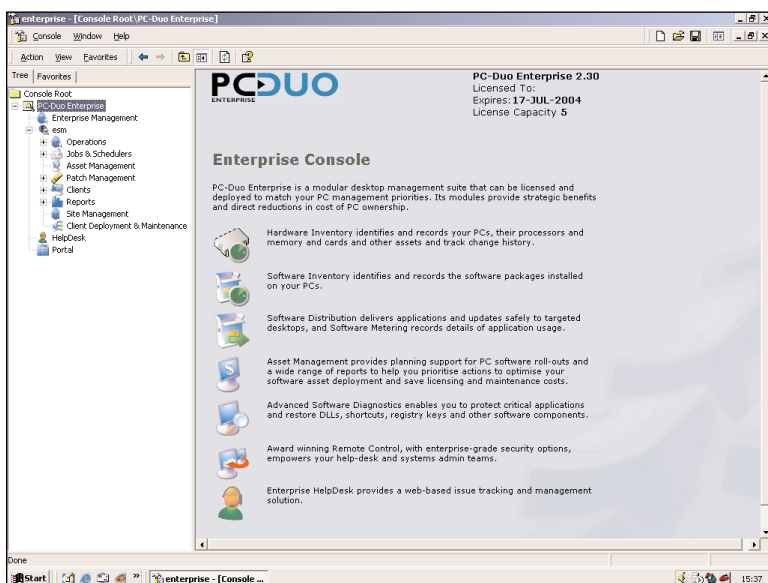


Figure 1: The main console of PC-Duo Enterprise 2.3 showing its broad range of options

administration of security updates and service releases, and you can monitor the progress of the updates using a set of reports (**Figure 2**). To understand the facilities offered by the PC-Duo interface, you need to be clear about the way SUS works. There are two components – SUS servers that let you check the Microsoft Windows Update site for new updates, and Automatic Updates clients that install the updates stored on your SUS servers.

Essentially, you use SUS servers to set up your own private version of the Windows Update site so that the machines you're updating don't need to check an external web site for updates. You manually or automatically download updates as they are made available on the Microsoft site, then your local systems administrator tests and chooses which updates to make available on their local SUS server.

The Automatic Updates client is used when installing patches on user PCs. The clients can be used to get information either straight from the Windows Update site, or from a local network server running SUS. The clients record information about which updates are installed, and you can control where the clients connect to find updates as well as

“Some server software goes out of its way to be difficult. Everything in PC-Duo aims to make systems management easy, putting it within the reach of mere mortals”

when the required updates will be scheduled. The Automatic Updates client application is installed as part of Windows 2003 or as part of a service release for Windows 2000 and XP. To make life simple, PC-Duo Enterprise itself can also be used to install the client separately.

What PC-Duo Enterprise brings to the mix is a simple interface that you can use to manage SUS and your Automatic Updates clients. Using PC-Duo Enterprise, you get a SUS Server folder from where you can view and manage your SUS servers to synchronise their content with that of the Windows Update site. You also get a patch management folder from where you can install Automatic Updates clients, control which SUS server each client connects to and schedule updates. You can control your SUS server installation whether you're working with a single SUS Server or a distributed system with a number of installation and statistics servers.

All-seeing, all-dancing

While the simple interface from which you can manage your servers and clients is great, the patch management reports are perhaps even more important, because they give you a way to see exactly

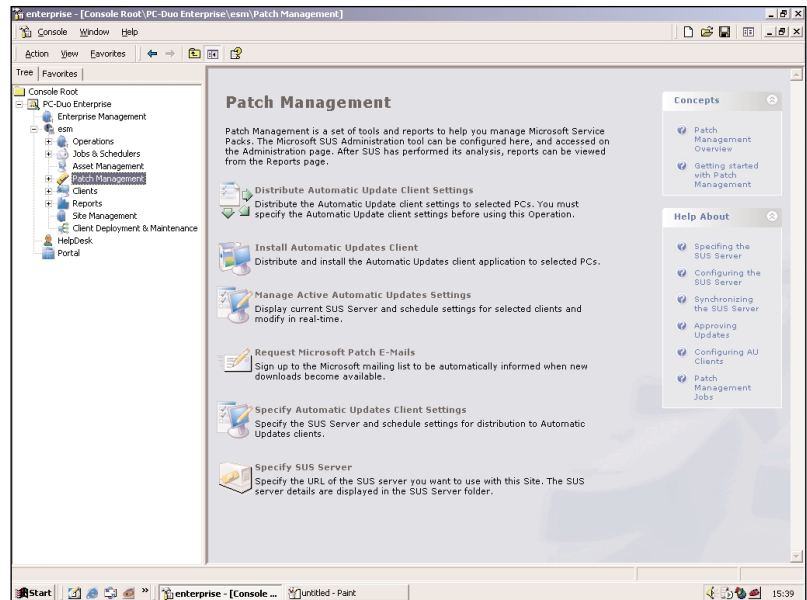


Figure 2: The patch management console. Note the helpful mini-windows on the right

what's going on in a format that's accessible. The reports are based on Crystal Reports version 9, and can be used to see how your software updates have gone. You can view the information organised by product or by machine, see installation histories, check which PCs haven't been updated, and view the updates organised by Microsoft Knowledge Base number. This final option means that if you've read a Knowledge Base article about a particular vulnerability, you can quickly check whether a particular PC, or the PCs in a particular department, have been updated to mitigate the threat.

PC-Duo already had an excellent selection of reports on all aspects of your network, both hardware and software, and this new collection matches up to the others in terms of both comprehensiveness and clarity. One type of patch management report shows vulnerable PCs on which updates have failed; other useful reports show outstanding updates, and the status of available updates (ie which ones you've approved).

As I've mentioned, you can choose from two options depending on whether you are using Active Directory. PC-Duo Reports for SUS work with your SUS servers in an Active Directory environment, while PC-Duo Extensions for SUS give you the patch management reports for SUS along with the tools you need to deploy and manage the Automatic Updates client when you're not using AD.

You can't go wrong...

Overall, PC-Duo Enterprise is easy to use, gives you the information you need, and has great flexibility. The addition of patch management facilities increases the overall usefulness and will save system administrators even more time. <

System requirements

PC-Duo patch management module SUS Server.

PC-Duo console Windows NT 4, 2000, XP or 2003; MDAC 2.61 or later; IE 6.0 or later; 85Mb free disk space.
PC-Duo client Windows 95, 98, Me, NT, 2000, XP or 2003 (DOS 3.3 or later and Windows 3.1 are supported by the Enterprise 2.1 client.); 5Mb free disk space.

Databases supported
Microsoft Access, Microsoft SQL Server 7 SP3 and 2000, Oracle 8.1.5 or later.

UK supplier

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Cost

Please contact Pillar Solutions for pricing.

Bottom line

Pros Easy to use and flexible.
Cons Windows-centric.