

# GNOME 1.2 Desktop COMEBACK OF THE GNOME

ANDREAS HUCHLER



G · N · O · M · E

Ignored by many users and prematurely written-off by some distributions the GNOME desktop environment fights back with a new version. Here, we take a look at the most important components of Helix GNOME 1.2 to help you decide if an upgrade or new installation is worthwhile.

About four years ago a group of Linux enthusiasts on the Internet got together with the aim of developing a graphical user interface for Linux that would stand comparison with Windows and Mac OS.

It's true that at that time there were already several window managers – for example, fvwm2 and Afterstep – for the X interface; with CDE a desktop environment was even available. However, these solutions all had disadvantages – the window managers had no session management nor support for drag and drop; CDE was commercial and obsolete – so there was a real need for a new graphical interface to be developed.

There were soon differences in opinion about how (and more precisely, using which GUI toolkit) this interface should be developed. First up for discussion was the Qt library from the Norwegian firm Trolltech. The most diehard open source supporters however complained that Qt (at that time) was subject to a commercial, non-free licence. They pointed out that a free library was available in the form of the Gimp Toolkit (gtk/gtk+) which allowed graphical

elements to be produced in a similar easy manner. The differences were not resolved, so in the end some of the developers decided to support the Qt-based KDE project whilst the others started to create the gtk-based GNOME project.

## Co-operation

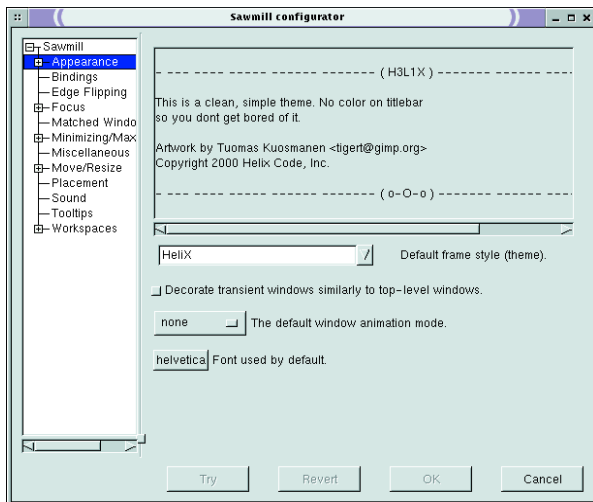
Over time, not least because of the subsequent open source licensing of Qt, the former rivalry between the two projects gave way to a spirit of co-operation. The developers of both teams are now anxious to integrate application programs which have been written for the other desktop environment into their own interface. However, KDE has so far enjoyed greater success than GNOME, especially in Europe. The fact that some Linux distributions now rely entirely on KDE (examples include, Caldera eDesktop 2.4, Corel Linux OS 1.0 and easyLinux 2.0) has particularly hindered the advancement of GNOME, as has the practice of making KDE the default choice of the installation routine so that

---

## Helixcode

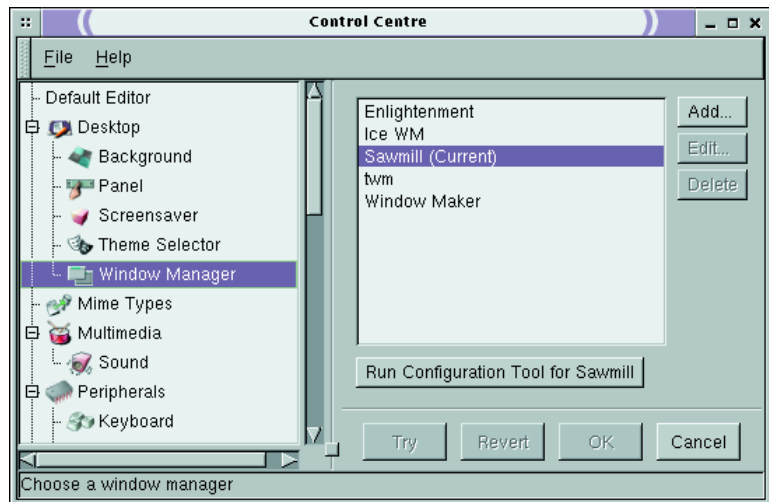
The American firm Helixcode, Inc. (<http://www.helixcode.com>) cofounded by GNOME evangelist and author of *Midnight Commander* Miguel de Icaza, has made it its goal to help GNOME break through as an Internet desktop. In addition to support of the GNOME project by making the GNOME extension "Helix GNOME" available at no cost and by developing further open source solutions in the office and groupware area, the company makes its money from support and network services.

---



[left]  
GNOME uses the new  
window manager Sawmill

[right]  
From the GNOME Control  
Centre you can select a new  
window manager.



GNOME is only available after further configuration steps. Red Hat is at the moment the only major distribution that uses GNOME as its standard desktop.

But reports of GNOME's death are exaggerated. With the jump from version 1.0 to version 1.2 GNOME, now supported by firms like Helixcode Inc., could possibly even succeed in making a comeback. We shall show you what features are included in the new version of GNOME and how you can integrate the **Helixcode** GNOME Binary Release 1.2 into your existing Linux system.

## Window manager

GNOME in the narrowest sense consists mainly of the GNOME Panel, the GNOME Control Centre, drag and drop functionality and a session management system. Whilst KDE with its **kwm** already has its own **window manager**, GNOME leaves it up to the user as to which window manager is used. Realistically, however, it must be accepted that so far

only a handful of window managers are capable of working well with GNOME. In the current version 1.2 HelixCode only supplies *Sawmill* as a window manager. If you prefer another GNOME-capable window manager, you can activate this after any necessary re-installation in the GNOME Control Centre under *Desktop, Window Manager*.

## Flexible Panel

The GNOME Panel is the focal point of everyday work on the GNOME desktop and can be freely adapted to your own requirements. You can also set up several panels at the same time. Apart from the main menu (accessed using the foot icon) you can add and remove your own user menus, application launchers and applets. GNOME applets correspond to KDE's docking widgets: they are usually utilities that can be integrated in an active form into the panel in order to have important information or functionality immediately to hand. In the main menu under *Panel* you will find the submenu *Add to Panel* which contains all kinds of applets and utilities. In addition you can add an ordinary application to the panel using drag and drop from the Programs menu. This is a handy feature for those applications that you launch particularly often.

## Control Centre

Just like KDE, GNOME also has a control centre. It can be reached from the menu (*Programs, Configuration, Control Centre*) or by clicking the toolbox icon on the panel. The Control Centre can be used to customise the behaviour of the desktop. Currently the following options exist:

- Desktop (screensaver, window manager, background, panel, theme)
- User interface (applications, dialog boxes, multi-document interface)
- Window manager settings (dependent on the window manager selected)
- Multimedia (mainly noises, sounds, ...)
- Peripherals (mouse, keyboard, possibly Palm Pilot...)

## Window Manager

When switching into graphics mode (X Windows) it is initially only possible to display a grey pattern and to put characters or images on the screen. A window manager brings some colour into the grey world of Unix and Linux and makes it possible to open and close, maximise and minimise and move application windows. It also creates the window frames.

### Installation of Helixcode GNOME 1.2

If you have already installed a recent version of GNOME and it can be called up using the KDM login screen (see the selection list *Session*), the installation should be straightforward. For this you can use the distribution-specific rpm packages. Helix GNOME is available for download in binary packages for several distributions from: [www.helixcode.com/desktop/download.php3](http://www.helixcode.com/desktop/download.php3). Advanced users will find the latest GNOME sources at <http://www.gnome.org/start/source.html>. On the CD, unfortunately, there was insufficient space for the latest GNOME version. However, Linux Mandrake 7.1 contains GNOME rpm packages, though not the most up-to-date versions.



- Session (start sequence, tips on starting)
- Handling documents (MIME types, opening URLs, editor...)

## Drag and drop

GNOME supports drag and drop. This functionality allows you to move objects by dragging them (by keeping the left mouse button pressed) from one point to another. Although the capability to support drag and drop is built into GNOME, many GNOME applications don't yet take advantage of it. If you are used to working with Microsoft Windows you may notice this lack of drag and drop functionality.

Cut and paste is another feature of modern desktop environments which GNOME of course supports. Although classical X11 applications such as XEmacs have long supported the marking, copying, cutting and pasting of portions of text within a document, as soon as you want to cut and paste objects other than text you need the support to be built into the desktop environment itself.

## Session Management

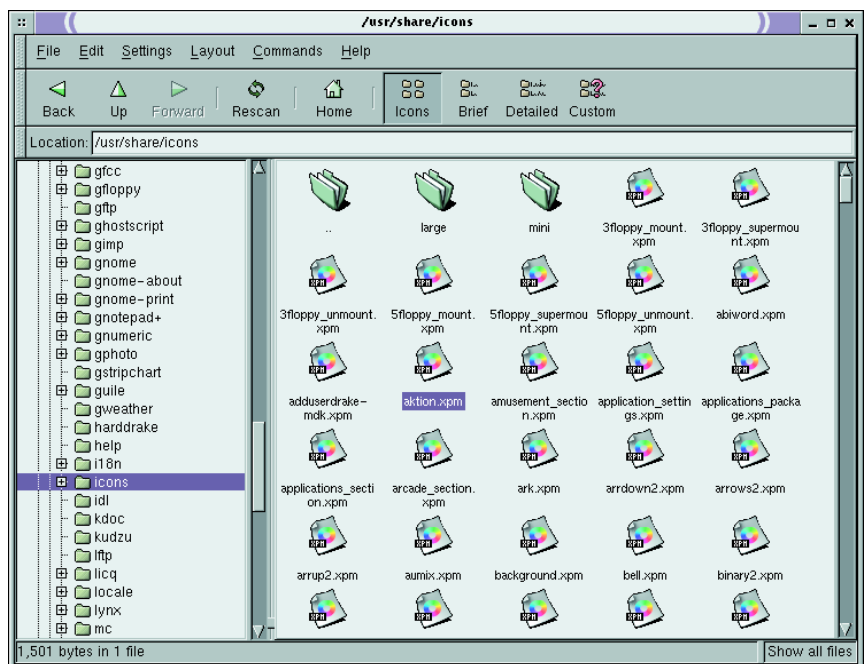
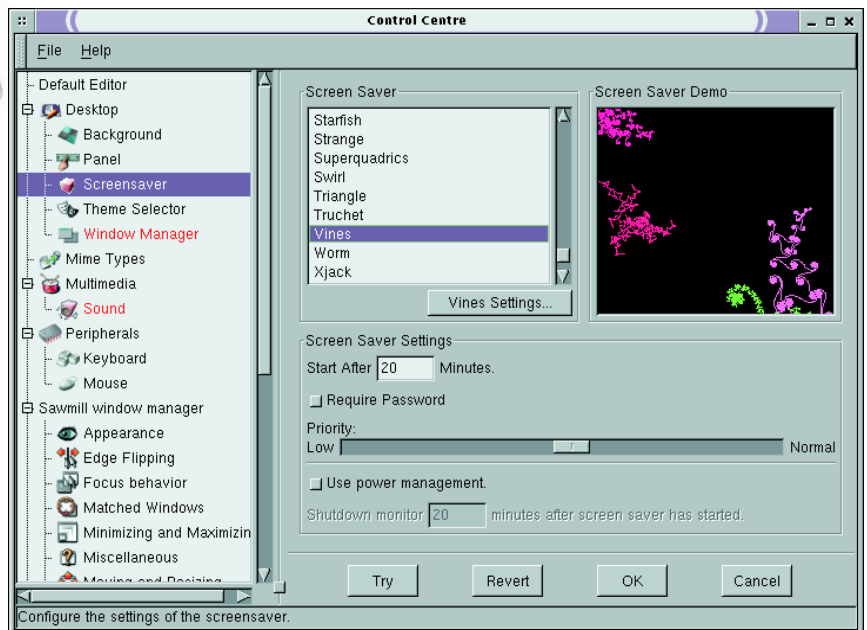
Another key area of functionality for a modern desktop is session management. This means the ability for each user of the system to have their own personalised desktop. The first time a user logs in using GNOME, it creates a special folder in which all the desktop settings for that user will be stored. If you make changes to the desktop or leave applications open when you close the GNOME session, GNOME records the final state of the desktop and tries to restore that state, as far as possible, the next time you log in.

## Midnight Commander

To conclude our brief tour of GNOME 1.2 we will mention the graphical file manager *GNOME Midnight Commander*. This is GNOME's answer to the KDE file manager KFM. If you have used MS-DOS you may have used the utility Norton Commander, which was the inspiration for the console-based Midnight Commander for Linux. GNOME Midnight Commander is a graphical version of this powerful file manager which can be accessed from the menu under *Programs, File Manager* or from the document icon on the panel. You can use this utility to carry out all kinds of file management tasks using the mouse, and even to connect to other computers using the FTP protocol.

## Upgrade or not?

GNOME has grown up a good bit since the previous version. However, it cannot be denied that problems and program crashes still occur. In most cases these can be traced back to the window manager being used. If you already have an older version of



GNOME installed on your system you should acquire and install the latest version of GNOME right away (see box "Installing Helixcode GNOME 1.2"). Even if you don't change over immediately you will still benefit from an update of the basic libraries which will be used by the gtk-based applications running under KDE.

But if you don't yet know GNOME, perhaps because your distribution only contains KDE, there is a lot to be said for trying it out. After all, what is the value in having a choice if you don't use it? One of the many good things about Linux is that it doesn't force you to use a particular desktop. You can't say that about a certain other well-known operating system, can you? ■

[top]  
Everything to hand —  
the GNOME Panel

[middle]  
Everything is config-  
urable from the Control  
Centre

[below]  
GNOME's Midnight  
Commander in action

