Jo´s alternative desktop

BIT OF
MAKE-UP?

BY JO MOSKALEWSKI

What your Linux desktop looks like is something only you can decide. With deskTOPia we take you with us on a regular journey into the land of window managers and desktop environments, presenting the useful and the colourful, as well as pretty toys. And true to our motto "Our desktop will improve the way it looks" we are now going to show you a tool to put a bit of pizzazz into any window manager. Make-up for the desktop.

xosview 1.7.1, xnodecor
LinuxMagazine/desktopia/

Window manager: Manages the windows of the graphical user interface X Window, which is also used by KDE or GNOME (both also only fall back on a window manager, which equips the applications with frames).
GNOME Panel: The start panel of the GNOME environment which can be deployed separately; counterpart to the KDE start panel or Windows task bar.
/dev/null: Unix device file which makes data "disappear": Data written into this file is simply forgotten by the system.
X Session: Session on the graphical desktop – from the start of the interface (X) to the close.

Many people have already tried to upgrade a puny **Window Manager** with an application such as the system monitor *gkrellm* – usually successfully. But what can you do if this is now firmly settled as desired on only the first of your multiple desktop, and that its presence in the task list of the window manager? Or the dream tool which actually gives you optical nightmares, such as e.g. a **GNOME Panel** with window frames – who wouldn't want to send this combination as quickly as possible to **/dev/null**?

Our leading actor

But if you want to turn your deams into reality, rather than having to remove them in the correct way – there is a solution, as will be shown by the example of the system monitor classic *xosview*. And as *xosview* comes with every distribution in a sufficiently up to date form, we are no longer going to concern ourselves with its installation, but with the intention of integrating it inconspicuously into the desktop.

The Emperor's new clothes

A window manager should normally provide each program with a frame, (provided it does not expressly wish to remain incognito) but unfortunately not every window manager understands this, or this has somehow not been thought of by the program author (as for example in the case of *xosview*). So what is needed is the possibility of hiding any program, regardless of whichever window manager is in use – it has to become invisible. But it is only rarely that we have any influence on the program – or on the window manager. But if, after starting an application and before starting our window manager, we could rob this program of its window attributes, the window manager would not take it under its wing.

Since this does not usually involve programs which are briefly started and stopped again during an **X Session**, but rather those such as a system monitor (or a clock, start panel, notification of incoming mail, etc.) which are only supposed to be started automatically when the system is turned on, these need to be included in the start files of our X Session.

Changing rooms

Every user can concoct his own X Session start file. This is called either *~/.xsession* (usually used when the user logs in graphically – e.g. via *xdm*), or *~/.xinitrc* (start X via the command *startx*). Both files are identically constructed. Hence it is possible to kill two birds with one stone using a **Symlinks**. These files are actioned line by line and once the last command in them has been actioned, the X Session is also ended. So one first starts tools in these, such as our *xosview*, adding a background image if required, and only then is a window manager called up. If this is ended, X stops. Our *~/.xinitrc* could thus contain the following:

```
xosview &
sapphire
```

The & after *xosview* is necessary, because without this the window manager (in this case *sapphire*) would only start after our system monitor had finished its action – but now the process *xosview* is sent into the background, and it's the turn of the next line. And so this is also an ideal opportunity to make our *xosview* invisible before starting the window manager. To do this, there is the unknown program *xnodecor*, which can now only be found on the Internet at *ftp://ftp.42.org/pub/wmx/contrib/ xnodecor.c.* The author's Web site mentioned there is no longer available.

Tailor-made suit

But that's not enough – because there's nothing there but naked program code, and very few would know where to start with that. And those who do will find out that this may well function under the related operating system, but not under Linux. This is why I have included it on the coverdisc – together with the necessary extras – as an all-round, carefree package. This is unpacked and installed just like other *tar.gz* source text archives:

```
tar xvzf xnodecor.tar.gz
cd xnodecor
su -    (Password...)
make
make install
exit
```

If unexpected problems should arise, there is also a ready-compiled binary included with the package, which a *root* "User" can simply copy to */usr/local/bin*.

Behind the scenes

The way *xnodecor* is to be called up is revealed to us by the command *xnodecor -h*, and this is, as you can imagine, easy: While previously in our *~/.xinitrc* first *xosview* and then a window manager were called up, we now simply insert an *xnodecor -w xosview@computername*:

```
xosview &
xnodecor -w xosview@planet
sapphire
```

xosview@computername? Right, *xosview* goes by this name, and not just as expected by that of *xosview*. In case of doubt the name can be determined with the command *xprop* I grep *WM_NAME* and a mouse click on the window to be hidden. But it is usual for a program to be hidden with the name of the executed file.

Make Up

Anyone now following up with practical trials has certainly found out to his or her disappointment that *xosview* itself also draws a little frame, and that this does not necessarily go to the top right hand corner of the screen and simply will not match the desktop background colour. But that too can be changed, and this is done via the **X Ressources**. Simply make – if not already present – a file *~/.Xdefaults* and add to this the following entries:

```
xosview*geometry:   -0+0
xosview*background: #102040
xosview*foreground: #102040
```

Obviously your own values should be inserted here – and with *xosview* there exist an almost infinite number of other options which can be found in the manual, *man xosview*. By now our system monitor is looking like the one in Figure 2, and is present on all desktops. It no longer appears in the window list of our window manager. Anyone with lots of time and patience could now theoretically design a matching and functioning background graphic using *xnodecor* .   ■

Symlink: Directory entry, behind which no file is hidden, but which only represents a cross-reference to another file. So the command "ln -s .xinitrc .xsession" can get round creating the file ~/.xsession, if an ~/.xinitrc with the requisite content already exists.
X-Resources: In classic X-programs default values are set with regard to these – usually with respect to their appearance.

■