

Thinking back to my long buried Windows roots, I still get a headache when I think about that OS's reputed user-friendliness. Installing new software meant that all kinds of file suffixes were suddenly mapped to the new program, ignoring the configuration work I had previously put in.

I no longer have to suffer this torment, thanks to Linux – nothing moves on my machine nowadays without me knowing about it. And I was prepared to pay the price for this peace of mind and tackle that “one-off” configuration work. Now, unfortunately there seems to be a hitch with that “one-off” bit. Although mapping file types has always been a bit scary, if I need to tell five applications what to do with a certain file type, I have to configure all five individually. And that to my mind is four times as much work as I should be doing.

Additionally, most programs insist on a one-to-one relationship between file type and application. But what happens if I just want to view an image instead of working on it (as would normally be the case)? Or what happens if I want to use a different browser to view an HTML file? The solutions tend to break at this point.

Simple & effective

This is a problem that effected most of us, but not someone as clever as Ethen Gold, who hit on the idea of mapping all the file types in all these programs to a single application. This tool would then be responsible for deciding what to open a certain file type with. This still means careful configuration work, but restricts that work to a single site. And you also have a way of enhancing applications that previously insisted on a one-to-one relationship between file type and the application.

The program enhancement kit you are looking for is available both on the Web (at <http://thaumaturgy.net/~etgold/software/launcher/>) and on the CD with the subscription issue, and there it is called *Launcher*. However, in contrast to MS

DESKTOPIA

Only you can decide how your desktop looks. With deskTOPIa we regularly take you with us on a journey into the land of window managers and desktop environments, presenting the useful and the colorful viewers and pretty toys.

Jo's Alternative Desktop: Launcher

The Right Type

Tired of telling hordes of applications which third-party programs to use when opening various file types? Launcher can help you solve this problem.

BY JOACHIM MOSKALEWSKI



Windows, it does not use file suffixes to identify file types but **MIME** types, which are more common on the Internet and in Linux territory. The applications themselves are responsible for discovering the MIME types of the files. To do so, they either use their own test procedures or rely on the *file* command. This has the advantage that files are still recognized after renaming them.

Of course it still makes sense to keep the *.html* suffix for an HTML file, but it is nice to know that it is not entirely necessary.

Installation

Be bold – there are no strings attached to the *launcher-086.tar.gz* archive. You need the Tcl/Tk interpreter, *wish*, which you will no doubt have installed previously,

and the *file* and *make* commands – all of which are just part and parcel of your standard Linux machine's setup. Start by expanding the archive using the following command:

```
tar -xvzf launcher-086.tar.gz
```

To perform the actual installation (using *make install*) you need temporary *root* privileges; so use the *su* to apply them. Make sure you drop your *root* privileges using *exit* after installation. You can then supply a peppering of configuration files from your user account:

```
make installfileslocal
```

This copies the required files to your home directory. It is possible to create a

system wide configuration (see the *INSTALL* file in the archive for details), but not for individual users.

After completing the installation, you will want to define the *launcher* as the default applink for all of your programs. The quickest way to do this, is to use *wildcards* (normally a global wildcard *** will represent any string), and accounting for all file types with a single entry.

However, there is an issue here: Some programs require individual syntax. Thus an entry without a file type accounts for all file types in the XFce file manager, *XFtree*: a single line containing *() (launcher) ()* in the *~/.xfce/xtree.reg* is all you need to hand responsibility for all file types to the launcher.

Just ask

Click on a file in a file manager that you have configured as described, to start the launcher, that will then locate and start an appropriate application based on its MIME type. For multiple mappings the launcher will prompt you to decide which application should be started (Figure 1).

The factory defaults may not comply with your personal preferences. To solve this, launcher offers a fairly substantial configuration tool, that you can access via the *launcherconfig* command. You can just as easily right click on the dialog box to choose between multiple application mappings. So, if you happen to disagree with the selection, just right click.

Rules and regulations

The configuration tool offers you some general options (shown in Figure 2, *Launcher Config*). And three buttons are available for clicking: *all* affects how the multiple selections are handled – if this button is active, the whole file list is passed to your program en bloc. If you

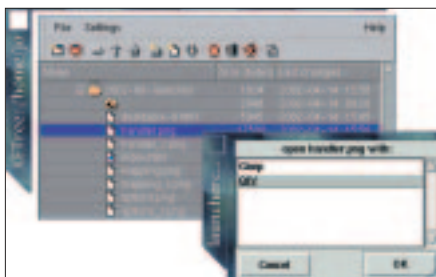


Figure 1: Launcher between Gimp and QV

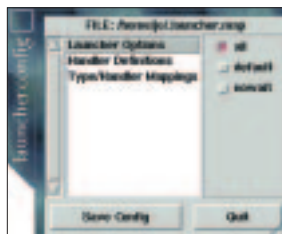


Figure 2: Launcher Config

deactivate *all*, the launcher will start the appropriate program for each file.

You can use the *default* button to suppress the prompt, asking you to choose one of the available alternatives; the launcher will then automatically start, without asking, the

default application.

The last button in this bunch – *nowait* – is applicable when the *all* option has been deactivated: In this case the launcher does not wait for the current process to terminate before passing the next file to an application, and proceeds with the next file, so launching the next program as applicable.

Announcements

If you now jump from the *Launcher Options* to the *Handler Definitions*, you arrive at a configuration dialog box that you can use to edit your *Handlers*. The dialog box contains a list of applications that you may assign to the current file type (Figure 3).

Working with this dialog box is not entirely intuitive. If you want to add a new application, you first have to click on *Set*, then enter a mnemonic name for your application (*XEmacs*), then the real program name (*xemacs*) and finally the syntax (*xemacs %s*). You can use an *%s* instead of a file name and a *%d* instead of a directory. You will need to click on *Add* before your entry is added to the list.

Mapped

That still leaves us with the *Type/Handler Mappings* (Figure 4), where you can put the applications you have previously defined to their required tasks. If you select several applications for a single MIME type, you should note the default and possibly modify the setting. This does not mean that the default application will appear first in future operations, the option is only applied, if you you select *default* in the general options.

Watch out for the stumbling block while defining MIME types. Let us assume that you have an image file in PNG format called *graphic.png*. To be consistent with the presets in the launcher configuration (e.g. *image/gif*) you would expect the MIME type to be *image/png*. But instead the launcher will

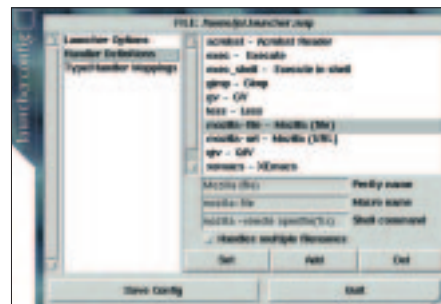


Figure 3: Handler Configuration



Figure 4: Who's playing whom?

present you with the whole handler list – the new MIME type would seem to be totally ineffective. The command below should help on the subject:

```
jo@planet ~-> launcher ?
--showtypes graphic.png
graphic.png: image/x-png
```

So now you know that you need to define the *image/x-png* MIME type for PNG images.

It is hard to find fault with this extremely practical tool, but the current version still cannot process MIME type definitions containing wildcards. That means you will not be able to configure all image files simply by defining an *image/** MIME type, even though the configuration file may suggest something different.

GLOSSARY
MIME: The abbreviation for "Multipurpose Internet Mail Extensions". If an attachment is sent by mail, the mail program states the file type. After evaluating the MIME header, the receiving mail application does not need to perform content analysis to know whether a text document, a sound file, an archive or something completely different is coming your way. MIME types are additionally used for the dialog between web servers and browsers, and are often found when Linux applications need to interface with third-party programs.