KDE 3.1 & GNOME 2.2

Desktop Showdown

Although rivalry between the KDE and GNOME camps has noticeably declined, there can be no denying the competition between the two when it comes to end user statistics. The fact that the latest versions of KDE (3.1) and GNOME (2.2) were released at the same time, provided us with a convenient opportunity to compare the two.

The new version numbers assigned to the desktop environments reflect the **GUI toolkits** used, revealing that KDE 3.1 is based on Qt version 3.1, and GNOME 2.2 on Gtk version 2.2.

The desktop showdown might never have happened as a KDE 3.1 download was actually planned for the end of last year. A few security holes and some serious bugs forced the developers to revise their plans and postpone the final version, while appropriate fixes and patches were completed.

The GNOME team also seems to have matured with the, more or less, totally unusable Theme Manager available in the GNOME 2.2 beta being thoroughly reworked before the 2.2 final release, so becoming a fairly useful tool.

The Emperor's New Clothes

Launching the new KDE desktop reveals a new default style called *Keramik* and a matching icon theme called *Crystal* (see Figure 1).

New releases of the major desktop environments, KDE and GNOME, appear at regular intervals and typically leave the user needing answers to a whole bunch of questions. What has changed, is it worth my while updating, and what do the competitors offer? **BY ANDREA MÜLLER**

Fans of the older style can use the Control Center to select it, or select a style to suit their requirements from the jam-packed *kdeartworks* package. There is no need to worry about changes in other areas because the typical handling and preferences seen in previous versions have been retained, making it easier for users to locate the options they need. In fact, some users might feel so at home with the new desktop they could easily overlook some of the finer details in the update.

Full Control

A lot of work went into enhancing the structure and clarity of the Control Center, ensuring that users unfamiliar with KDE will not have too many navigation issues to cope with. The typical tree structure allows the user to configure daily tasks and the system itself.

Preferences are not restricted to the desktop layout, but also include personal data (name and email address) and preferred applications. Even administrative chores can be done there, like configuring the **Login Manager**, or a new feature that allows you to modify

the X server resolution directly from within the Control Center.

The font module has also been completely re-vamped, the most important change being the fact that individual point sizes can be excluded from anti-aliasing. One unpleasant side-effect of earlier KDE versions was the fact that smaller fonts were commonly hard to decipher; the new Control Center option allows you to resolve this issue without completely disabling anti-aliasing.

The Font Installer, which is located in the *System* submenu, has a few new options; in addition to a thumbnail view of the selected font (Figure 2), you can now disable individual fonts instead of having to remove them from the list.

Panel Features

The KDE Panel, aka *kicker*, has also been enhanced. In addition to allowing users to replace the KDE menu with a customized menu, the hide modes available for the panel have been extended. You can now allow windows to overlay the panel, but still pop the panel back into the foreground when you drag the mouse into a corner of the desktop. This feature

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GLOSSARY

GUI toolkit: *A program library that provides facilities for programming the elements of a graphic desktop, such as dialog boxes and menus.*

Login Manager: *Also known as the "Display Manager", this program provides a GUI login. Apart from the login facility, login managers often provide additional functions, such as a facility for re-booting or shutting down a machine.*

strace: *Adding strace to a command's syntax will log any system calls and signals performed or issued by the command to standard output, allowing the user to reproduce read or write operations.*
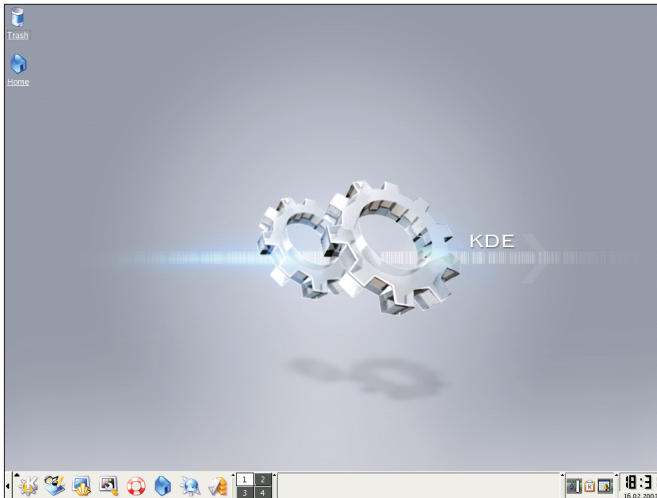
Figure 1: The new look for KDE 3.1

Figure 2: Font installation with preview window

is configured in the *Hiding* tab of the Control Center's *Desktop / Panels* menu.

Some improvements have been made with respect to grouping windows in the panel. If you display a group of tasks, that is, use a single icon to group multiple active consoles, *kicker* now displays the number of programs grouped under the icon. Globetrotting users, who need to keep track of multiple timezones, will be pleased to hear that KDE now allows you to display clocks for multiple timezones (Figure 3). You can even assign different designs to the clocks to distinguish them more easily.

KDE applications launch noticeably quicker throughout the desktop. This is mainly due to the fact that the KDE libraries now support icon loading on demand. When an application is launched, only the icons that need to be displayed immediately are loaded – icons that the user might not get to see until some time later, after launching a dialog box or a menu, for example, are simply ignored until needed.

The fact that the desktop still takes quite a while to load is acceptable. The developers have put a lot of effort into improving KDE's stability – you should not need to launch KDE more than once a day.

Integral Value

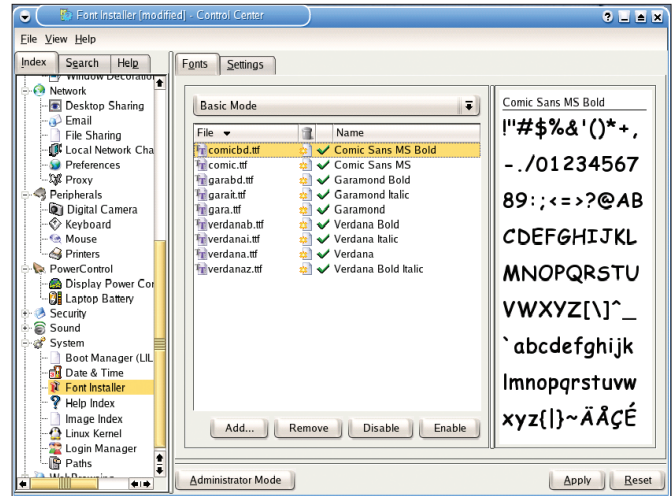Visually speaking, GNOME 2.2 does not seem to have changed too much (Figure 4). Users familiar with GNOME 2.0 might note the new splash screen, or the *Show Desktop* button at the bottom left of the panel, but these are the only visual indications that a new version is running. The button is used to minimize all the active windows at once, allowing a clear view of the desktop.

Reorganized

Users will lose that déjà-vu feeling as soon as they start changing their preferences. Some options have moved, and others simply no longer exist.

Users who, in earlier GNOME versions, preferred an icon-less desktop could simply tell Nautilus not to draw the desktop. Now this is no longer a menu option which is particularly annoying if you are running Nautilus on top of another window manager.

To get the same functionality, make sure that you launch Nautilus with the *--no-desktop* flag set, as the option has survived as a command line parameter. Be prepared for some extra leg work should you want to make this a persistent setting in GNOME.

Icon management has also gone through major changes – this becomes particularly evident when you navigate tried and trusted paths to select a different Nautilus theme, only to discover that the option has disappeared. Icon themes apply to the desktop in general as of GNOME 2.2 and are thus available for

use by other applications, such as the panel, or the *fileroller* archiving program.

The Theme Manager is used to select icon themes, window dressing and control elements, unfortunately, it can be highly uncooperative. If an older theme that the Theme Manager cannot handle happens to be stored in *~/.themes*, the manager simply refuses to launch. We had to call:

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strace gnome-theme-manager
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to get to the bottom of this issue, and were forced to delete the subdirectory to resolve it – a bit more help from the Theme Manager, like an error message, would have been appreciated.

Consistency & Intuitiveness

Apart from these teething problems, the changes are useful. New users often tended to capitulate when faced with configuring earlier GNOME versions, as the required options were not presented in a cohesive manner. Now, users no longer need to worry about whether an option is the domain of the file manager, the window manager preferences, or the Gtk theme.

Simplified configuration options are apparent throughout. Although all the GNOME configuration modules are still accessible via the menu, a compact version is available by typing *preferences:///* in the Nautilus address box (Figure 5).

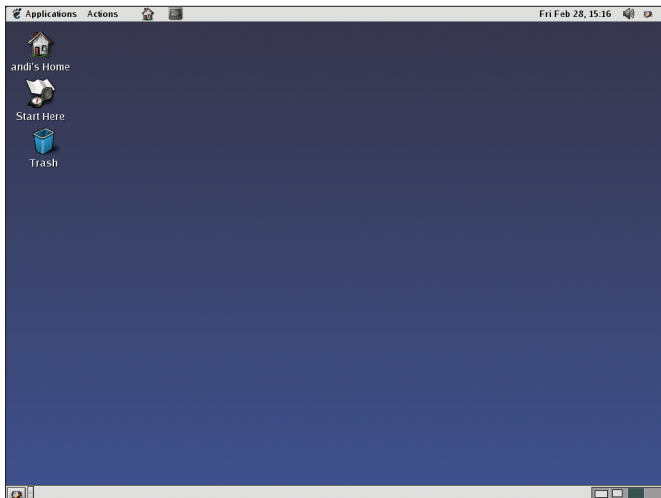Figure 3: Displaying multiple clocks in the panel
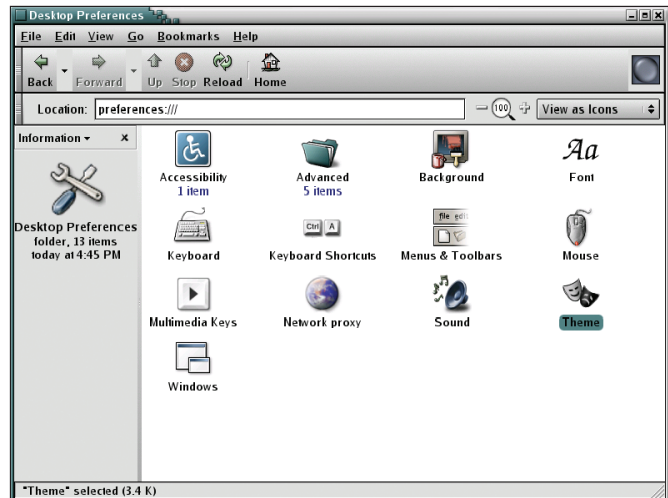
Figure 4: GNOME 2.2 looks familiar

Figure 5: Compact GNOME configuration via Nautilus

A menu that provides an item displaying the user's complete KDE menu is another feature that can save you a lot of work (Figure 6); that is, if you have compiled GNOME yourself, or are using a distribution without a menu system of its own.

The panel also has a few new features. The action menu provides quick access to recently accessed files, and the search function allows you to open files directly using a suitable application. The panel now also boasts a message box for use by messaging programs.

...at what price?

Although these simplifications may be welcome to newbies, one should not overlook the fact that a large proportion of GNOME's flexibility and configurability have been lost in the process, and after all, this is what long-term users liked best about the GNOME desktop environment. One prime example of this is GNOME's default window manager, *metacity*. If you select a screen resolution of 800 x 600 pixels, some application windows will overfill the desktop.

Also *metacity* does not even allow you to scroll the desktop window outside of

these boundaries to access the status bar. Similarly, there is no way to tell windows to overlay the panel; users can choose between a panel that hides automatically, or one that stays in the foreground.

Unfortunately, there is no replacement for *metacity* at present, as no other window manager interacts as seamlessly with GNOME.

Don't hold your breath while waiting for these issues to be fixed; the developers do not regard them as missing features, but rather as indicative of a design paradigm change. To quote the developers: "GNOME is one of the few open source projects to take a stand for ease of use and UI consistency over geeky hyper-configurability." [1] The Human Interface Guidelines, on which the current implementation is based, are available from [2] – you can decide for yourself whether or not they make usability sense.

A Question of Choice

There is no generic answer to the question of which is the better desktop – individual concepts of ergonomics and ease-of-use are simply too diverse. KDE is highly configurable, allowing you to pinpoint your needs and reflect them in your desktop environment, whereas GNOME provides a less generous helping of options, at the same time making the desktop more accessible to the inexperienced.

The GNOME developers' argument – that many configuration options are simply unnecessary gimmicks, required only by a few users, and confusing to the

masses – cannot be entirely dismissed, even though their radical approach to implementing this concept is somewhat objectionable.

Choosing a desktop is a matter of personal taste, and users will have to decide for themselves whether to update or stay put. Having said that, the numerous bugfixes incorporated by both projects do speak in favor of an upgrade and, as packages are available for most major distributions, the transition should not be too difficult. Those of you still sitting on the fence might like to take a look at [3] and [4] before you make up your minds. ■
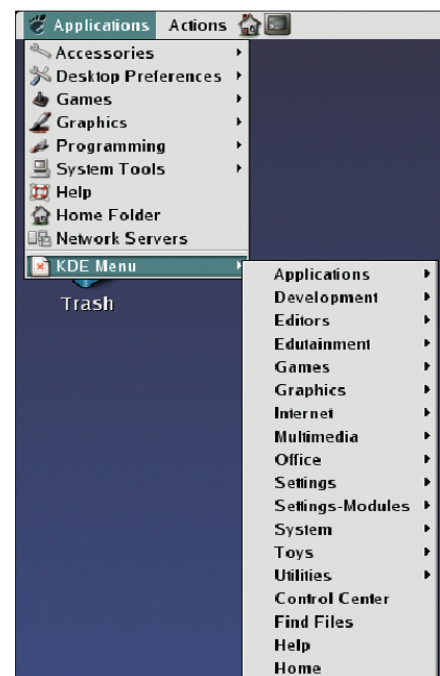

Figure 6: GNOME integrating an existing KDE menu into its own

INFO
[1] http://www.gnome.org/start/2.2/notes/rnwhy.html#id2808366
[2] http://developer.gnome.org/projects/gup/hig/
[3] http://promo.kde.org/3.1/feature_guide.php
[4] http://www.gnome.org/start/2.2/notes/rnwhatsnew.html