

XPde

XPdition to Redmond

Have you ever tried to get friends or acquaintances interested in Linux? In many cases it is simply a question of habit that makes users keep on using Windows. However, XPde could change all that, by hiding your favorite system beneath a look alike environment.

BY ANDREA MÜLLER

The title might sound slightly ominous, but never fear, the author has not lost her dictionary and Linux Magazine has definitely not taken an interest in Redmond based operating systems.

Having said that, many users stick to Windows simply because they have become used to its looks; help, in the form of a similar environment, is sorely needed. As intuitive as the **desktop environments** and window managers provided by Linux may be, working with them feels different, and the options are at completely different places than on Windows XP.

Users familiarizing themselves with a new operating system are often faced by a cultural shock: the vast choice of desktop environments. As Windows converts take a while to appreciate the variety and freedom choice that Linux provides, José León decided to create an environment called *XPde* [1] that imitates the Windows XP desktop and minimizes possible migration pains.

deskTOPia

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Figure 1: XPde on initial launch

Simple Installation

Although this is unusual for a Linux program, XPde is not written in C or C++, but in Borland Kylix [2]. Users wanting to compile XPde themselves will need to have Kylix Open Edition installed as a minimum requirement, although one can safely assume that most users will be only too glad to use the pre-compiled version provided by the author. To install this version, simply unzip the *tar.gz* archive and change directory to *xpde-0.3.0*. Once there type

```
su
enter the root password
./install.sh
exit
```

to install XPde in the */opt/xpde* directory. If you want to get rid of the Windows look some time in the future, you can simply delete the whole package by deleting this directory. Normal users wanting to launch XPde will then need to type the following in the *xpde-0.3.0* directory

```
./setup.sh
```

This script copies the XPde configuration files to your home directory. The directory that the script creates, *~/xpde*, contains the default background and Start menu. Additionally, the *xinitrcDE-FAULT* file is copied to the user's home directory.

GLOSSARY

Desktop environment: *In contrast to a window manager that simply manages windows, a desktop environment offers the user a lot more in the way of applications with an identical look & feel, globally valid desktop shortcuts, and no-hassle data exchange between programs within the framework of a uniform working environment.*

~: *Shortcut for a user's home directory on Linux. This is where users will store configuration files for the applications they use, and of course their private data.*

startx: *When you log on to a console and are presented with a text based system, this simple but powerful command can be used to launch a GUI desktop.*

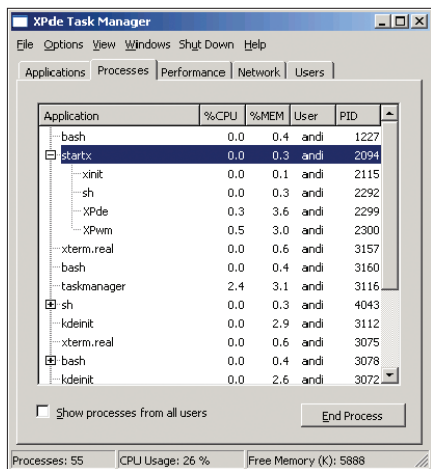


Figure 2: A perfect copy of the Windows XP task manager

The file contains some lines that you will need to copy to your `.xinitrc` to launch XPde when you enter `startx`.

If you use a GUI login, the `.xsession` is probably the place to insert these lines. As the start configuration for the X Window systems varies from distribution to distribution, you might like to consult the manual for more details.

So much to do...

When launched for the first time XPde surprises the user with its amazing resemblance to Windows XP's classic look (Figure 1).

The windowing concept is also Windows like; clicking on a window moves it into the foreground. Also, just like the system it imitates, XPde does not allow you to modify this behavior. Don't bother looking for the default XP theme, Luna, by the way; the developer does not like this theme and has assigned a low priority to its development.

Nearly all the dialog boxes and a few applications have already been completed, but numerous menu items and buttons still do not work. At present, there is no way to configure the taskbar, although the drop-down menu does contain an entry that would suggest otherwise. Although you can move the desktop icons, nothing happens when you double-click on them.

Similarly, you can create new folders, but not rename them or delete them using the drop-down menu. A radical `rmdir` in the command line will remove the folder physically, but this does not stop XPde from displaying it; in fact, you

have to re-launch XPde to get rid of the phantom folder.

We continually found features that are represented by a front-end only, but the version number, 0.3.0, is a good indication of the fact that this project is incomplete. If you are interested in details on future developments, a quick look at the `/opt/xpde/share/doc/planning/developmentplan.txt` file provides the answers.

XPerience on Linux

XPde imitates the look of Windows XP, and the functionality it provides assures that erstwhile XP users should feel at home. The Windows task manager provides details on processes or the network status. If you launch the *Task Manager* item in the XPde taskbar you will hardly notice the difference. The *Processes* tab, which provides a tree view of the current processes, is a really good imitation that allows you to kill troublesome tasks on the spot (see Figure 2).

The *Performance* tab provides details on CPU and memory loads. Unfortunately, there isn't a function to display windows permanently in the foreground at present. Right-clicking on the desktop will open a drop-down menu with an item called *Preferences* that opens a dialog box where you can configure the display properties. There aren't many

configuration options available at present, although the wallpaper function works. If you have installed Windows XP, you can even use the XP wallpaper (see Figure 3).

The Start Menu

Besides offering Windows XP looks, the Start menu also provides a few applications based on their Redmond counterparts. Check the *Programs / Accessories* item to find out more.

The Explorer clone is more or less unusable at present, as it is extremely incomplete and even buggy in parts. If your machine has a CD writer and a DVD drive, the tree view will show only CD drives. Although you might be able to come to terms with that, crashes while copying do tend to undermine one's confidence and render the program effectively useless as a file manager. However, this is excusable, at the current development stage. Worry-free navigation of the directories is only available in the tree view at present.

Fortunately, some other applications are at a far more advanced stage of development. The editor launched by the *Notepad* menu item is usable and hardly discernible from its Windows role-model with respect to its ease of use and meager editing functionality, although the find function is not fully implemented.

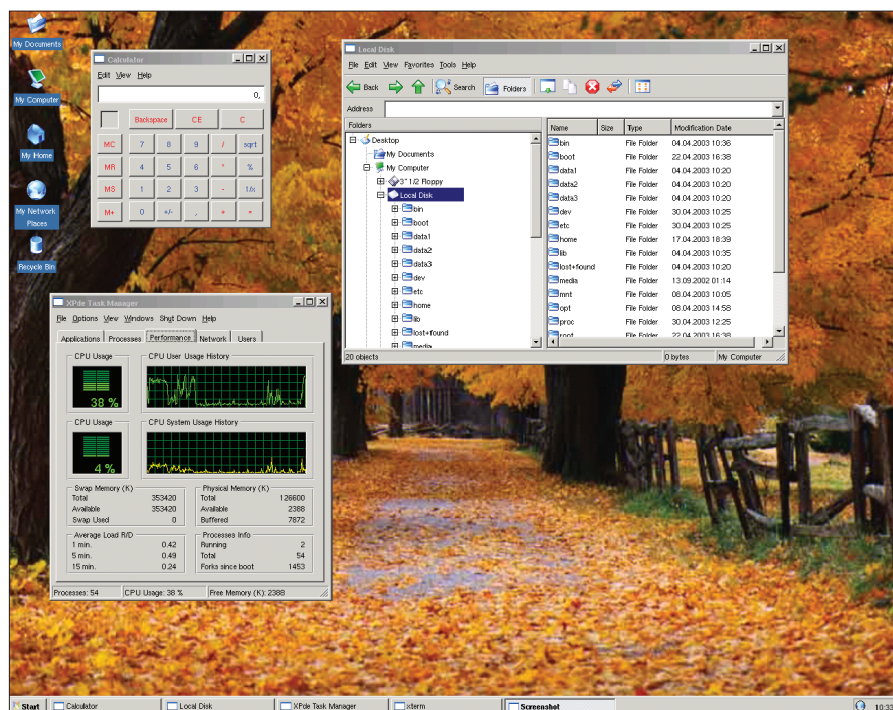


Figure 3: The XPde applications calculator, taskmanager and explorer

The (*Calculator*) should bring a smile to the faces of XP converts; it really does look like it was surgically removed from a Windows XP monitor.

At present the desktop still lacks a front-end that allows users to add programs to the Start menu; instead you still have to resort to the editor. The menu items are stored in the `~/ .xpde/Start Menu/Programs` folder and its subfolders. The following command adds a personal folder for additional programs to the Start menu:

```
mkdir ~/.xpde/Start\Menu/Programs/Private
```

The backslash (\) is used to mask the space character in *Start Menu* (if you use tab completion in the shell, you can just ignore this). To add a menu entry for *sylpheed* to your *Private* folder, simply create a file called *Sylpheed.lnk* with the following content in that folder:

```
[Shortcut]
Command=sylpheed
```

You can follow these steps to create additional menu items, and then restart XPde to display them in the Start menu.

A Question of Preferences

The *Settings* item in the Start menu provides access to XPde's system

preferences. There was an occasional glitch that failed to open the preferences despite double-clicking on "Settings", however, command-line access worked just fine. You need to be aware of where programs are stored, that is in `/opt/xpde/bin/applets`. If you do not want to add this directory to your **path**, the command-line syntax for the mouse settings is as follows:

```
/opt/xpde/bin/applets/mouse
```

The individual modules are at different stages of development. The mouse preferences and network status both work quite well. When launched from the command-line the latter expects a network interface as a parameter. The syntax for displaying the status of the *ppp0* interface is as follows:

```
/opt/xpde/bin/applets/networkstatus -i ppp0
```

If you don't know which interfaces are available, you can specify the `-l("list")` flag for the program to display a list of network interfaces.

xpsu is another interesting tool that allows you to launch programs with *root* privileges. To do so, type

```
/opt/xpde/bin/applets/xpsu program name
```

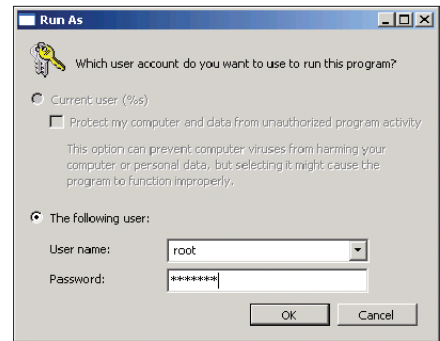


Figure 5: The *runas* clone *xpsu*

This works just like *runas* on Windows and opens a dialog box where you can type the username and password (see Figure 4) to launch a program with these credentials.

Early Conclusions

All in all, XPde falls short of the target it has set itself at present. Windows users interested in migrating are more likely to run for cover than enjoy the experience. The components that have been implemented already are convincing. Both the excellent copy of the desktop elements, and some of the applications demonstrate the genuine potential of the XPde project.

José León's team plans to implement a few more menu items in the next version, 0.4.0, and you can look forward to additional applications such as a connection wizard to provide intuitive Internet access.

Experienced users who are not afraid of one or two bugs, should consider taking a look at XPde at its current development stage, if for no other reason than to amaze friends and acquaintances who still use Windows. When the version number finally reaches 1.x, the XPde desktop should convince even those Windows users who are too scared to give Linux a trial run. ■

GLOSSARY

Path: Search path for executables. A program that resides in your path can be called by its name only. The `echo $PATH` command displays a list of the current search path directories.

INFO

[1] Xpde: <http://www.xpde.com/>

[2] Kylix: <http://www.borland.com/kylix/>

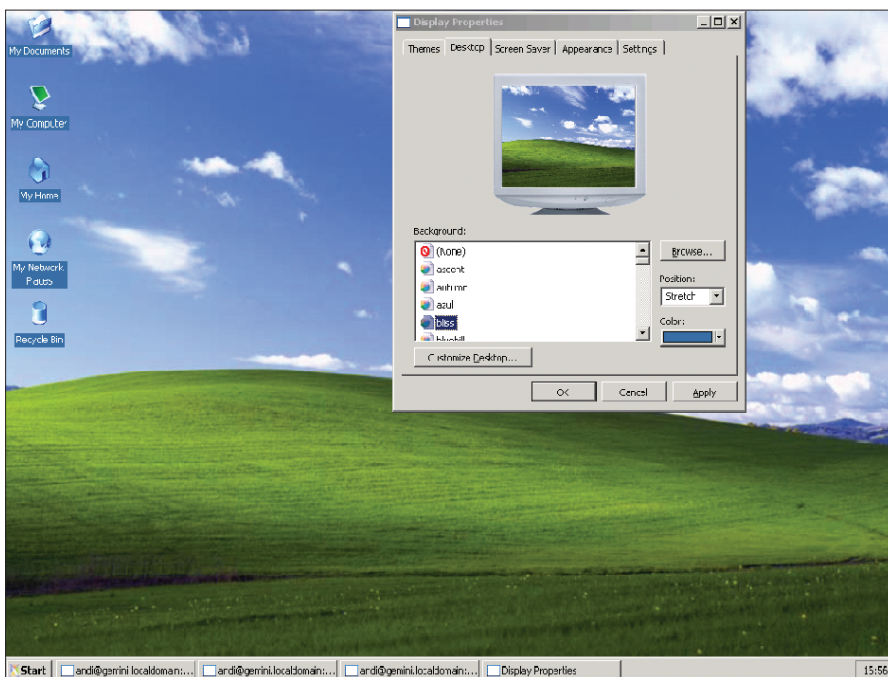


Figure 4: Linux or Windows, that is the question