



KDE 3.2 final release imminent

Last Stop

The KDE developers failed to meet the December 2003 deadline for KDE 3.2.

New and improved functions and programs may make the long wait worthwhile. We checked out Release Candidate 1. **BY CARSTEN SCHNOBER**

The KDE developers set themselves a demanding pace at their conference in August 2003 [1]. The first KDE 3.2 beta was actually released just a month later, but they failed to meet the December deadline for the final version. Although Release Candidate 1 still suffers from teething trouble in the form of program crashes, it does provide interesting insights under the hood of the new KDE.

Minor Differences

Although the KDE team itself has not published binary packages of the Release Candidate, external package compilers have been busy.

Admittedly, the installation has a few rough edges at this stage. Our recommendation is to completely uninstall your existing KDE first, to avoid conflicts with installed packages. Also, make sure that you back up your `~/kde` directory (this is where your personal KDE preferences are stored) to a safe location, as version 3.2 can't use this information.

After successfully navigating the installation of the unfinished version, you may be surprised at how minor the differences appear on the surface. There are a lot of new icons, wallpapers, styles, color schemes and miscellaneous eye candy items. A closer look reveals that the most interesting changes concern the applications.

First and foremost, the file and Web browser, Konqueror, which has a mass

of new features. The speed with which Web pages are displayed is frighteningly fast in comparison to previous versions. Rendering issues seem to be a thing of the past.

Attention to detail in the improved browser certainly enhances the daily Internet surfing experience for the user. *Tab browsing* has finally been introduced to the KDE browser. As an alternative to tabbing, you can display two independent view windows tiled horizontally or vertically, where each window can display a Web page or a local directory (see Figure 2).

User-configurable keyboard shortcuts facilitate access to most known search engines. For example, you can simply type `gg:`, followed by a search key, to search Google and display the results directly on the main page. Typing `fm:` allows you to access *freshmeat.net*; in fact, there are over 60 pre-configured shortcuts. New options are available for the file browser. In combination with the

GnuPG front-end *KCpg*, you can encrypt files or even whole directories at the click of a mouse via the drop-down menu. If required, you can use the same technique to add files and directories to tar archives, which Konqueror will optionally compress.

The all-round browser facilitates local network access by providing cross operating system integration facilities. A Samba plug-in makes browsing Windows shares far easier for the user.

Developer Fun

Most users of "real" programming languages will question the aptness of using a HTML editor for development work. Despite this, KDE still assigns *Quanta Plus*, which is now a basic component, to the *Development* submenu.

In response to promotion, Quanta Plus tries to give more developer support, providing syntax highlighting for multiple programming languages. Quanta 3.2

is very PHP-friendly with a tree view that sorts loops, objects, and functions into well-organized branches.

The *KDevelop* [2] developer environment has been approaching the jump to the totally updated version 3.0 (Codename *Gideon*) for some time. The important thing for programmers is that version 3.0 not only supports C++, but also Java and C. The old issues with the *Autoconf* compiler utility have finally been resolved, and the developers have enhanced the interface.

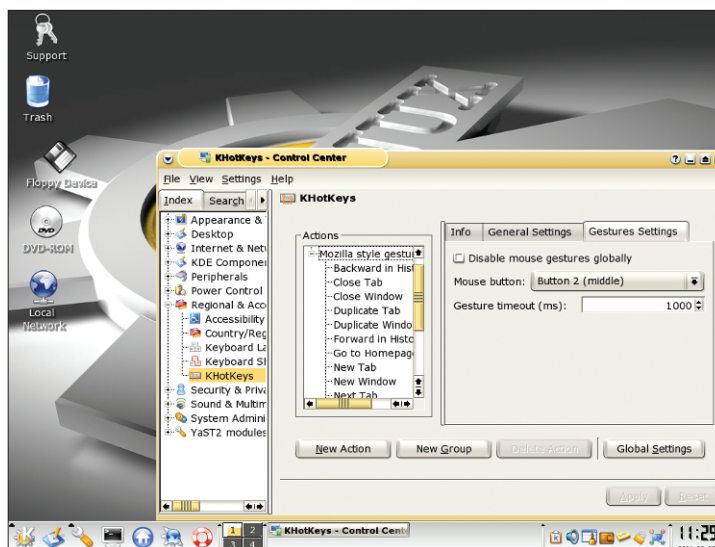


Figure 1: Only minor changes at first glance: KDE 3.2.

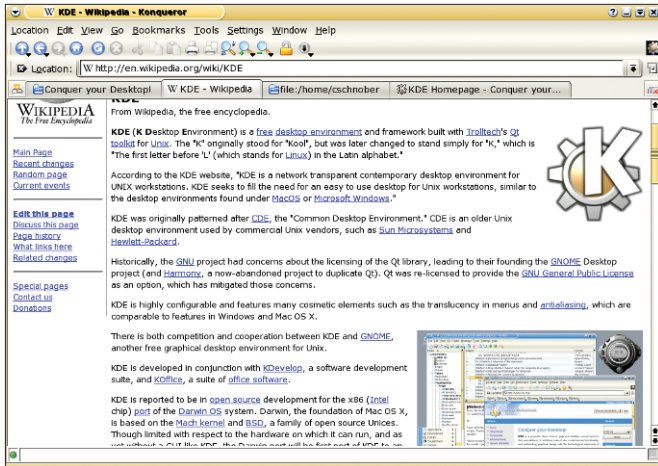


Figure 2: The Web and file browser, Konqueror, with its new view mode.

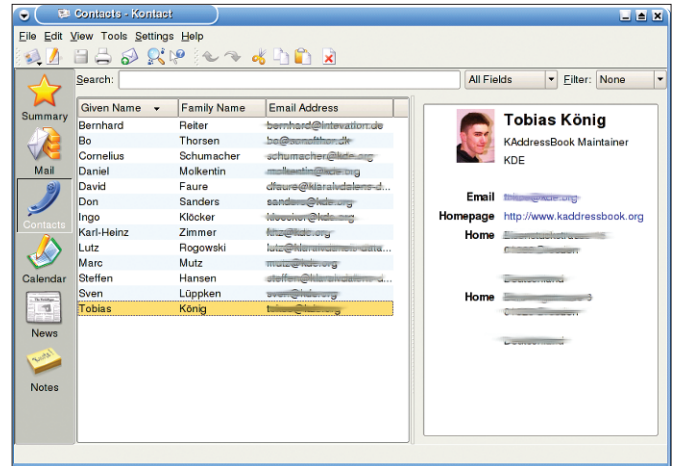


Figure 3: Kontakt integrates the KDE PIM applications.

Variety

Version 3.2 will see many additions to the collection of tools that make KDE so popular with so many users. Besides the groupware project, *Kontakt* [3], (see Figure 3), *KOrganizer*, *KMail*, the KDE address book, and another PIM application, the desktop now includes *KWallet*, a useful new tool (see Figure 4). The program sits in the panel and waits for input in the form of usernames and passwords.

When you type a password, to access your email messages for example, *KWallet* offers to store the password, and provide protection by means of the master password. Safety-conscious users may not be thrilled at the idea of storing passwords on the hard disk with only a master password to protect them; but if you have a large number of email accounts to manage, or a large number of passwords to remember for other reasons, you might be glad of the virtual memory hook.

The developers have also put a lot of effort into enhancing the *KOffice* package. KDE's slightly cryptic multimedia applications *Noatun* and *Kaboodle* now

have a rival audio player called *Juk*. Direct editing of ID3 tags, which MP3 files use to store information on the track name, the artist, and other details, and the ability to handle multiple simultaneous playlists may finally convince more music fans to use a KDE tool in future. Many MP3 collectors avoid the older KDE players due to their lack of, or unintuitive, playlist management facilities.

KDE has added a few standard tools that have been popular with KDE users for quite a while. For example, the *Kopete* instant messenger has been added to the KDE PIM package in version 3.2; and as previously mentioned, *KGpg* has been added as a basic tool.

Gestures of Grandeur

The introduction of mouse gestures is one of the most controversial new features. This program control method, which many Web browsers have used for some years now, is available throughout the desktop, thanks to *KHotKeys*.

You can record mouse gestures in the appropriate Control Center module, and apply the gestures globally, or to application-specific commands and keyboard shortcuts. For example, you could hold down the middle mouse button, and perform the appropriate mouse gesture, to open your home directory with the Konqueror file manager.

It is typical of KDE that the developers have decided to introduce this feature, which has just as many opponents as proponents. Users can decide for themselves whether the abundance of new features is becoming too much of a good thing.

Although the multitude of options does not cause any direct harm, even if you do not need some of the features on offer, it does make it harder to find the function you need. Some drop-down menus are just as overloaded as the Control Center.

Attention to Detail

At first glance, KDE 3.2 may not appear to offer any major changes. The over abundance of new options could frighten off the more Spartan users. On the other hand, the work put into improving the collaboration between a variety of applications and network environments may not be immediately apparent, although it is far more important to improve the daily computing experience for KDE users.

You should avoid installing Release Candidate 1, unless you desperately need one of the new features. The upgrade path with the existing binary packages is a hard slog, and probably not worth the risk in production environments, with the final release of KDE 3.2 just around the corner, and the distributions stamping their hooves in anticipation. When it finally arrives, let's hope that KDE 3.2 opens up the path to more widespread use of Linux on the desktop. ■

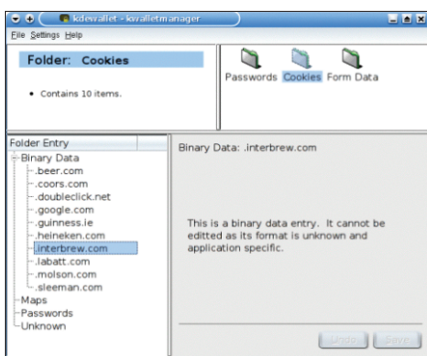


Figure 4: KWallet stores user credentials.

INFO

[1] Patricia Jung, "There's an aim called 3.2", *Linux Magazine*, Issue 36, November 2003 p86

[2] KDevelop: <http://www.kdevelop.org/>

[3] Kontakt: <http://kontakt.org/>