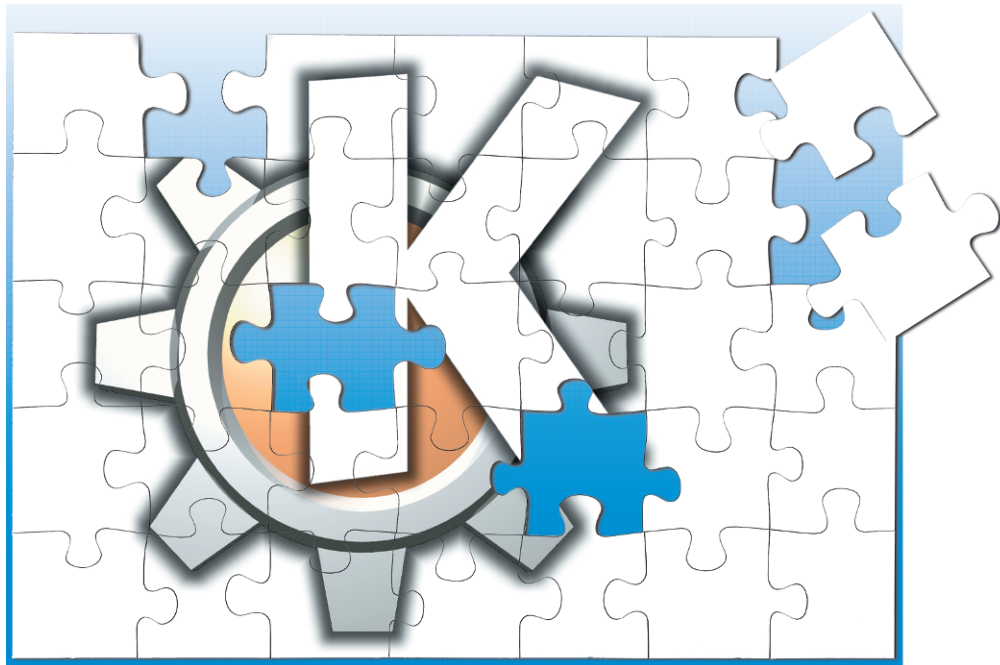


KDE 3.2 on Suse 9.0 Usability Report

We Are Almost There

Hands off software versions with a zero after the decimal point! Major Open Source projects are typically no exception to this rule – if you prefer a bug free software to the latest features, that is. But what exactly are the issues that users moving to KDE 3.2(.0) need to look out for?

BY WERNER HARRICHHAUSEN



KDE 3.2 is better than its predecessor. In fact, this has been true of every new KDE release. It has the KWallet password and credentials manager, the Kontact **PIM Suite**, the JuK Jukebox (see page 74), the Kopete instant messenger, and the Kig geometry program just to name a few. All of these programs have entered that illustrious circle of **core packages**. Existing programs offer a wide selection of new features and improved usability.

However, novelty is not always what users look for. Humans are creatures of habit, and it is often more important to users that their favorite programs work just like they always did. This is why we will be looking into the issue of the pitfalls that unsuspecting users might run into after an update. The examples we

will be looking at are just an arbitrary selection. The KDE bug reporting system (<http://bugs.kde.org/>) provides ample opportunity for more detailed research. We will leave it up to readers to decide for themselves if the enhancements in KDE 3.2 are worth taking the hurdles – after all, people have different requirements, and for many, it won't be the first time that you have had to tolerate bugs.

Our lab systems use Suse Linux 9.0 – users of other distributions may get lucky and not actually experience some of the problems that we had. We used the 3.2 KDE Beta versions 3.1.94, 3.1.95, plus the 3.2 version from the Suse FTP server [1]. All of these versions displayed the symptoms described in this article.

Mail First

The first thing that many users look to, is getting their email working, and the new KMail version actually does this. Sadly, the good initial impression was rather spoiled by an error that dropped filtered email messages into a black hole. Unfortunately, this not only happened to filtered mail, but from time to time messages failed to appear either in the inbox

or in a subdirectory assigned as a mailbox. The same problem also occurred when we used a POP filter.

The KDE project introduced a **patch** [3] for the issue on February 5, however, the patch was missing from Suse's own KDE packages for Suse 9.0 [1], and in the latest official KDE/Suse 9.0 packages from February 3 [2].

Calling Info Center

As of KDE 3.2, KMail is no longer a stand-alone application, but instead a component of the Kontact information center, which also includes the KNode newsreader, the KOrganizer calendar, the KDE address book, virtual sticky notes courtesy of KNotes, and a few other tools.

Unfortunately, KOrganizer does not seem happy as just one program among many, and tends to "forget" its current planning data from time to time. You need to reload the `.ics` file to regain access to your data. Next time you launch the program under Kontact, it's goodbye data once again. This issue does not occur if you launch KOrganizer as a stand-alone application.

THE AUTHOR

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KOrganizer also loses colored highlighting for appointments or appointment groups. In this case, the bug occurs with or without Kontact. We were unable to fix this problem before this issue went to press.

Password?!

Some of the other new members of the KDE in crowd also have teething trouble, for example KWallet. This tool provides password management facilities for Web access – a good idea, as is evidenced

by similar functions in the Opera and Mozilla browsers. The idea behind KWallet was to provide password management facilities for multiple applications.

When you launch the program by typing *kwalletmanager*, a small wallet icon appears in the bottom right-hand corner of the panel. You can click the icon to display an empty window, and then select *File / New digital wallet...* to open the setup dialog. You are prompted to enter your master password, as shown in Figure 1.

If you then launch KNode, KWallet wants to see your master password again, plus the password for the news server. Okay so far. But the next time you launch KNode, the program wants the same passwords yet again, both for KWallet and for the new server. You can go on repeating this for ever. Incidentally, this problem also occurs when you attempt to access your KMail mailboxes. The only answer, as far as we could see, was to stop using KWallet.

Let me in!

We are not sure if the KDE wallet application plays the same trick with the KBear [4] FTP program, and there is a

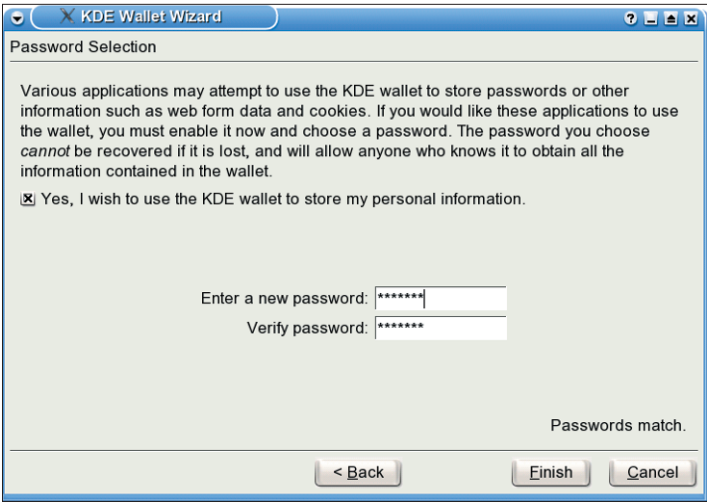


Figure 1: The checkmark that removes the need to memorize a thousand passwords raises false hopes.

good reason for this. As soon as you launch this (non KDE core) package on KDE 3.2 and access a FTP server, the whole GUI freezes (we tested versions 2.1-395 and 2.1-413).

Our attempts to kill the active X server by pressing [Ctrl-Alt-Backspace] failed. Our only hope was to press [Ctrl-F1] to switch to a text console, log on as *root*, and launch *init 3*, followed by *init 5*. KDE 3.2 refused to play ball until we had downed the X server and restarted.

Fortunately, there is a workaround that worked on a few occasions. Before launching KBear on KDE 3.2, first delete the *kbear* folder below */home/user-name/.kde/apps/*. The folder is created the next time you launch the FTP program. On the downside, the workaround provide unreliable. It did not work with the Beta versions, although it worked with the ready-made KDE 3.2 packages from Suse.

Everything Running?

We experienced similar issues with the X server freezing at times, however, these errors were irreproducible and seemingly arbitrary. The fact that several programs occasionally crashed, although the

effects weren't quite as devastating, made us wonder why the KDE project hadn't waited for tests to be completed before going for the "stable" release. Was it because the official release date was way overdue, and they didn't dare wait any longer? Or has their been a lack of user feedback on the Beta version that led to the project assuming that the software was mature enough for a wider market?

Our conclusion has to be that KDE 3.2 has definitely made a giant leap forward.

Unhappily, anyone who needs a reliable Linux workhorse is well advised to steer clear of KDE 3.2 for the time being. It is definitely worth waiting for the genuinely stable KDE 3.1.5 version, which will have removed the current teething trouble. If you need reliability, you might even consider waiting for a future KDE 3.2.1, or even KDE 3.2.2 release before you make the upgrade.

Another thing that disappointed us was the fact that Suse had not managed to provide a *kdebase3-SuSE* RPM package for KDE 3.2 for download by the time this issue went to press. Suse Linux users with KDE 3.2 will have to do without KDE control center integrated YaST modules, and file extension mappings for the time being.

INFO

[1] Suse Linux KDE 3.2 packages:
ftp://ftp.suse.com/pub/suse/i386/supplementary/KDE/update_for_9.0

[2] Official KDE download:
<ftp://ftp.kde.org/pub/kde/stable/3.2/>

[3] KMail patch:
ftp://ftp.kde.org/pub/kde/stable/3.2/src/kdepim-3.2.0-HOT_FIX_FOR_KMAIL.patch

[4] KBear:
<http://kbear.sourceforge.net/>

GLOSSARY		
<p>PIM Suite: <i>An integrated program collection providing features for managing personal data, such as email messages, addresses, and appointments ("Personal Information Management"); the advantage over individual programs (theoretically) being seamless data exchange and collaboration.</i></p>	<p>Core packages: <i>KDE desktop software is organized by its field of use, and distributed across multiple packages, of which only "kdelibs" and "kdebase" are mandatory. Any other programs (such as the "kdeedu" learning tools or the "kdegraphics" graphics tools) are only optional. Distributors tend to split the core</i></p>	<p><i>packages up into smaller chunks for easier handling.</i></p> <p>Patch: <i>A piece of software that removes a bug, or adds functionality. In the case of Open Source software, the patch often needs to be applied to the source code, and that means rebuilding.</i></p>