



FIRST STEPS SYSTEM MAINTENANCE SERIES

Upgrades Get more from KDE 3.4

PART 2 Drop shadows! Transparent windows! Always-on apps! Andy Channelle brings all these KDE riches and more to your desktop.

LAST TIME



Last month we looked at some of the tools available to keep a Linux system up to date, including *apt* for Debian systems and *RPM* for SUSE, Mandriva and Fedora. If you missed the issue, call 0870 837 4773 or +44 1858 438795 for overseas orders.



Staying abreast of open source upgrades can be a little difficult – the Linux development process is certainly not as centralised as Apple’s or Microsoft’s.

While the kernel is being developed by Linus Torvalds and friends, a ton of technology sits on top of it, and much of this is self-contained projects with their own release cycles, development teams, funding and so on.

Users with the time or inclination can expend a little effort in upgrading this technology – notably X and the desktop environment (KDE or Gnome usually) – to ensure that their Linux boxes are always running along the bleeding edge. The rest of us who are too busy or lazy to spend every spare hour on upgrades can let the distribution vendors do the hard work with their nine to 12-month release cycles and maintain our systems that way. Not for us a five-year wait for the next super-duper release!

KDE and Gnome tend to release updated versions every six months or so, meaning that the main distros often miss out on the most up-to-date flavour, though they offer prepared binaries via their FTP servers for those who really want them. There are exceptions to this; Ubuntu, for example, attempts to follow the release cycle set by Gnome, so new Ubuntu releases should hit

the mirrors (complete with the new version of the desktop) on the same day as the Gnome update.

The most recent KDE release, version 3.4, was published in March. If you live life on the bleeding edge, you will likely already have got your hands on it – binaries for various distros are available via KDE’s main website, or you may have grabbed the source packages and built them yourself (KDE has a nice graphical package called *Konstruct* for doing just that),

And even if you’re a ‘wait for the distro’ kind of guy, KDE 3.4 will be coming to your desktop very soon if it hasn’t already: it is available as part of SUSE 9.3, Fedora Core 4, Kubuntu and the latest Gentoo, to name but four.

So it’s high time we took a look at the new tools and toys available on the KDE desktop (Gnome users, don’t worry: next time we’ll do exactly the same for 2.10). This tutorial will introduce you to the best features in 3.4 to help you immediately make use of them. In the context of this series, I would recommend going for the complete upgrade or, failing that, using your distro’s package manager and distribution-specific packages. Remember, though, that the upgrade process should always begin with a backup of all important documents and downloads.

PART 1 – REFRESH YOUR DESKTOP

On the surface, there are no real revolutionary advances on the KDE desktop in 3.4: icons are still linked to applications, files or locations; the clock still tells the time; and the panel still pops up full of applications and other stuff. However, some things have changed. For example, it is now possible to define transparency for almost any element of the user interface (**Fig 1**), thanks to extensions within the underlying X server. Though this may seem like pointless eye candy, there are some real usability reasons for switching it on – provided you have the necessary hardware, which in this case means a pretty beefy 3D card.

Adding transparency and drop shadows to KDE requires a brief spell editing a configuration file and you'll have to do it after logging in as root. In KDE this can be done by opening the Run dialog (KPanel > Run) and typing `kdesu kwrite`. You will then be asked for the root password and the text editor *KWrite* will open with root privileges, so be careful what you are doing.

The file we need to edit in is the directory `/etc/X11` and is called `xorg.conf`. Once you have opened this, do File > Save As and call the file something like `xorg.old` as a backup. Now, at the end of the file we need to add the following:

```
Section "Extensions"
```

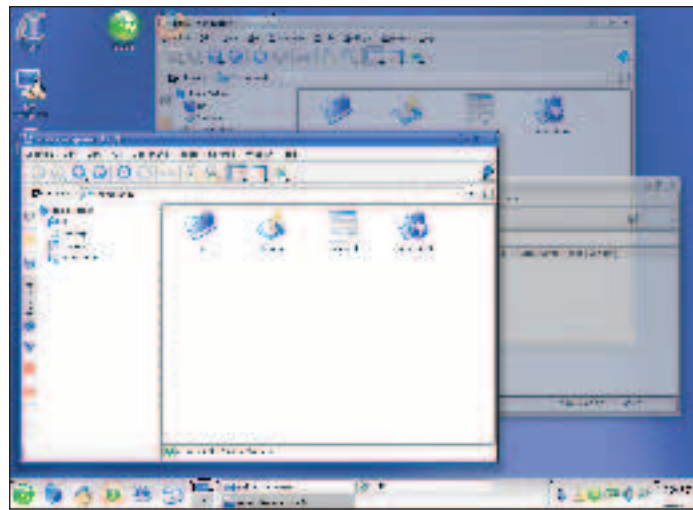
```
Option "Composite" "Enable"
```

```
EndSection
```

The file should then be saved, again with the Save As menu option, as `xorg.conf`. Once we have logged out of KDE, which should restart the X server, we can enable the transparency support. Go into the Control Panel, select Display > Window Behaviour and click on the Translucency tab. Hitting the Use Translucency/Shadows option should enable it. There are various options available in here relating to the transparency and shadows for both Active and Inactive windows, but be aware that the developers of this extension don't guarantee it will behave! I got pretty good results with an NVIDIA graphics card with 128MB RAM, but things slowed down a little on a machine with an integrated graphics chipset.

It is also possible, once this is set up, to adjust the transparency of the active window so you could, for example, work on a document in *OpenOffice.org Writer* while viewing a web page or email client beneath it. To set translucency for a window, right-click on the window's top bar and select Opacity and then change the percentage.

Oh, and while you're in this menu, there's a new entry in the Advanced section that provides options for configuring windows on an individual basis. This is very useful if, for instance, you wanted to set up *Gimp*'s toolbox window to stay on top of other



1/ Translucent windows are cool to look at, but they're also pretty useful.

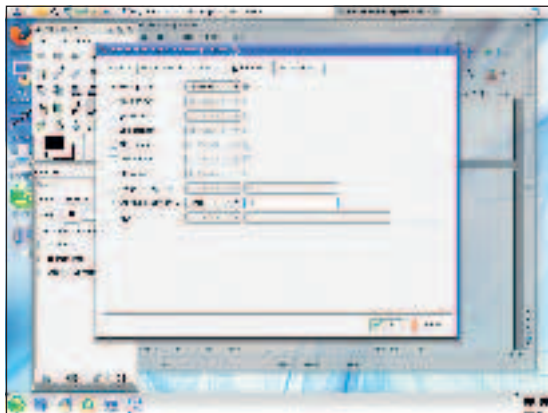
windows without having to change it every time the application is launched. Right-click on the top bar and do Advanced > Special Window Settings and choose the Preferences tab. The first option here is Keep Above; select this, change the dropdown menu to Force and hit the radio button beside it. This should mean that the next time *Gimp* is launched the main window will be set to stay on top.

You can also use this configuration box to set individual windows to open in particular places or desktops (**Fig 2**) and, if you want, to remove the window's border – useful in *Gimp*.

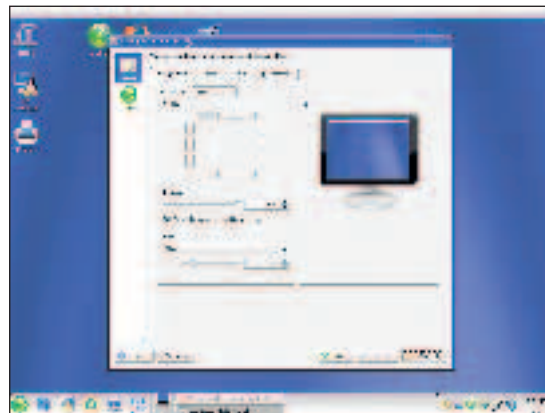
More panels, more control

Another cool way of adding extras to the KDE desktop is the use of supplementary panels. By default most users tend to have a panel sitting at the base of the screen, but it is quite simple to stick one at the top or on either side of the desktop. The two most useful panel types supported by KDE are the 'child' panel (**Fig 3**), which can do anything the regular one can including housing the pager (for switching virtual desktops), the taskbar and just about anything else; and the Universal Sidebar, which we will cover in a moment.

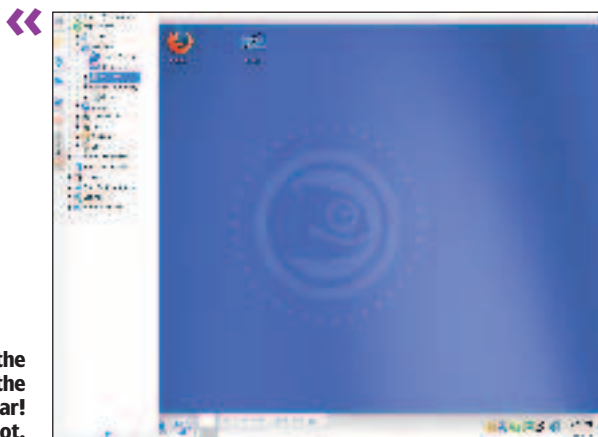
To add a child panel, simply right-click on the bottom panel and select Add To Panel > Panel > Panel. This will add a new normal-sized panel right above the bottom one. Now simply click and drag the panel to another edge of the screen; we can resize it by right-clicking, going into the Configure Panel option and changing the Size option. It's also possible to make panels >>



2/ In KDE 3.4 you can tailor options to individual windows.



3/ A child panel can give you more options for the desktop.



4/ It's a bar... on the side! Let's call it the KUniversal KSidebar! Oh, let's not.

translucent in the Appearance tab; remove the panel hide handles (which can be used to slide panels off of the screen when they're not in use); or add elements such as Recent Documents or a Quick Browser.

The Universal Sidebar (**Fig 4**) is a different beast altogether and provides very quick access your filesystem, bookmarks (if you use *Konqueror*), network shares, system settings and even *amaroK's* Context Browser. Again, this can be added to the desktop by right-clicking on an existing panel and selecting Add to Panel > Panel > Universal Sidebar. I tend to use autohide on this panel because when it's open it does take up a significant amount of space. However, on a big, high-resolution monitor, it's great to have so much stuff to hand with so little effort.

It is also possible to add news feeds to the Universal Sidebar, which we can do in part 2.

PART 2 – SET UP AN RSS FEED

KDE's Personal Information Manager (PIM) apps have been packaged into the *Kontact*, er, package since KDE 3.2. Version 3.4 brings a major addition in the form of RSS support.

In case you've been playing *Unreal Tournament* for the last nine months, I'd better explain that RSS is a protocol that lets website administrators package up their content so that it can be accessed at predefined intervals by special reader software. In effect, it delivers the news to your desktop from a variety of sources. Most of the technology sites such as Slashdot, Groklaw and The Register have had feeds available for some time, but it's not just restricted to websites aimed at computer nerds.

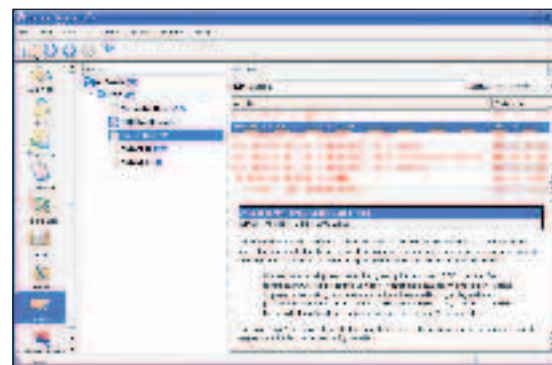
RSS has become the technology *du jour* over the past 12 months, with decent facilities being added to both *Firefox* and *Opera's* new browser suite (see page 28). Not to be left behind, KDE 3.4 has added RSS facilities to the desktop. To see them in action, we are going to set up a feed from the BBC's news home page and then configure it to update every hour. We could, if needed, have the application fetch the news every minute, but this would involve using up more bandwidth than is necessary, and may ultimately annoy the hell out of whoever pays for it at the other end.

The normal procedure is to manage and browse feeds via the badly named *akregator* application. But thanks to some clever planning and programming, this can be accessed as an integral part of *Kontact*, and also works in tandem with *Konqueror* and other parts of the desktop. This is because KDE is modular in structure.

First, though, we will look at how to browse and then, if needed, remove the default feeds. When *akregator* is first launched – either on its own 'location' or through *Kontact* – you'll notice that some feeds have already been defined (**Fig 1**). By and large these are specific to KDE and KDE development, and may be of little interest to the casual user. You can download the content of these feeds by hitting the Download All icon, which is third from the left on the main toolbar. It is possible to update an individual feed by right-clicking on its name and selecting Fetch Feed or hitting Ctrl+L. To make the most of RSS, a broadband connection is really a prerequisite. The prospect of the application having to fire up a modem and dial out to update a feed every ten minutes rightly puts most people off.

A closer look at the layout

The *akregator* interface is based on the same conventions as *KMail* (and most other mail clients): available feeds are ranged vertically down the left side of the application window, and clicking on one of these will open a selection of stories in the



1/ Akregator comes with a pile of KDE-centric feeds already set up. Ariya is a *KSpread* developer, you know.

top right-hand pane. Furthermore, clicking on one of these stories should open either a fuller headline, or a text version of the entire story in the bottom pane.

Some sites tend to just reiterate the headline in this section – which sort of defeats the object of the technology – and these will probably require you click on the link within to view the whole page, while others will display a précis or even the full text of the article. It's difficult to begrudge the sites that do the former, because RSS would appear to be the ideal technology for avoiding the kind of advertisements that tend to pay for content.

The resultant story should be perfectly rendered in the bottom pane, thanks to the *Konqueror Kpart*, but it is also possible to open stories in your default browser by specifying it in the preferences. Do Settings > Configure Akregator and select the Browser tab. There are a number of options to play with here, but the most important defines an external browser. By default, the command listed will open *Mozilla*, but if you have *Firefox* installed, simply changing the **mozilla** portion to **firefox** should work. If you want to test it before committing to the change, open the Run dialog (*Kpanel* > Run Command) and type **firefox**. If the *Firefox* browser launches, then the command will work within *akregator*.

New news

Chances are that most users will soon tire of reading all that KDE news that has thoughtfully been provided, so we'll remove the default feeds and set up some more general sources. To remove a feed, right-click on its name and select Delete Feed or hit Alt+Delete. Do this for all the feeds you don't need. Remember that the application's feed tree is similar to any file

QUICK TIP

RSS in the Universal Sidebar
To receive RSS news feeds in the Universal Sidebar, right-click on it and select Add New > Newsticker. Now right-click the top of the window (where the address is) and choose Configure Newsticker. You can manually add web addresses in here and then browse the sites directly from the desktop. Smart. Once connected, you will see headlines. Double-clicking on one will open the story in the browser.

tree, so you can order new feeds by their type: work, leisure, entertainment or whatever, and give each type its own folder by right-clicking on the 'root' folder and selecting New Folder.

There is an easy way and a hard way to add new feeds, and we'll cover the difficult one first. It may seem a little sadistic, but it helps to know the underlying structure of this sort of thing.

The BBC's headline news feed is accessed via the following address: http://newsrss.bbc.co.uk/rss/newsonline_uk/edition/front_page/rss.xml. This is pretty much the same as a normal URL, except that the last portion points to an XML file rather than an HTML one. You could type it into the address bar of your browser to see how the actual file is ordered. Right-click on the All Feeds entry on the feed tree and select Add Feed. In the Add Feed dialog box, type in the URL mentioned above and also give it a description, say BBC News (Fig 2).

We can also select a time period for updates (remembering the tip earlier that setting one minute updates will cause the feed provider to hate you), and define how many articles should be kept in the archive. Once this is done, hit OK then select the Fetch All Feeds icon. Within a few seconds, there should be a selection of stories under the BBC News heading. Click on one to see the short version in the bottom pane.

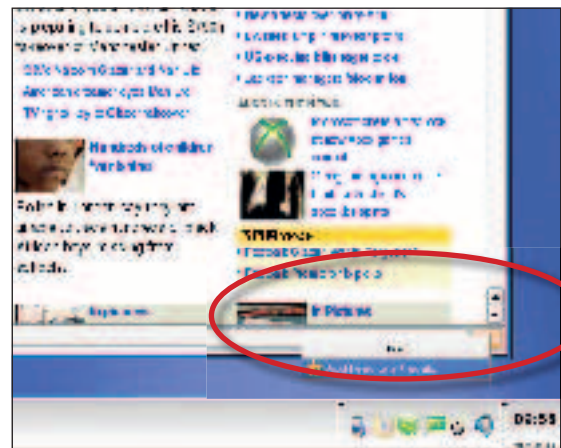
The easy way to add a feed is to open up *Konqueror*, navigate to the BBC news website (<http://news.bbc.co.uk>) and notice the little RSS icon that appears in the bottom right of the



2/ Manually editing or adding feeds is quite easy...

browser's window (Fig 3). Click on this and select Add Feed To Akregator. And that's it. If you open up *Kontakt* now, the feed will be available under the Imported Feeds entry and can be configured in the same way as a manually-entered feed.

One last thing to mention: if you go into the configuration options (Settings > Configure Akregator) and select the Show System Tray option, the RSS logo will stay in the system tray even when *Kontakt* is closed, and report on the number of new articles available. The same tool is also available for mail messages received in *KMail* and you can also set up notifications using the standard KDE control panel option.



3/ ... but it's easier to do it through *Konqueror*.

PART 3 – GIVE KONQUEROR DISTINCT TASKS

Like *Kontakt*, *Konqueror* has become something of a multi-tasker when it comes to data access on local filesystems, networks and the internet. This is because the design of KDE is very modular and its *Kpart* components can be mixed and matched with relative ease. *Kparts* are the reason why, for example, *KMail* is able to use *Konqueror*'s web rendering engine KHTML to display HTML messages and why *Konqueror* can browse websites just as well as managing local and remote files. My favourite thing about *Konqueror*, though, is the fact that the developers have understood that the tools needed for a file manager are different from those required for efficient web browsing and made it easy to 'repurpose' the application for a variety of tasks. More importantly, these different toolkits can be saved and accessed with just a few clicks.

We are going to set up two versions of *Konqueror*, one for web browsing and one for file management. Remember that what we are doing here is simply cosmetic, not changing the actual application.

Firstly, fire up *Konqueror* using the home icon on your panel or desktop. The standard format has the file tree on the left, an icon preview pane on the right and a range of icons below the

menu bar. These will cover everything from defining previews and setting the size of icons to searching through the file system. We can add or remove icons from this toolbar by doing Settings > Configure Toolbars. On the left of this dialog you should see all available icons, and on the right those in use. The four arrow icons in the centre either move icons from one pane to the other, or alter their position within the toolbar. You can play with these to your heart's content, but once you are satisfied with the way things look and work, exit the dialog box and do Settings > Save View Profile "File Management" to save the setup.

Now do Settings > Load View Profile > Web Browsing. This will repurpose *Konqueror* as a web browser complete with Google search box. You can now do the same as before: move the Address bar up, remove the 'loading animation' or whatever and then save the profile ready for later use.

If you mess up and end up with a completely unusable browser, just shut down the browser (before doing the Save stage mentioned above) and it should revert to its previous state. **LXF**

NEXT MONTH

In **LXF70** I'll show you how to take advantages of recent updates to Gnome. A Linux user never sleeps!

READY AND WAITING

KDE has had the ability to automatically run applications for ages. This facility is well hidden, but it is there. One very useful application to arrange to start on the launch of the desktop is *Kontakt*, which, as previously mentioned, manages email, RSS, your calendar and other vital stuff.

The first step is to discover the location of this application. You could do this by opening a console and typing which *kontakt*

The result should be something along the lines of /opt/kde3/bin/*kontakt*

Now open *Konqueror* and do View > Show Hidden Files. This will, as expected, show the files that *Konqueror* usually keeps hidden, including the dotfiles, which usually contain configuration options. It should now be possible to navigate to /home/[username]/.kde/

autostart. Anything placed within this directory will be launched immediately after KDE starts.

Right-click anywhere in the right-hand pane and select Create New > Link To Application. In the General tab you can give the shortcut a name and icon (if you like) and then go into the Application tab where most of the work will be done. The important entry here is Command. You should enter the output from the which *kontakt* command at left, or if *Kontakt* is in your path (which is highly likely), you could just enter *kontakt*.

You are also free to add links to URLs, websites or documents in here, so it's possible to set up KDE to start up exactly as you need it for general work sessions. It's even possible to set up different logins – work, leisure, games – with a complete set of auto-running applications and websites.