

Jo's alternative desktop

XFCE



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At first glance, the XFce desktop might remind the old UNIX hands amongst you of CDE (Common Desktop Environment). But XFce's nippy, easy-to-use interface also supports some modern features.

When it comes to posing almost any question, in the world of the UNIXes you're spoiled for choice. There are usually several programs to choose from that can solve your problem. The same goes for graphical user interfaces: All distributors agree that this choice must be made easier for the user, and just install one of the two big desktop environments – often without even asking if they are required. But as a general rule, the distributions also have a few other pearls, which have no need to hide behind powerful interfaces. One of these is XFce.

echo \$HOME

If there is no XFce on one of the silver discs from the distributor, we will be happy to help out: On the cover CD you will find what is, at the time of going to press, the latest version 3.8.3 – but by the time this issue hits the streets, this could be out of date,

as the development of XFce is anything but slow. In the six weeks it took for these lines to be prepared and typed, four new releases came out. During this period, not only were bugs corrected and details improved, but also all kinds of sensible innovations were implemented. If you like things up to date, take a look at <http://www.xfce.org/>. Unlike the package jungle of interfaces of a similar type, the people at XFce bundle absolutely everything into a single package, which at 3.4MB is not too big for download (for the source texts), just to try this environment out. "Can't be much in it", we hear some of you mumbling. Well, the ready-compiled source code at 38Mb proves to be an asset, and comes up with an impressive list of features:

- Modest hardware requirement
- Easy-to-use window manager "xfwm"
- Session management
- Front-ends for all options: No editing of configuration files necessary (although this is possible if a simple text format is used)
- Drag and drop
- Panel with program starter and clock
- Integration into KDE and Gnome menus
- Virtual desktops including pager
- Theme-capability including creating themes (also for general X-applications, especially Gnome and Gtk programs)
- XFTree file manager
- System sounds with XFSound
- Manager for background images
- Gnome-compatible
- XFGlob search tool
- Recycling bin
- Tool to mount drives
- 19 languages
- Support for Xinerama (multi-monitor operation)

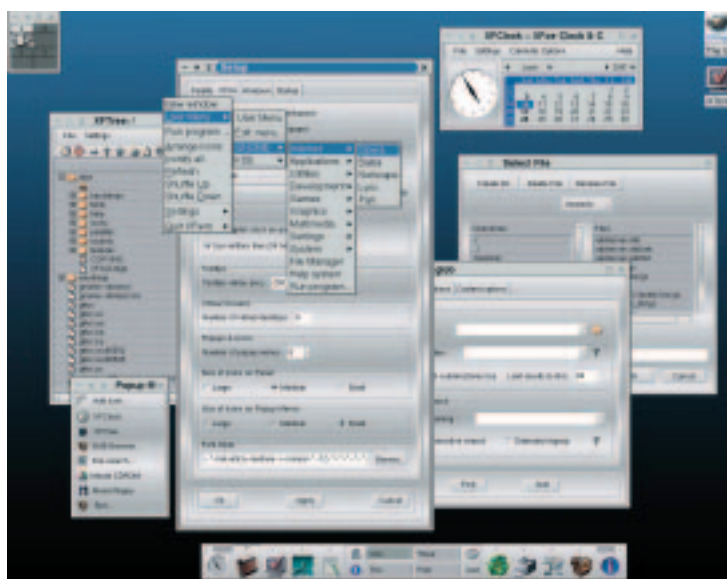


Figure 1:
A first look

On your marks

Installation means simply playing in the RPM package from the cover CD with rpm. If you would prefer to use the sources, you will need a few (not very spectacular) developer packages, which are listed in the INSTALL file included. Once XFce is on the hard disk, every user will also need an initial configuration. Here again the XFce developers have done all the work, and a simple `xfce_setup` (typed on the console or in XTerm) arranges things so that in future both in the graphical log-in, as well as when starting X via `startx`, XFce will fill the monitor. An `xfce_remove` can revive any settings which have fallen victim to the set-up. Users with a bit more experience might not necessarily entrust their home directory, including painstakingly created start files, to a strange set-up tool – so they should simply call up the window manager `xfwm`, which will also start the entire environment automatically. XFce will not make the existing configuration files; but those that already exist will not be touched, provided they weren't created by Xfce. The Gtk themes in particular will have only a limited function. XFce is thus very easy and safe to implement – except that updating from a version before 3.8 means getting rid of old configuration files.

If you want to explore the newly-created desktop world in person and gets stuck, would be well advised to consult the concise but adequate Users' Guide at `/usr/(local)/share/xfce/help/help.html`. Unfortunately this has not been updated since Version 3.7, but it is still valid. But let's slowly feel our way through this desktop environment:

Striking ...

...is the word for the main panel on the bottom edge of the screen. This is not – as is the custom of many other desktops – firmly anchored in position, but can be moved anywhere on the striped areas on the desktop with the mouse. The little button on the far left ends the X-session in the same way as the Quit button in the central area. Both do their duty, but never without first consulting the mouse. The really small button minimises the main panel, as if it were a completely normal program (which is basically what a panel is). A single mouse click on an icon starts the associated program – and these icons lead to drop-down menus, from which additional programs can be started. One nice feature is the lower bar in these drop-down menus: This can be used to separate a menu permanently and position it freely on the desktop.

New to the panel is the option of selecting the number of icons and menus (a maximum of 12 is provided, which should be enough for any user profile). Equally, both the size of the icons as well as the display of the menus can be selected in three stages, making XFce more flexible than ever and means a major steps towards the declared objective:

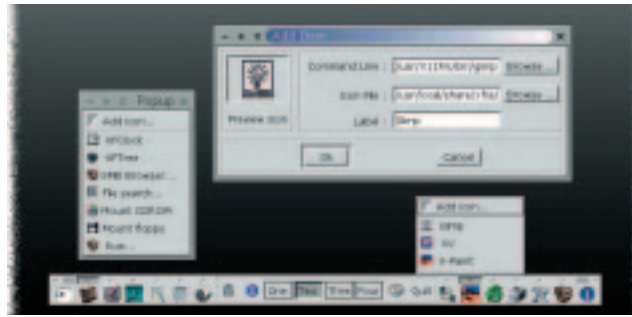


Figure 2: The main panel – including ripped off menu

that of being able to work unhindered in a modern environment even on less powerful computers.

Set up

Each start entry can be configured by right-clicking on it. If, on the other hand, the main panel itself is to be configured, the icon with the colour palette helps: This is where the XFce set-up is hiding. Unfortunately it is not yet possible to configure the entire desktop from here, and so in the menu over the icon for the mouse settings a few more tools can be found – such as for system sounds and background graphics.

Following suit ...

...is allowed in the first tab of the set-up dialog; bearing the title "Palette", in this case meaning themes. The Load ... button allows you to choose one of the 73 themes supplied. Also of interest in the colour settings is the entry Apply colors to all applications – this makes basic settings via the Xresources, which are used by many X-programs (but not by KDE or Gnome programs, where the Gnome solution is also used in XFce). Anyone also wishing to use the XFce themes for Gtk applications (such as Gnome software), should have created the user's own start files (as described above) via `xfce_setup`, or deleted or renamed `~/.gtkrc`. This only leaves out the KDE applications. The eight colour zones in the set-up dialog offer an ingenious

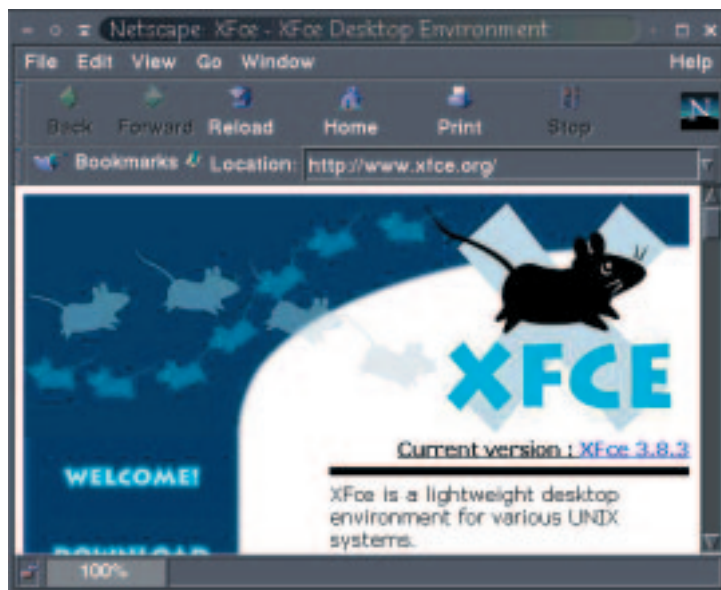


Figure 3: Themes on request for the Navigator

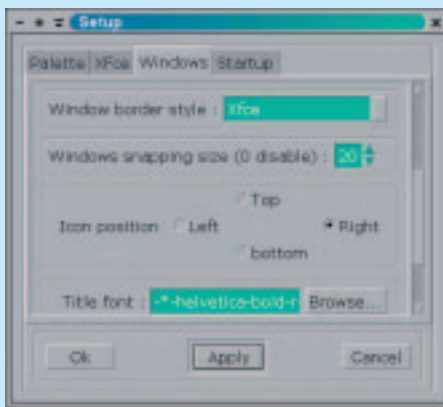


Figure 4: Xfce's standard window frames

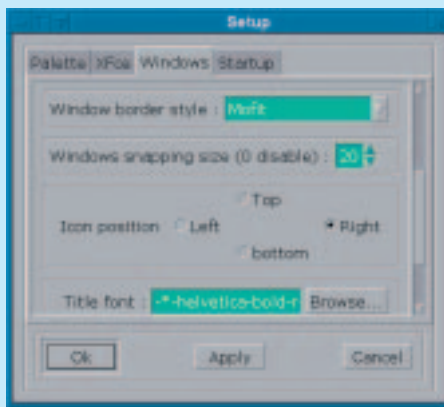


Figure 5: Windows in the Mofit design

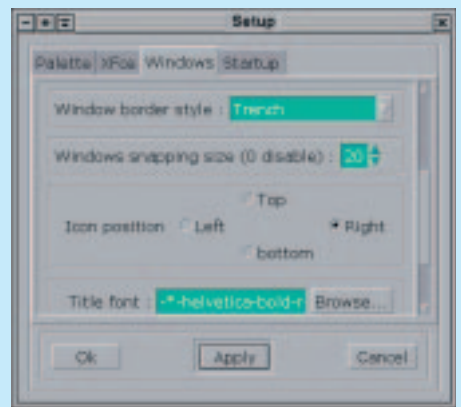


Figure 6: Trench Look

system for displaying your own taste in handling the colour palette – anyone who has ever tried to make their own Gtk theme any other way will certainly appreciate these splashes of colour.

The second tab concerns Xfce itself. If you want to use your own colour settings for each desktop (and no background graphics), activate the first menu item Repaint root Window of Workspace; the control button with the heading Panel Layer ensures on request that the main panel cannot be drowned out by other applications so easily.

Window master

It only starts to get interesting in the third tab, which concerns the behaviour and appearance of the window manager xfwm. Both Click to focus and Auto raise are on offer – the latter unfortunately without configurable time delay (which is the only failing of this window manager). Other features sparkle. So for example there is a choice of three window decorations – Xfce, Mofit (no typing errors!) and Trench, which extend from the company's own look via the classic Linux desktop up to the flair of an Apple Macintosh.

When the windows are moved, they dock with other windows and on the edge of the screen. This makes it easier to position a window. The handling of the virtual desktop is also really nice in the

window manager. To toggle between them, there are several options:

- via the XFPager (by default in the top left corner),
- via the main panel,
- with a click on the middle mouse button,
- or else by deliberately pushing the mouse beyond the edge of the screen.

If a window is intended to follow the journey of the mouse, it can simply be pinned firmly with the circle symbol in the toolbar. Another nice feature is that each virtual desktop can be assigned its own background. And if there is a shortage of space, the window can be minimised, not just as a traditional icon, but also onto its toolbar – either via another button in the toolbar or by a right mouse click on the toolbar. KDE and Gnome menus can be found with the left mouse button on the free desktop, while the middle mouse button always keeps the functions of the active toolbar to hand. And if, despite everything, an application can no longer be found on the desktop (or if this has been covered by a hasty Auto raise), the right mouse button can help.

...and its subordinates

The last tab in the set-up dialog integrates the additional tools of Xfce. If you'd rather be sparing with resources, you can completely deactivate the system sounds there (and if you change your mind about this in the meantime, simply start these – like any other tool in Xfce - manually in "main panel").

Things are somewhat trickier when it comes to the implementation of the Backdrop Manager – by means of which graphics instead of colours (or colour runs) can be set as desktop background. Unfortunately this cannot cope with virtual desktops, and so it is only possible to set one graphic for everything. So if you now, when swapping over to another virtual desktop, suddenly come across a single colour, the box marked Repaint root Window of Workspace, in the set-up dialog, should be deactivated.

Figure 7: System sounds

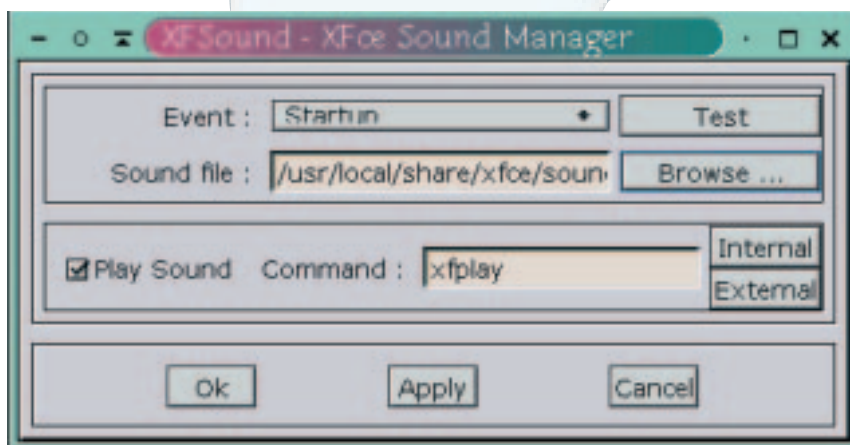




Figure 8: Backup Manager

Workhorse

Another important little helper is the file manager XFTree, included as standard. When you start it, you may be disappointed by its lean appearance, yet at second glance this is a distinct advantage: It can do drag and drop, and this means that not only can you use the two file lists familiar to numerous Norton Commander clones for this, but also open a third file list in the form of a third window – ideal for tidying up. The concept also corresponds to the latest trend: Only one directory tree is shown, in which the files are incorporated (and not just a file list with the directories in the current path). Drag and drop does not, however, function between the windows of the file manager. Instead, a text file can be dragged onto the editor icon of the main panel, in order to open it. Since Xfce likes to use current standards, drag and drop also functions from a few other file managers – such as from Gnome Midnight Commander or KDE's Konqueror. XFTree does not appear to be completely finished when files are opened via the file name extensions: If a program other than the preconfigured one is to be used here, this has to be stated manually in the configuration file `~/l.xfce/xtree.reg`.

which first and foremost the file manager is responsible), in addition to a well co-ordinated collection of tools. There isn't any session management yet, which is always active and unnoticed in Xfce. If, when shutting down Xfce, an XTerm window is left behind, this is opened again at the next start in the same place. Everything is still where it was left, making an autostart function pointless. Xfce is a great success – as things stand now, the desktop user lacks for nothing. It has speed and stability combined with clean problem solutions and a huge dollop of comfort. It's a long time since Xfce was a secret tip, even if the installation routines of many distributions allow you to think so ■

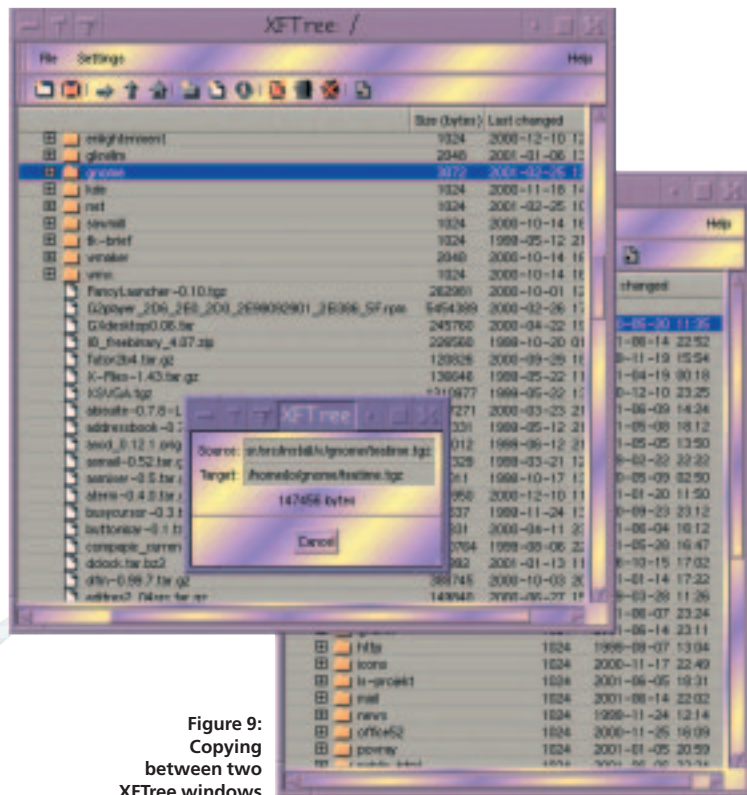


Figure 9: Copying between two XFTree windows

A good nose

You won't need Dr Watson in Xfce, but once the journey of adventure does begin through the leftovers from past computer activities, there is a handy search tool at your disposal with XFGlob. The search can be narrowed down, not only by the path or via file name filters, but also via the file content or the file type, as well as a number of other options.

Session management

Xfce is meant to be an environment – so far we can recognise the usual features of an environment such as the consistent look and feel (achieved by the use of GTK and overarching themes), drag and drop (for

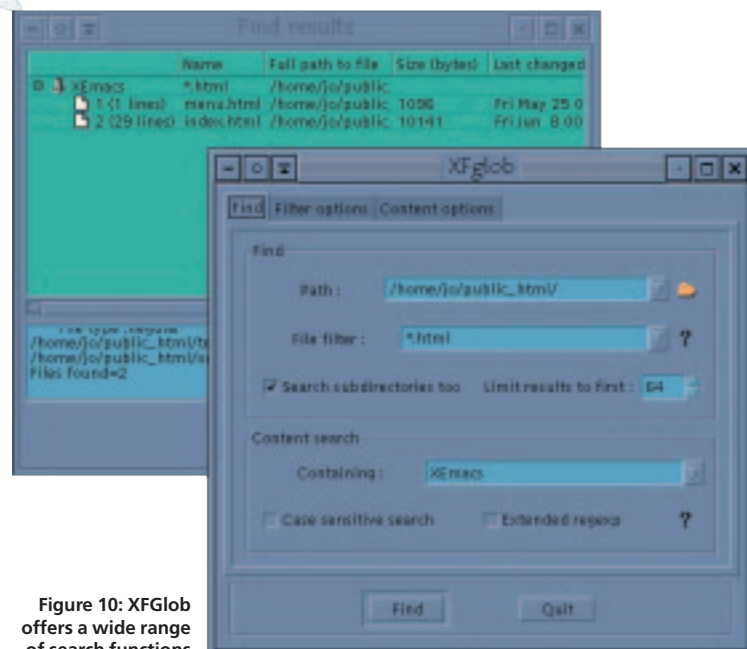


Figure 10: XFGlob offers a wide range of search functions