

Customising the desktop with Control Center

TAILOR-MADE DESKTOP

ANJA M WAGNER

Working with a graphical user interface starts being fun once the settings have been adapted to your own preferences, so that the interface makes working easier.

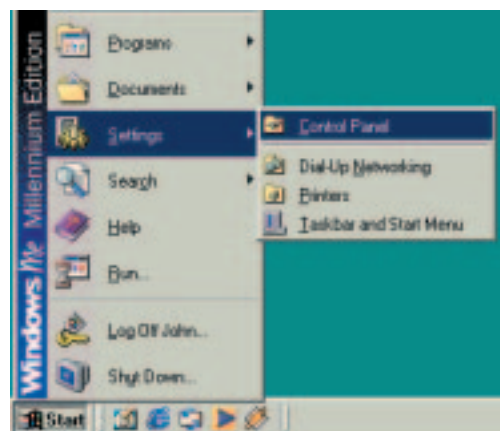


Figure 1: The Windows Control Panel is accessed via the Start menu

click on the Gnome icon on the left and select *Program/Configuration/GNOME Control Center*.

The Control Centers for Windows and KDE differ in terms of their appearance. KDE divides the screen into two halves. The configuration areas are listed on the left, the relevant dialog window appears on the right. The elderly gentleman in billowing robes who welcomes you is called Kandalf, by the way. The categories in the left column can be represented as a tree structure or an icon view. You can change the display mode using the *View* option on the menu bar. In the following text we will be referring to the tree view.

Appearances

The visual aspect of the Windows user interface is adapted mainly through the *Display* option in the *Control Panel*. Here you can choose wallpaper and screensavers, and configure display options for desktop components such as windows, title bars, icons and menus.

In order to do this in KDE, click on the "+" in front of *Look and Feel* in the tree view of the KDE Control Center. Further sub-items will appear. The first, *Desktop*, itself contains four sub-items. Under *General* you can specify some general desktop properties.



Figure 3: Kandalf welcomes you to the Control Center

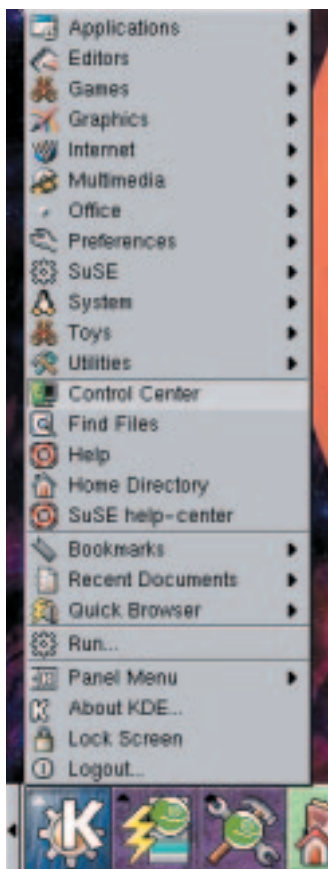


Figure 2: KDE adopts the same route to its Control Center as Windows

Under Windows, the principal configuration options for the desktop can be found in the Control Panel. KDE, probably the most commonly used graphical interface for Linux, takes a very similar approach. You will find the important options for customising your work environment in the KDE Control Center.

In this workshop we will show you in KDE how to adapt the settings which you would access through the *Display* section of the Windows Control Panel. We will be referring to Windows 98 SE and SuSE Linux 7.1 with KDE 2.0.1.

The path to the configuration controls is similar for both desktops. Under Windows it is *Start/Settings/Control Panel*.

After installing KDE you will see a panel similar to the Windows taskbar at the bottom of the screen. This is the KDE control panel, often simply called Panel. If you click on the button with the KDE icon at the far left, a menu opens which contains, among many other things, the *Control Center*. Click on this menu item and you will find yourself in at the heart of the controls.

The Control Center for Gnome (another graphical interface) can be reached most quickly via the button with the toolbox on the control panel. You can also

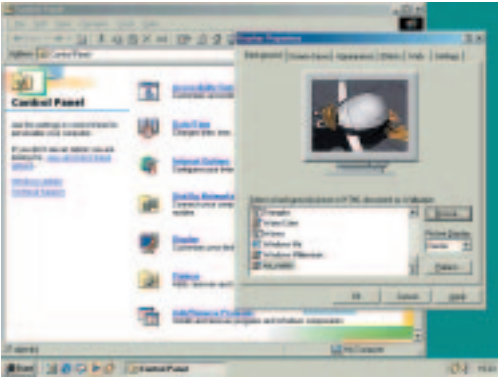


Figure 4: Basic desktop settings are implemented in the *Display* section of the Control Panel, for instance the selection of wallpaper

What should happen if you click on a free area of the desktop with the mouse? If you preset the option *Window List Menu*, clicking will open a menu that shows all windows currently open. You can display these tiled or cascading, raise them or change desktops altogether (see below).

The *Desktop Menu* may be more familiar to you under the name *Context Menu*. Here you find basic actions such as *Create new* for directories or documents, *Paste*, *Help* or commands to rearrange the icons on the desktop. By default, this menu is opened with a right-click. This is true of almost all KDE applications. If you like, KDE could also show the application menu when you click on any free space on the desktop. This normally appears when you click on the K-Button on the panel.

In some cases, such as clicking on the desktop, you will need a middle mouse button to use KDE. For a two-button mouse you normally need to press both buttons together to simulate pressing the middle mouse button. Whichever options you have chosen for each of the three buttons, confirm the settings with *Apply* and test the effect.

On the second tab, *Appearance*, you can vary the font size for the desktop between small, medium and large, as well as setting the standard font and normal text colour. If you have experimented with lots of different options and would like to return to the original settings just click on *Standard*.

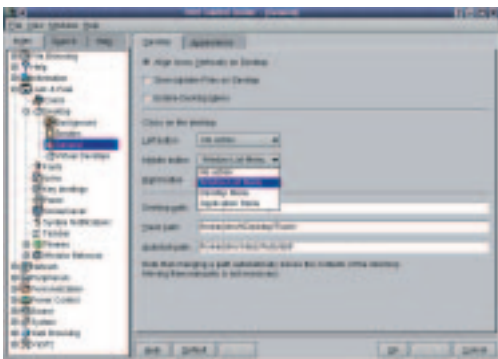


Figure 6: Rather than having an image, you can run a program as desktop background

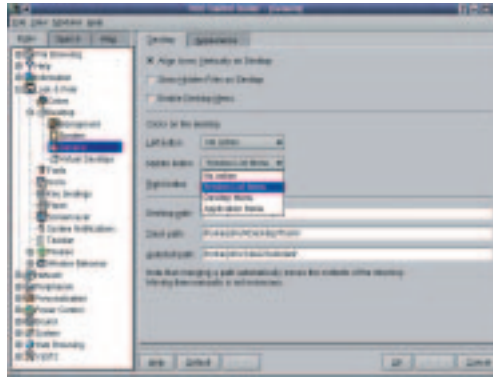


Figure 5: Here you can specify what happens when you click on the desktop with the middle mouse button

Backgrounds

We continue with the sub-item *Background* in the left column. Here you will notice a special feature of graphical Linux interfaces. KDE provides four desktops as standard. You can set up a maximum of 16 desktops (see below). If you want to design different desktops, uncheck *Common background*. In the lower half you can now select a background for each desktop.

Select a gradient under *Mode* if the background is going to have two or more colours. If you would like a pattern, activate the relevant option and click on *Setup*. KDE offers seven patterns as standard. Confirm your selection with *OK* and check the appearance in preview. Use the same procedure to activate a program as background. *kdeworld* displays the Earth's time zones, updated every 10 minutes, *xearth* shows the globe as it rotates slowly. Activating background programs does take up a lot of computing capacity and can slow down machines significantly depending on their resources.

Under *Wallpaper* you can deactivate the preset logo and specify how an image should be arranged on the desktop. You can select your own image using the *Browse* button. To have more than one wallpaper display, enable *Multiple*, select the images through *Setup* and determine the order and time interval of their appearance.

The *Advanced* tab allows detailed settings such as blending and limiting the pixmap cache. The

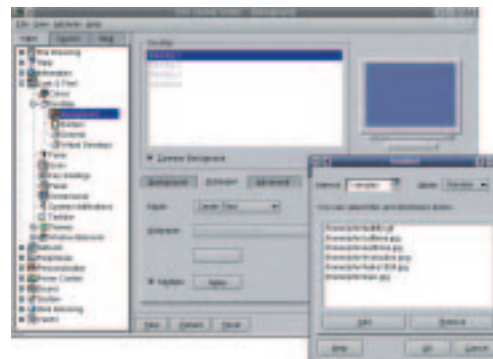


Figure 7: You can decorate the desktop with your favourite pictures, tiled, blended or alternating

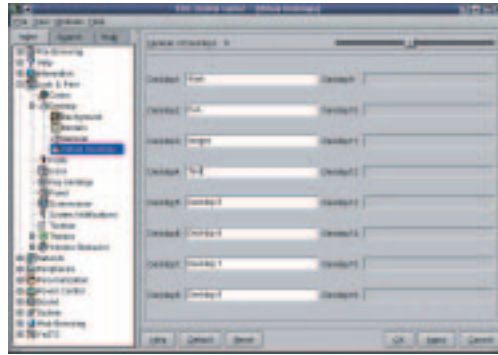


Figure 8: Ease-of-use and plenty of space is provided by up to 16 virtual desktops

easiest way to find out how these affect the desktop is to try them out. Fortunately you can create many different desktops rather than having to settle on one design.

Desktop and window *Borders* can be magnetised. This means that windows that are moved close to another window or to the edge of the screen will snap onto these once they have got within a certain distance – the snap zone. This makes it very easy to position windows. Use the slider under *Magic Borders* to specify how large in pixels the zone in which the magnetism effect works is going to be. *Active Desktop Borders* are not yet available.

As mentioned already in the *Background* section, KDE starts off by providing four desktops. In the *Virtual Desktops* configuration section you can define a maximum of 12 additional desktops, which you can customise according to taste. To increase the number of active desktops, use the slider.

If you would like the desktops to have names, you can write these in their text boxes, for example Work, Games, Experiments, etc. Each desktop will now appear as a button on the control panel. Small boxes indicate which desktop has windows open.

“Why all this effort?” you may ask yourself. If you work with many windows open simultaneously you can arrange these, possibly by subject, on the different desktops. Each individual desktop remains clear, and by clicking on the panel buttons you can quickly jump between desktops.

Screensavers are selected using the *Screensaver* menu item in the left column. First, activate the option *Enable screensaver* in the dialog window. Set the time in minutes before it starts and apply a password if required. The *Priority* slider determines how much processor performance is made available to the screensaver. You ought to keep the preset, *Low*.

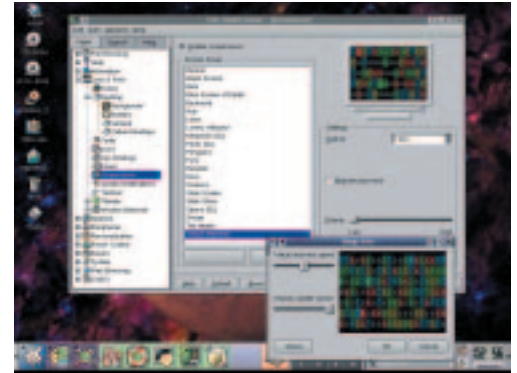


Figure 10: Screensavers to suit every taste

Windows combines the screensaver configuration with the adaptation of the monitor's energy-saving features. This is the same in Gnome. KDE gives the energy settings their own menu item. Select *Power Control/Energy* in the left-hand column of the Control Center. Once you have enabled the display energy saving mode, use the sliders to set the time after which it should be activated.

More style

You have already been introduced to a number of configuration options for the desktop, but there are more. *Themes* allows you to design your desktop's style and icons. KDE offers several different styles. This means that the appearance of windows, icons, buttons, title bars, etc. follow a consistent style. For example, if you choose the style *Qt Windows* the appearance of your desktop will be very similar to the familiar Windows environment.

Some general settings for KDE program toolbars are also applied here. Should toolbar buttons be represented as icons, text or a combination of both, should active buttons indicate when the mouse pointer touches them (by being highlighted briefly), and should the toolbar be transparent when it is being moved?

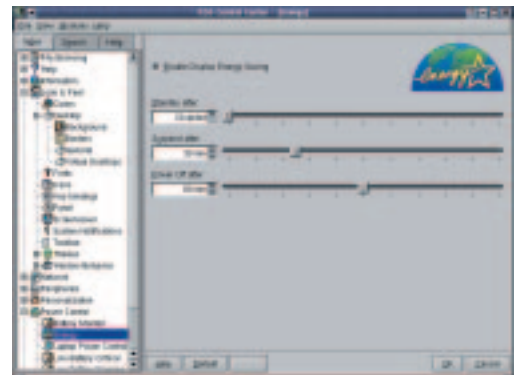


Figure 11: Saving energy

Figure 9: Each desktop is represented on the panel by a button



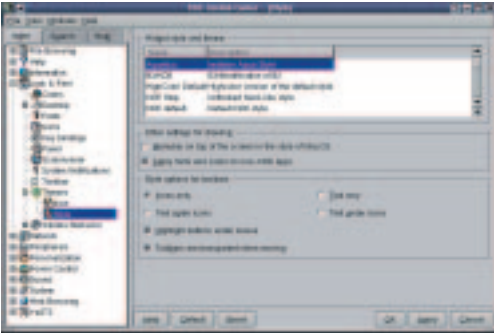


Figure 12: Change the appearance and style of your desktop

Some surprising effects can be achieved with *Colors*. You can vary the colours of windows, title bars and menus. After you click on *Apply* the desktop elements are assembled according to the chosen colour scheme and displayed in a preview. Depending on how outrageous your desktop design is you may see unusual things.

Tip: If you have designed very different backgrounds for your desktops, there is an easy way to check the window layout for all desktops. Open a window in any desktop and right-click on the title bar. In the context menu, select *To desktop/All desktops*. Now all you have to do is to select all desktops in turn from the panel and to check whether the colour and design suits all backgrounds.

Another very convenient configuration option can be found under *Window Behaviour*. If your machine is slow you should disable *Display content in moving windows* and *Display content in resizing windows*. Only the frame is now displayed when windows are moved, as familiar from Windows. If there is more than one window open on the desktop, KDE can apply a *Smart* placement policy so that as much as possible is visible of each window on the desktop. Other options are *Cascade* or *Random*.

The windows focus policy is designed to make things easier; the active window is the one in focus, it receives all keyboard input. You can specify the behaviour of the window for mouse clicks or mouse contact. The settings could be combined so that a window is in focus as soon as the mouse moves over it and is raised automatically. Select the relevant option on the *Focus Policy* drop-down menu, followed by the option *Auto raise* which is enabled. The raising of the focus window can be delayed using the slider.

What should happen when you click on title bars, frames or windows with one of the three mouse buttons is specified under *Mouse Behaviour*. The default settings are similar to those in Windows.

A useful feature is the *shade* facility, which is

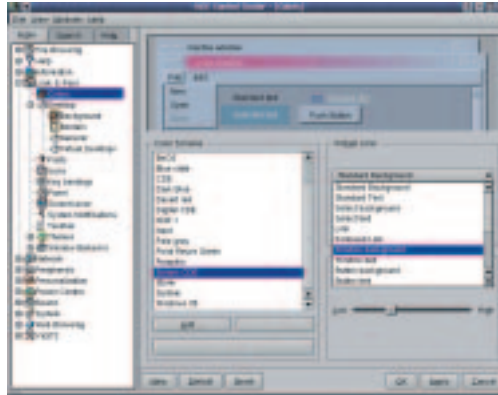


Figure 13: The more outrageous the better

started by double-clicking on the title bar of a window. The open window is reduced to its title bar. Another double-click causes it to expand back to its full size. This avoids cluttering up of the desktop when many windows are open at the same time.

Under *Taskbar* you can enable the *Show all windows* option. This causes all open windows on all desktops to be displayed in the window panel. The window panel is integrated into the control panel and is situated to the right of the desktop buttons. If the option is disabled, only the windows on the current desktop are shown. The second option, *Position*, has not yet been implemented.

The control bar or panel is an essential component of the desktop and can be arranged in a variety of ways. It can be dragged to the edge of the desktop using drag and drop as in Windows. You can also specify its position under *General* on the menu item *Panel*. The panel has a small arrow at either end. If you click on this, it disappears, apart from the button with the small arrow. Another click causes the panel to return. It can also be hidden automatically. Use the slider to specify after how many seconds this should happen. The panel reappears when you touch the edge of the screen where it is normally placed with the mouse pointer, by default this is at the bottom.

On the *Look and Feel* tab you will find the

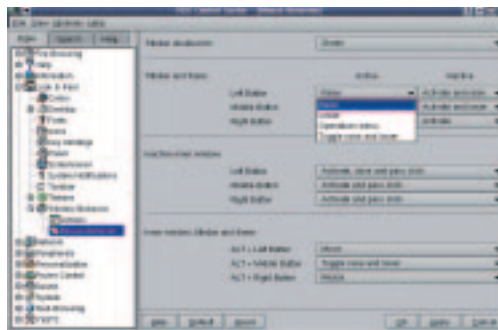


Figure 14: The mouse rules over title bars and windows



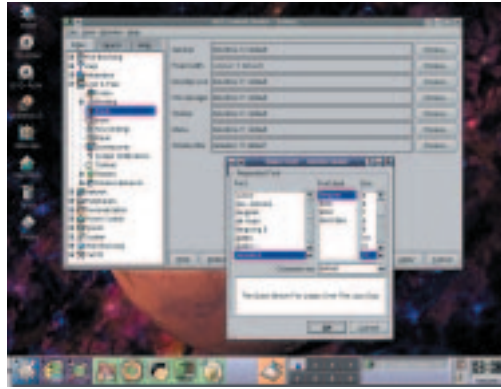


Figure 15: Select fonts for different elements of the graphic interface, like window titles or menu entries

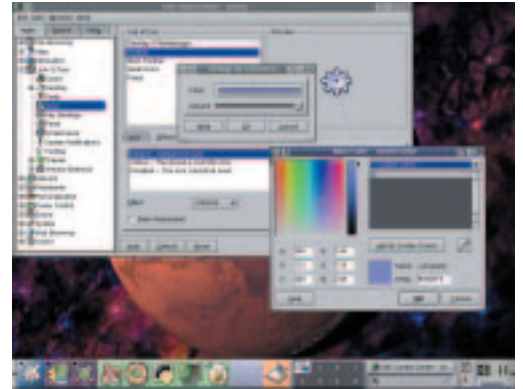


Figure 16: Desktop icons can have both size and colour customised.

option *Fade out applet handles*. If such applets are present on the panel you will see a small area on their left, which looks like it is covered in small rivets. This is the handle. By right-clicking on it you can move buttons and applets or delete them from the panel.

Gnome panels

If you switch between desktops you will notice that the panel remains the same. In Gnome you are able to use and configure several panels. Right-click on a free space on the control bar and select *Panel/Create Panel*. You can insert elements into the new panel in the same way by choosing *Add to Panel* and selecting the relevant elements from the menus that follow. You can configure a different control panel for every area of work, which greatly reduces the time it takes to access the respective applications. Simply close panels that you do not require at present using the small arrows.

Back to KDE: Font type and size for the desktop components are set under *Fonts*. The *Choose* button leads to a dialog window where font, font style and font size for the specified desktop components are set separately. These options allow you to differentiate in more detail than under *Desktop/General/Appearance*.

If the size of the icons on the desktop does not appeal to you *Icons* is the place to go. Using the example of the cogwheel application icon, KDE shows how icons will appear in panels and on the desktop. The size can vary over three levels. In addition, pixels

can be displayed double sized. The *Effects* tab contains further design options, for example colouring the icons and adjusting the saturation.

KDE can keep you informed about the system activity of the graphical interface and the window manager. Four options are available for each action under *System Notifications: Log to file, Play sound, Show message box* and *Standard error output*. If you would like to play a sound for a system notification tick the relevant option – this will enable the text box *Filename*. Click on the directory icon to the right of the box and choose the appropriate sound file.

The last sub-item of the large *Look and Feel* complex lists the valid keyboard shortcuts under *Key bindings*. Many of these shortcuts such as *Cut* (Ctrl+X), *Copy* (Ctrl+C) are identical to the Windows shortcuts. If you would like to change a key combination, click on the relevant action in the dialog box and select *Custom key*. As an example we will change the key combination Alt+F1, which calls the Start menu, to Alt+F5. Choose this action from the list. If you now click on *Custom key* the Alt key remains selected. Click on the function key icon and press F5. The new setting appears in the selection window. Actions that do not have any keyboard shortcuts yet are defined in the same way.

The screen resolution and the colour depth cannot be amended through the KDE Control Center. You have to start another tool in order to do this, which is why we will be covering this point in a later workshop. ■

KDE: KDE stands for **K Desktop Environment** and is a graphical user interface for Linux. Together with Gnome, KDE is the most widely used interface and these days the most sophisticated. The number of programs and applets for KDE is enormous. The project has been in existence since the end of 1996. KDE consists of the modules login display manager (kdm), the window manager (kwm), the file manager (Konqueror) and the control panel (kpanel). Further information can be found under <http://www.kde.org>.

Gnome: **GNU Network Object Model Environment**, where GNU stands for **GNU is Not UNIX**, has been a project of the Free Software Foundation since 1997. It consists of the login display manager (gdm), the file manager (gmc) and the control panel (panel). Information is kept at <http://www.gnome.org>.

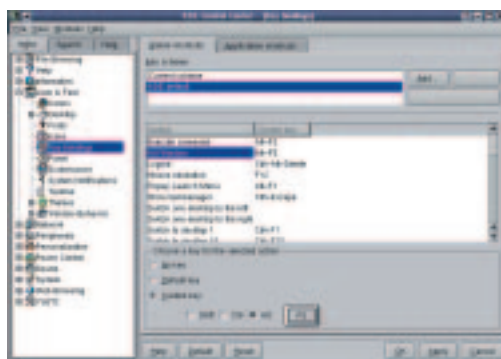


Figure 17: System under control

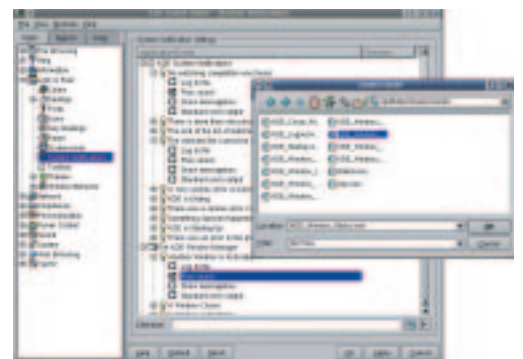


Figure 18: Key shortcuts instead of mouse