



Personalizing Ubuntu: Getting Everything Just Right

If you've read this book from Chapter 1, by this stage you no doubt have become comfortable with Ubuntu. You've started to realize its advantages and are on the way to making it your operating system of choice.

But things might still not be quite right. For instance, you might find the color scheme is not to your tastes. Or perhaps the mouse cursor moves a little too fast (or too slowly). Maybe you simply want to stamp your individuality on your system to make it your very own.

That's what this chapter is all about. We look at personalizing Ubuntu, so that you're completely happy with your user experience. To do this, we will thoroughly examine the GNOME desktop and explore its potential.

Changing the Look and Feel

Ubuntu is similar to Windows in many ways, but the developers behind it introduced improvements and tweaks that many claim make the software easier to use. For example, Ubuntu offers multiple virtual desktops—long considered a very useful user-interface feature that seems to have passed Microsoft by. It also moves the programs menu to the top of the screen, leaving the whole width of the screen at the bottom to display taskbar buttons. This is very sensible, because the buttons don't look cramped when more than a handful of applications are open. However, if you're not satisfied with Ubuntu's out-of-the-box look and feel, you can change it.

You might be used to changing the desktop colors or wallpaper under Windows, but Ubuntu goes to extremes and lets you alter the look and feel of the entire desktop. Everything from the styling of the program windows to the desktop icons can be altered quickly and easily.

Altering the Theme

Ubuntu refers to the look of the desktop as a *theme*. Because it's built on the GNOME desktop, Ubuntu allows you to radically personalize your desktop theme. Several different themes come with the distribution, and you can download many more. Each lets you change the way the windows look, including the buttons and the icon set (although some themes come without additional icons).

However, unlike Windows themes, most GNOME themes don't change the fonts used on the desktop, and the wallpaper and color scheme will probably remain broadly the same. You can change these manually, as described in the "Setting Font Preferences" and "Changing the Wallpaper" sections a bit later in this chapter.

To alter the theme, select System ► Preferences ► Theme. Then it's simply a matter of choosing a theme from the list in the Theme Preferences dialog box, as shown in Figure 10-1. A useful hint is to open a Nautilus file browser window in the background (Places ► Home), so you can see how the changes will affect a typical window.

Note The default Ubuntu theme is called Human and is designed to represent the skin tones of the world's population. This is intended to reflect Ubuntu's mission of being accessible to everyone, no matter where or who they are.

My favorite themes are Clearlooks and Mist, largely because they're simple and uncomplicated. Remember that you'll be working with the theme on a daily basis, so it should be practical and not too distracting. Those miniature close, minimize, and maximize buttons might look stylish, but they're useless if they're so small that you can't reliably click them with your mouse.

As well as changing the overall theme, you can also modify individual theme components and even download more theme components.

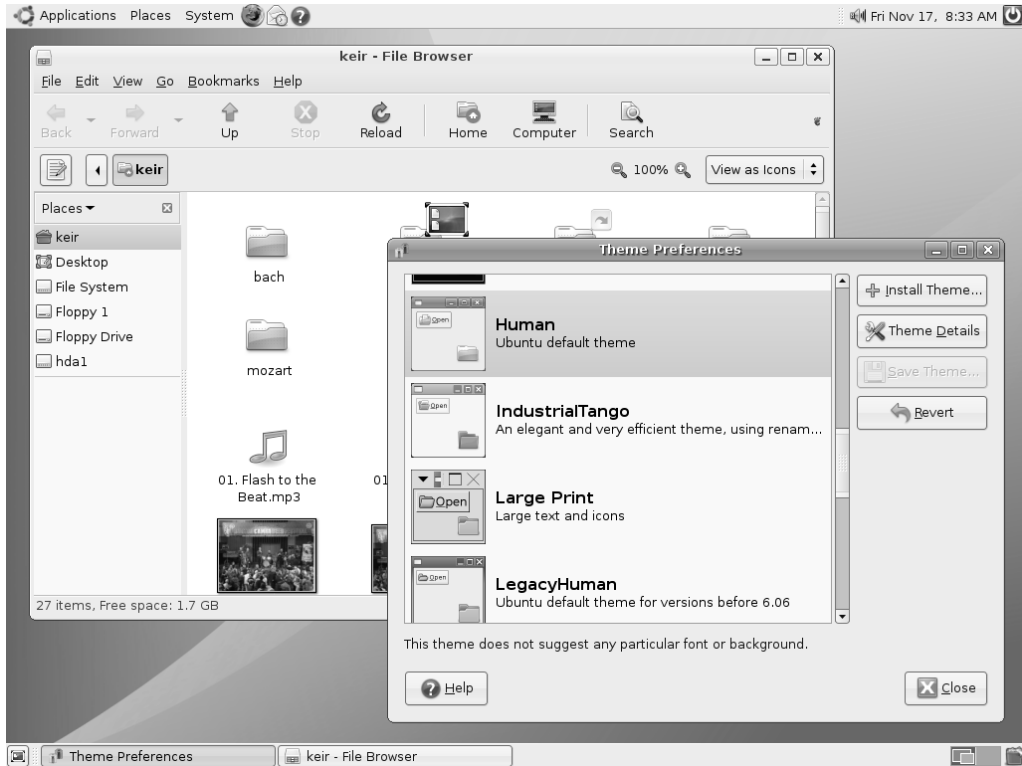


Figure 10-1. *Ubuntu comes with several theme choices.*

Changing Individual Theme Components

You can alter the three aspects that constitute a GNOME theme: the *controls* (sometimes known as *widgets*), the *window borders*, and the *icons*. Controls are simply the elements you click within dialog boxes and windows: buttons, scroll bars, and so on. Additionally, controls usually come with their own color schemes, which affect all components of the program windows.

The window borders are, as seems obvious, the borders of program windows and dialog boxes, with particular attention paid to the top of the window, where the program name appears along with the minimize, maximize, and close buttons.

Icons are, as is again obvious, all the icons on the desktop, within program windows (such as file browsing windows), and so on.

Note To make matters a little confusing, most window borders have their own selection of close, minimize, and maximize controls.

To make changes to a theme, click the Theme Details button in the Theme Preferences dialog box (see Figure 10-1), and then click each tab to see your choices, as shown in Figure 10-2. Unfortunately, there are no thumbnail previews of each style, but as soon as you click each option, it will be automatically applied to the currently open windows. To preview the effects fully, the best policy is to keep a Nautilus window open (Places ► Home).

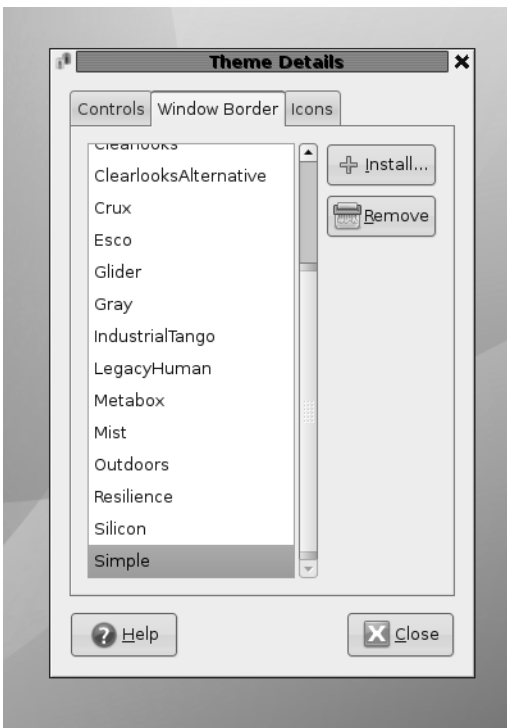


Figure 10-2. You can create a theme by choosing your own controls, window borders, and icons.

When you've made your choices, you can save the theme for further use. Simply click the Save Theme button in the main Theme Preferences dialog box. You'll need to give the theme a name and, if you wish, a short description for future reference. By putting a check in the Save Background Image box, the theme will also remember the wallpaper that's in use. When you select the theme in the future, the wallpaper will be suggested at the bottom of the Theme Preferences window; to select it, just click Apply Background.

If you don't save the theme, as soon as you select another one, the changes you made will be lost.

Installing Additional Components

If you get tired of the built-in possibilities, you can download additional theme components, such as window borders and controls, to enhance your desktop experience. You have two ways of getting new themes:

- Download themes from the official Ubuntu repositories.
- Visit the GNOME Art or GNOME-Look web sites (<http://art.gnome.org> and <http://gnome-look.org>), and download items from there. Be warned that there is sometimes artistic nudity on some of the wallpapers available from GNOME-Look.

Downloading from Ubuntu Repositories

To get theme components from the Ubuntu software repositories, you use the Synaptic Package Manager. Setting up Synaptic Package Manager to use the online repositories is described in Chapter 8.

Select **System** ► **Administration** ► **Synaptic Package Manager**, click the **Search** button, and enter `gtk2-engines` as a search term (`gtk2-engines` is how Ubuntu refers to theme components). In the list of results will be those `gtk2-engines` already installed, indicated by a dark green check box, and several that are available for download.

Note In my tests I found a handful of dummy `gtk2-engines` packages (according to the description when you select them in Synaptic Package Manager). These are there for those upgrading from an older version of Ubuntu, and you can ignore them.

Icons rarely come in `gtk2-engines` packages, and instead are contained in their own packages. To find icons, use the Synaptic Package Manager to search for `gnome icon theme` (without any dashes).

Although each theme component comes with a description, you won't really know what it looks like until you see it. The best policy is to download all of them and audition them one by one. However, be aware that themes can be large, so they may take some time to download on a slower connection.

Don't forget that you're downloading theme components, rather than entire themes. To use your new theme components, select **System** ► **Preferences** ► **Theme**, click the **Theme Details** button, and choose from the various lists.

Downloading from the GNOME Art Web Site

Visiting the GNOME Art site (<http://art.gnome.org>), shown in Figure 10-3, gives you access to just about every theme ever created for GNOME. In fact, the site also contains wallpaper selections, icons, and much more besides. All of the offerings are free to use, and most of the packages are created by enthusiasts.

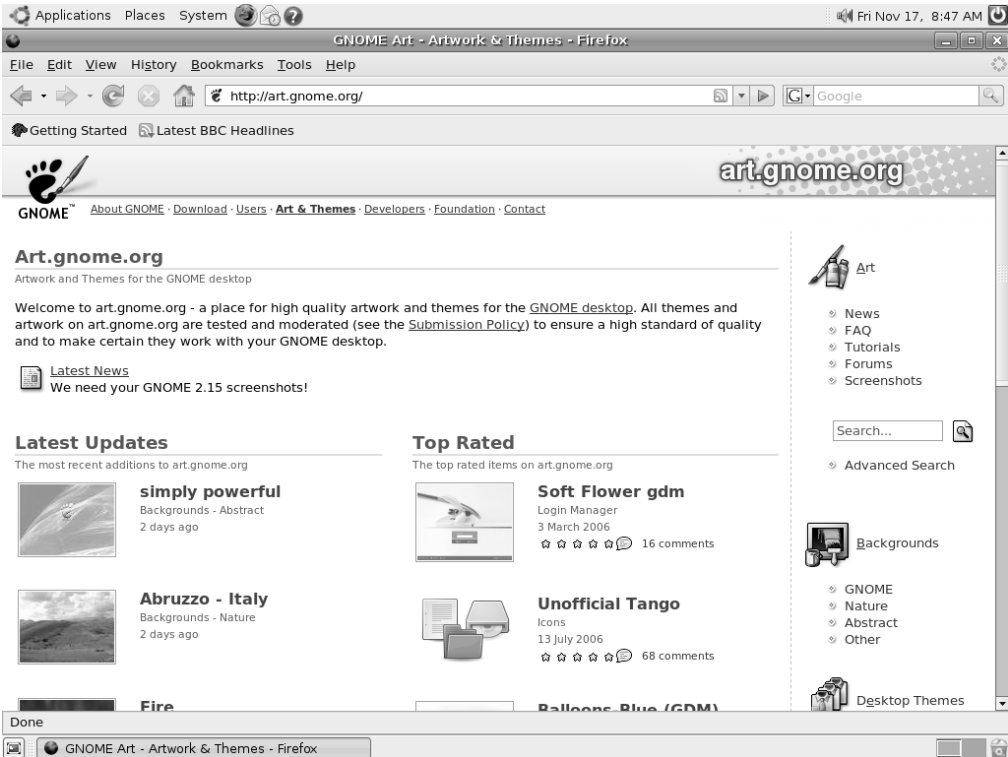


Figure 10-3. The GNOME Art site contains the latest themes, and you can use all of them with Ubuntu.

Installing new theme components is easy, and the instructions here work just as well for the GNOME-Look site too (<http://gnome-look.org>).

If you wish to install a new window border, for example, click the link to browse the examples, and when you find one you like, click to download it. It will be contained in a `.tar.gz` archive, but you don't need to unpack it. Simply select **System** ► **Preferences** ► **Theme**, and click the **Install Theme** button in the Theme Preferences dialog box. Then browse to the downloaded theme, and click **Open**. You'll be asked if you want to use the new theme component immediately, although it will also be available by clicking the **Theme Details** button.

You can delete the downloaded file when you're finished.

Note The same principle of sharing that underlines the GPL software license is also usually applied to themes. This means that one person can take a theme created by someone else, tweak it, and then release it as a new theme. This ensures constant innovation and improvement.

Changing the Wallpaper

The default Ubuntu wallpaper is a love-it-or-hate-it affair. Some find its swirling skin-tone colors beautiful and appreciate its humanist metaphor. Others just don't like it. If you're one of those who prefer something different, it's easy to switch. Right-click the desktop, and click Change Desktop Background. You can then select from a short list of different wallpapers, including Dawn of Ubuntu, which shows the Ubuntu logo raining down on an African landscape.

If you want to use a picture of your own as wallpaper, click the Add Wallpaper button, and then browse to its location.

In the Style drop-down list, you can select from the following choices:

Centered: This option places the wallpaper in the center of the screen. If the wallpaper is not big enough to fill the screen, a border appears around the edge. If it's bigger than the screen, the edges of the wallpaper are cropped off.

Fill Screen: This option forces the picture to fit the screen, including squashing or expanding it if necessary (known as *altering its aspect ratio*). If the wallpaper isn't in the same ratio as the screen, it will look distorted. Most digital camera shots should be okay, because they use the same 4:3 ratio as most monitors (although if you have a wide-screen monitor, a digital camera picture will be stretched horizontally).

Scaled: Like the Fill Screen option, this option enlarges the image if it's too small or shrinks it if it's too big, but it maintains the aspect ratio, thus avoiding distortion. However, if the picture is in a different aspect ratio than the monitor, it may have borders at the edges.

Zoom: Like Fill Screen, this option forces the picture to fit the screen, without any borders at the top and bottom. However, it avoids altering the aspect ratio. If the wallpaper isn't the correct aspect ratio then parts of the top/bottom or left/right of the image may be cropped off.

Tiled: If the picture is smaller than the desktop resolution, this option simply repeats the picture (starting from the top left) until the screen is filled. This option is primarily designed for patterned graphics.

Don't forget that the GNOME Art web site (<http://art.gnome.org>) offers many wallpaper packages for download.

Tip The default GNOME backgrounds include several wonderful nature pictures and some cool patterns. However, they aren't included out of the box with Ubuntu. To install them, search for `gnome-backgrounds` in Synaptic Package Manager. Note that the backgrounds are contained in the "universe" software repository, which should be enabled prior to installing the backgrounds; see the "Setting Up Online Software Repositories" section in Chapter 8.

Setting Font Preferences

Ubuntu lets you change the fonts that are used throughout Ubuntu (referred to as *system fonts*). You can also alter how they're displayed.

To change a system font, select System ► Preferences ► Font. In the Font Preferences dialog box, shown in Figure 10-4, click the button next to the system font you want to change, and then choose from the list. You can also set the font point size, so for example, you can make the labels beneath icons easier to read.

By clicking the entries under the Font Rendering heading in the Font Preferences dialog box, you can change how fonts look on your monitor. This will alter the *antialiasing* and *hinting* of the font. Antialiasing softens the edges of each letter to make them appear less jagged. Hinting affects the spacing and shaping of the letters. Used together, they can make the on-screen text look more pleasant. Try each Font Rendering setting in sequence to see which looks best to you (the text in the dialog box will update automatically to show the changes). Nearly everyone with a TFT-based screen, including notebook users, finds the Subpixel Smoothing option best.

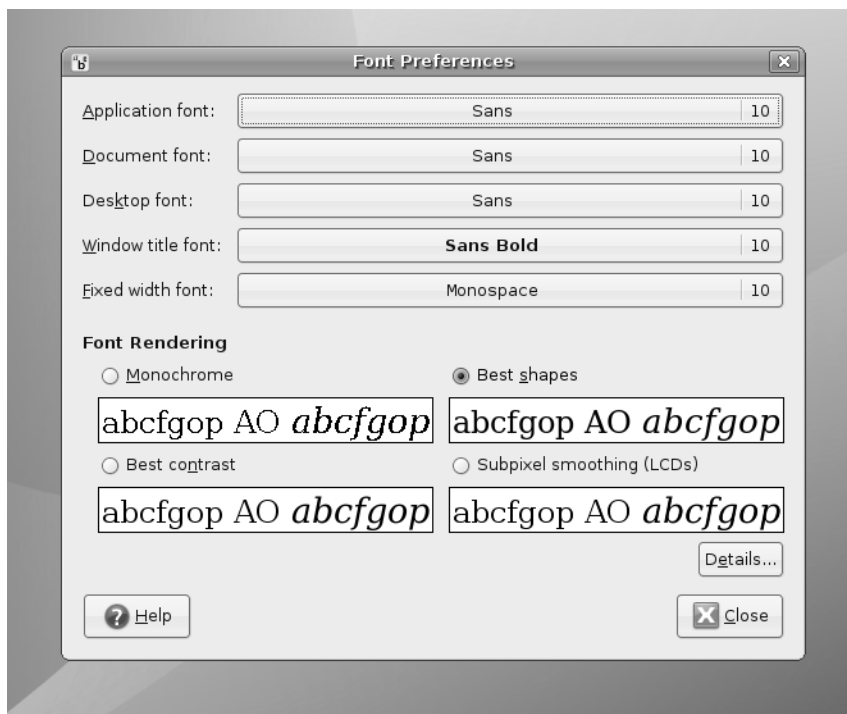


Figure 10-4. You can alter the way fonts appear on screen by using the Fonts Preferences dialog box.

BYTECODE HINTING

Two font hinting subsystems are available under Ubuntu: Autohinting and Bytecode Interpreting. There's a lengthy debate about which produces the best results. Personally, I prefer to use the Bytecode Interpreter, because I believe it leads to the cleaner fonts, but others say Autohinting is better in this regard.

It's easy to switch between Bytecode Interpreter and Autohinting. Follow these steps:

1. Open a GNOME Terminal window (Applications ► Accessories ► Terminal).

2. In the terminal window, type the following:

```
sudo dpkg-reconfigure fontconfig-config
```

3. On the first screen of the configuration program, select Native to activate the Bytecode Interpreter. Alternatively, you can choose Autohinting or even None, which will turn off the hinting system.
4. On the next screen, you can select whether subpixel rendering is activated. This is useful only for TFT screens (including notebooks), so either select Automatic, or if you use a TFT monitor and want to ensure the option is activated, select Always.
5. The third screen offers the option of using bitmap fonts. These are fonts that, unlike the TrueType fonts used within the rest of Ubuntu, don't scale beyond their original sizes. There's no harm in enabling them, because they can sometimes be useful as system fonts.
6. After making this choice, the configuration program will quit. Then you must write the changes you've made using the following command:

```
sudo dpkg-reconfigure fontconfig
```

7. Once the program has finished configuring the software, restart your X server by logging out and then back in again.

Configuring Input Devices

Mouse and key repeat speeds are personal to each user, and you may find the default Ubuntu settings not to your taste, particularly if you have a high-resolution mouse such as a gaming model. Fortunately, changing each setting is easy. You'll find the relevant options under the System ► Preferences menu.

Configuring Mouse Options

Select System ► Preferences ► Mouse to open the Mouse Preferences dialog box, which has three tabs:

Buttons: This tab lets you set whether the mouse is to be used by a left-handed or right-handed person. Effectively, it swaps the functions of the right and left buttons. Beneath this is the double-click timeout setting. This is ideal for people who are less physically dexterous, because the double-click speed can be slowed down. On the other hand, if you find yourself accidentally double-clicking items, you can speed it up.

Pointers: On this tab, you can select from any mouse pointer themes that are installed. You can also activate the Locate Pointer option, which causes a box to appear around the mouse cursor when you press the Ctrl key. This can help you find the cursor on a busy desktop.

Motion: This tab, shown in Figure 10-5, lets you alter the speed of the mouse pointer, as well as the drag-and-drop threshold. Changes are made as each setting is adjusted, so to test the new settings, simply move your mouse. Here's what the settings do:

- The Acceleration setting controls how fast the mouse moves. Whenever you move the mouse, the pointer on screen moves a corresponding amount. However, the cursor actually increases in speed the more you move your hand (otherwise, you would need to drag your hand across the desk to get from one side of the screen to the other). This is referred to as acceleration. If you set the acceleration too high, the pointer will fly around the screen, seemingly unable to stop. If you set it too slow, you'll need to ramp the mouse several times to make it go anywhere.
- The Sensitivity setting controls how quickly the acceleration kicks in when you first move the mouse. Choosing a higher setting means that you can move the mouse relatively quickly before it starts to accelerate and cover more screen space. A low setting means that acceleration will begin almost as soon as you move the mouse. Higher sensitivity settings give you more control over the mouse, which can be useful if you use image-editing programs, for example.
- The Threshold setting determines the amount of mouse movement allowed in a click-and-drag maneuver before the item under the cursor is moved. This setting is designed for people who have limited dexterity and who might be unable to keep the mouse perfectly still when clicking or double-clicking an icon. In such cases, a large threshold value may be preferred.

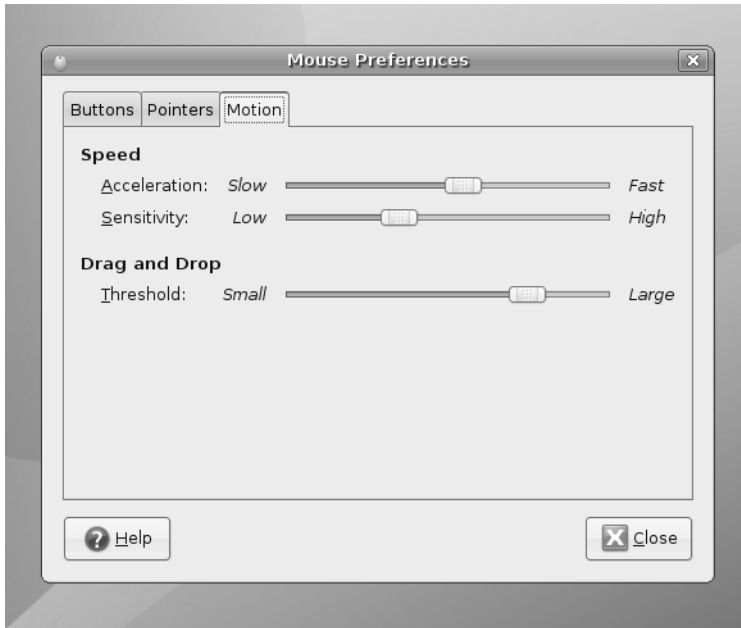


Figure 10-5. *The Mouse Preferences dialog box lets you tame that mouse.*

Changing Keyboard Settings

Select **System** ► **Preferences** ► **Keyboard** to open the Keyboard Preferences dialog box. This dialog box has four tabs:

Keyboard: Using the Keyboard tab, you can alter the rate of key repeat. This can be useful if you often find yourself holding down the Backspace key to delete a sentence; a shorter setting on the Delay slider and a faster setting on the Speed slider can help. However, if you get the settings wrong, you may find double characters creeping into your documents; typing an *f* may result in *ff*, for example. Beneath the Repeat Keys setting is the Cursor Blinking slider. Altering this may help if you sometimes lose the cursor in a document; a faster speed will mean that the cursor spends less time being invisible between flashes.

Layouts: On the Layouts tab, you can choose to add an alternative keyboard layout, as shown in Figure 10-6. For example, if you write in two different languages on your keyboard, it may be helpful to be able to switch between them. Click the Add button, and select the second language from the list.

Layout Options: This tab lets you select from a variety of handy tweaks that affect how the keyboard works. For example, you can configure the Caps Lock key to act like a simple Shift key, or you can turn it off altogether. You can configure the Windows key so that it performs a different function, too. Put a check alongside the option you want after reading through the extensive list of options.

Typing Break: This tab features a function that can force you to stop typing after a predetermined number of minutes. It does this by blanking the screen and displaying a “Take a break!” message. Note that a notification area icon will appear before the break time to give you advanced warning of the lockout.



Figure 10-6. You can have more than one language setting in place for a keyboard, which is handy if you need to type in a foreign language.

Creating Keyboard Shortcuts

Ubuntu lets you define your own keyboard shortcuts for just about any action on the system. To create a shortcut, select System ► Preferences ► Keyboard Shortcuts. In the dialog box, search through the list for the action you want to create a shortcut for, click it, and then press the key (or key combination) you want to use. For example, you might locate the Volume Up and Volume Down entries in the list, click each, and press Ctrl+left

arrow and Ctrl+right arrow. Then you will be able to turn the volume of your sound card up or down by holding down Ctrl and tapping the left or right arrow key, respectively.

Caution Be careful not to assign a shortcut to a popular key. It might be nice to make Totem Media Player appear when you hit the spacebar, for example, but that will mean that it will start up several times whenever you type a sentence in a word processor! Also be aware that some key combinations are used by applications. Within OpenOffice.org's Writer, for example, the Ctrl+left/right arrow key combination moves you from word to word in a paragraph. If you define those combinations as shortcuts, you will no longer have this functionality.

I like to configure my /home folder to appear whenever I press the Home button on the keyboard. This can be done by locating the Home Folder option under the Desktop heading.

Personalizing Login Options

You can even personalize the login screen under Ubuntu. This is known technically as the GNOME Display Manager, or GDM. To access its configuration options, select System ► Administration ► Login Window. The dialog box that appears has five tabs:

Local: The Login Windows Preferences dialog can configure settings for *remote* as well as *local* logins. Remote logins are those that take place over a network (or even the Internet), while local logins are the standard type that you use to access Ubuntu while sitting in front of it. In the Style drop-down list of the Local tab, you can choose the type of login screen people logging in locally will see: Themed, which is to say one that includes a pretty graphic such as the Ubuntu logo; Plain, which shows a simple plain color background with the GNOME logo; or Plain with Face Browser, which is like the Plain option but also shows user-selected photographs (see the next section). Assuming that you select Themed from the Style drop-down list, you can select the actual theme you want from the list. The default choice is Human, which features the Ubuntu logo and color scheme, but you can also select from a handful of other designs. By unchecking Show Actions Menu under the Menu Bar heading, you can deactivate the Actions menu on the login screen, which lets the user restart or shut down the computer. This can be useful for security purposes. By unchecking Include Hostname Chooser (XDMCP) Menu Item, you can remove the option from the Actions menu that allows users to log into a remote system. By selecting Custom under the Welcome Message heading, you can have the login screen display a custom sentence, but only if the Theme allows this—the default Human login screen doesn't. By clicking the Add button, you can install new login screen themes, which, as with other GNOME theme components, can be downloaded from <http://art.gnome.org>.

Remote: The Remote tab controls X Display Manager Control Protocol (XDMCP) logins. This is considered a very insecure method of remotely accessing Ubuntu and should be disabled. I discuss more secure options for remotely accessing Ubuntu in Chapter 34.

Accessibility: This tab lets you activate GNOME's Accessibility tools during login, which can aid those with physical disabilities. Additionally, you can alter the sound that is heard when the login prompt is ready to take input (by default, this is the sound of bongo drums). By putting a check alongside Login Successful and Login Failed, you can also choose sound effects to accompany both those two actions.

Security: This tab lets you alter login settings that might present a security risk to your system. The Enable Automatic Login check box lets you do away with the login screen completely when Ubuntu starts up and go straight to the desktop. Simply put a check in the box, and provide the login username. This presents obvious security issues, but if you're the only person using the computer and if it's located in a secure location, you might want to choose this option. The Enable Timed Login option lets you select a user who will be logged in by default after a given period. This is useful if you want to present the opportunity to log in as a different user but also want to have the fail-safe of logging in automatically, too. Under the Security header you can select Allow Local System Administrator Login, which controls if the root user is allowed to log in, something which is considered a security risk (this is only relevant if the root user account is enabled, which it isn't by default under Ubuntu). The Enable Debug Messages to System Log and Deny TCP Connections to X Server options relate to security, and it's unlikely you'll ever need to use them. The Login Retry Delay section controls how long Ubuntu will pause after an incorrect username or password has been entered on the login screen. Increasing this value can put an irritating block in the way of anybody who intends to try various random username or password combinations to break into your system, but it can also be annoying to you should you mistype and then have to wait! The Configure X Server button lets you configure the X server that starts by default. Changing these settings could stop your computer booting to a GUI, so you shouldn't alter the settings unless you know exactly what you're doing.

Users: Here, you can specify which users are offered as choices within GDM if the Face Browser option is activated in the Security tab. Bear in mind that Linux has many system user accounts that aren't designed to allow logins. By default, all users who have a password are displayed at login time, which is the best way of working (the system accounts don't have passwords, because they aren't login accounts).

ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY

You might know about the Accessibility tools under Windows, which help people with disabilities use the computer. It's possible to use an on-screen magnifier, so that users can better see what they're typing or reading, for example.

Under the GNOME desktop, the Accessibility tools are referred to as Assistive Technology. To use them, select System ► Administration ► Preferences ► Assistive Technology Preferences. Click the check box alongside Enable Assistive Technologies.

Here is what's offered:

- The Screenreader uses a speech synthesizer to announce whatever you click on, as well as whatever you type. To alter its settings, click the Settings button. Note that this also lets you configure any Braille output devices that might be connected to the computer, and it lets you configure the on-screen magnifier.
- The On-screen Keyboard can be used by a mouse, but is most useful when an alternative input device is used, such as a touch screen. As well as presenting a virtual keyboard, it shows the options on screen as a series of large and easy-to-activate buttons.

Changing Your Login Picture

If, when configuring the login options in the previous section, you selected the Happy GNOME with Browser theme, or activated the Plain with Face Browser option, the login screen will display a picture alongside your name, as shown in Figure 10-7. You can click this and type your password to log in. You might be familiar with a similar system under Windows XP or Mac OS X.

Users can choose their own login pictures by clicking System ► Preferences ► About Me. The About Me dialog is designed for users to enter their personal details, such as their addresses, but they can also simply use it to choose photographs of themselves. To do this, click the empty square alongside your name at the top of the dialog box. Ideally, the image you choose should be square and 96×96 pixels, although if the picture is too large, it will be automatically scaled down. Click OK when you've finished.



Figure 10-7. *The Face Browser lets each user choose an icon to appear on the login screen.*

Adding and Removing Desktop Items

Virtually the entire Ubuntu desktop can be redesigned and restructured. You can move the Applications menu from the top of the screen to the bottom to be more like Windows, for example, or you can add numerous desktop shortcuts to popular applications and/or files.

Adding a Shortcut

Ubuntu's nearest equivalent to a Windows-style desktop shortcut is a *launcher*, and you can create a launcher that points to a program or a file. If a launcher is created for a file, Ubuntu will automatically launch the correct program to display the file. If you create a launcher to a .jpg file, for example, Ubuntu will know to launch the Eye of GNOME image viewer when the launcher is double-clicked.

Creating a Launcher

You can create a launcher two ways. One way is to simply click and drag an icon from one of the main menus to the desktop. This effectively copies the menu's launcher to the desktop, rather than creating a new launcher, but the effect is the same. A little technique is required: when initially clicking the menu icon, click and hold for a second before dragging. This will let Ubuntu know that you intend to create a launcher, and that you haven't simply misclicked!

The other way to create a launcher is to right-click the desktop and select Create Launcher. In the dialog that appears, select whether you want to create a launcher to a file or application from the Type drop-down list (the third option, Application in Terminal, will open a terminal window and run the program within it; this is only for specialized use).

Then fill in the Name and Command fields. Alternatively, if you don't know the exact name and path of the file, clicking the Browse button will open a dialog box by which you can navigate to the file or program and click to select it.

■ **Tip** If you want to create a launch to a program, bear in mind that most Linux programs you use from day to day are contained within `/usr/bin`.

The Comment field can be left blank. If it's filled in, it forms the tooltip text that will appear if you hover the mouse cursor over the launcher icon.

To choose an icon for your launcher, click the No Icon button. You can select from several predefined icons, as shown in Figure 10-8, or choose your own picture by clicking the Browse button. If you don't choose an icon, a stock GNOME icon is used.



Figure 10-8. Creating a launcher is easy. Just fill in the Name and Command fields, and choose an icon.

Creating a Link

Launchers have one failing, and that is that they're only recognized by GNOME (and other desktop environments, such as KDE). You can't create a launcher to an application and use it from the command line, for example. In technical terms, a launcher isn't recognized by the underlying Linux file system.

The solution is to create a *link* to the file or program. This will actually create a *symbolic link* to the file. I explain more about file links in Chapter 14, but it's enough to know that this is very similar to a launcher, except it works on a file-system level.

■ **Note** Actually, Linux offers two types of link: a *symbolic link*, which is the most common type of link used under Linux, and a *hard link*, which is a cross between copying a file and creating a shortcut.

To create a link, locate the file you want to create the link to, right-click it, and select Make Link. The link will be created in the same directory as the original file, and you can then click and drag the new link to wherever you want it to appear, such as the desktop. You don't need to choose an icon, because the link inherits the icon of the original file. For example, if it's a picture link, it will inherit the thumbnail preview icon.

■ **Note** If you find the Make Link option grayed out, it's likely that you don't have sufficient permissions to write the link to the directory in question.

Personalizing the Panels

Panels are the long strips that appear at the top and bottom of the Ubuntu screen and play host to a choice of menus, applets, and icons. You can add a new panel by right-clicking a blank spot on an existing one and selecting New Panel, or you can remove a panel by right-clicking it and selecting Delete This Panel.

■ **Caution** If you delete a panel, the arrangement of items it contains will be lost. Of course, you can always re-create the collection on a different panel.

By right-clicking a panel and selecting Properties, you can change its size and dimensions. For example, by unchecking the Expand box, you can make the panel shrink to its smallest possible size. Then, when you add new components (or, in the case of a panel containing the Window List, a new program is run), the panel will expand as necessary. This can be a neat effect and also creates more desktop space.

■ **Tip** This effect is a little like the Mac OS X Dock and might help migrating OS X users feel at home!

Selecting the Autohide feature will make the panel slide off the screen when there isn't a mouse over it. Choosing Show Hide Buttons will make small arrows appear on either side of the panel so that you can click to slide it off the side of the screen when it's not in use. Both these two techniques create more desktop space.

Adding and Removing Menus

You can add either just the Applications menu or the entire set of menus (Applications, Places, and System) to the panel at the bottom of the screen. This can help those who long for the Windows Start button approach to access programs.

Adding All the Menus to a Panel

To add the Application, Places, and System menu to the Panel at the bottom of the Ubuntu desktop, follow these steps:

1. Right-click a blank spot on the bottom Panel, and select Add to Panel.
2. In the dialog box that appears, click the Menu Bar option to add all three menus. You'll find this under the Utilities heading in the list, and you'll have to scroll down to see it.
3. Click the Add button at the bottom of the dialog box.
4. Click the Close button.

Adding a Start-Like Button to a Panel

As an alternative to the Applications, Places, and System menu, you can add a Start-like button which offers submenus for all three menus. See Figure 8-9 for an example.

1. Right-click a blank spot on the bottom Panel, and select Add to Panel.
2. In the dialog box that appears, click the Main Menu option. You'll find this under the Utilities heading in the list, and you'll have to scroll down to see it.
3. Click the Add button at the bottom of the dialog box.
4. Click the Close button.

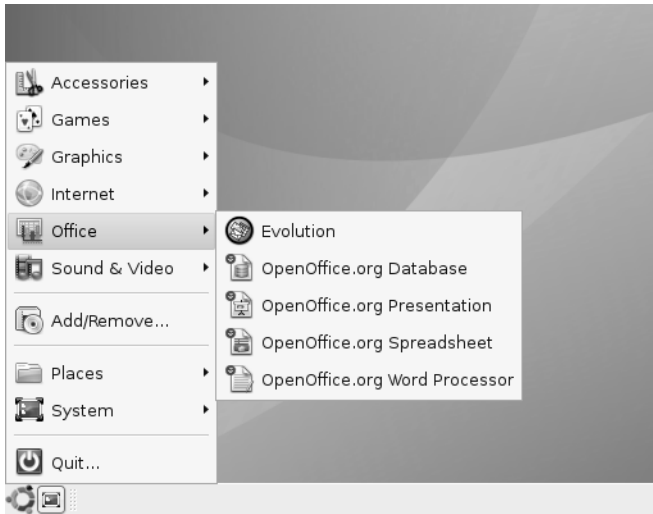


Figure 10-9. *If you just can't do without that Start button, you can re-create one on your Ubuntu desktop.*

Deleting a Menu

Creating new instances of the menu won't delete the old ones. If you create a new Applications menu at the bottom of the screen, for example, the old Applications menu will remain at the top of the screen. In fact, you can have as many instances of the menus on the desktop as you wish, although this won't be a good use of desktop space!

To delete any menu, simply right-click anywhere on that menu, and select Remove from Panel.

Moving Panel Items

To move a panel item, right-click it and select Move. Then drag the mouse to the new location, and click the mouse button once to set it in place. All panel items can be moved, including menus, and items can be moved between different panels. Any item that's in the way will be shifted to make space.

If an item refuses to move, right-click it and ensure that Lock to Panel doesn't have a check alongside it. This is especially relevant if you're trying to move an item into the space occupied by something else—if the other item is locked then it *won't* automatically shift out of the way!

GIVE ME MY TRASH CAN!

The developers who designed Ubuntu's desktop decided to keep the desktop largely clean of icons. This included relegating the Trash icon to its own applet at the bottom-right side of the screen. Many people find using the applet a little difficult and miss the desktop trash can icon, which has been present on Windows and Mac OS desktops for more than 20 years.

The good news is that it's easy to get the trash can back. Click Applications ► Accessories ► Terminal, and at the command prompt type `gconf-editor`. In the program window that appears, click the down arrows next to Apps, then Nautilus (you'll have to scroll down the list a little), and then click Desktop. On the right side of the program window, put a check in the `trash_icon_visible` entry. The Trash icon should then instantly appear on your desktop! To delete the old Trash icon at the bottom right, simply right-click it and select Remove from Panel.

You can also put a check in the `computer_icon_visible`, `home_icon_visible`, and `documents_icon_visible` entries if you wish to see Computer, Home, and Documents desktop icons. By putting a check alongside `network_icon_visible`, you can add a My Network Places-style icon to the desktop too.

Be careful when using the Configuration Editor program. It lets you configure just about every aspect of the GNOME desktop and doesn't warn you when you're about to do something devastating, so the potential for accidental damage is high!

Working with Applets

In actual fact, almost everything you see on the desktop is considered by the GNOME desktop to be an applet, with the exception of application/file icons and the panels. A menu is a form of applet, for example, as is the Workspace Switcher.

Ubuntu provides many more applets that you can choose to add to the desktop to provide a host of useful or entertaining functionality. To add an applet, right-click a blank spot on a Panel, and select Add to Panel. As shown in Figure 10-10, you have a wide choice of applets, divided into categories. Many require configuration when they've been created, so you may need to right-click them and select Properties. For example, you'll need to set your location in the Weather Report applet's properties, so it can provide accurate forecasting. For more details about each applet, and whether it needs additional configuration, see Table 10-1.

To remove an applet, simply right-click it and select Remove from Panel.

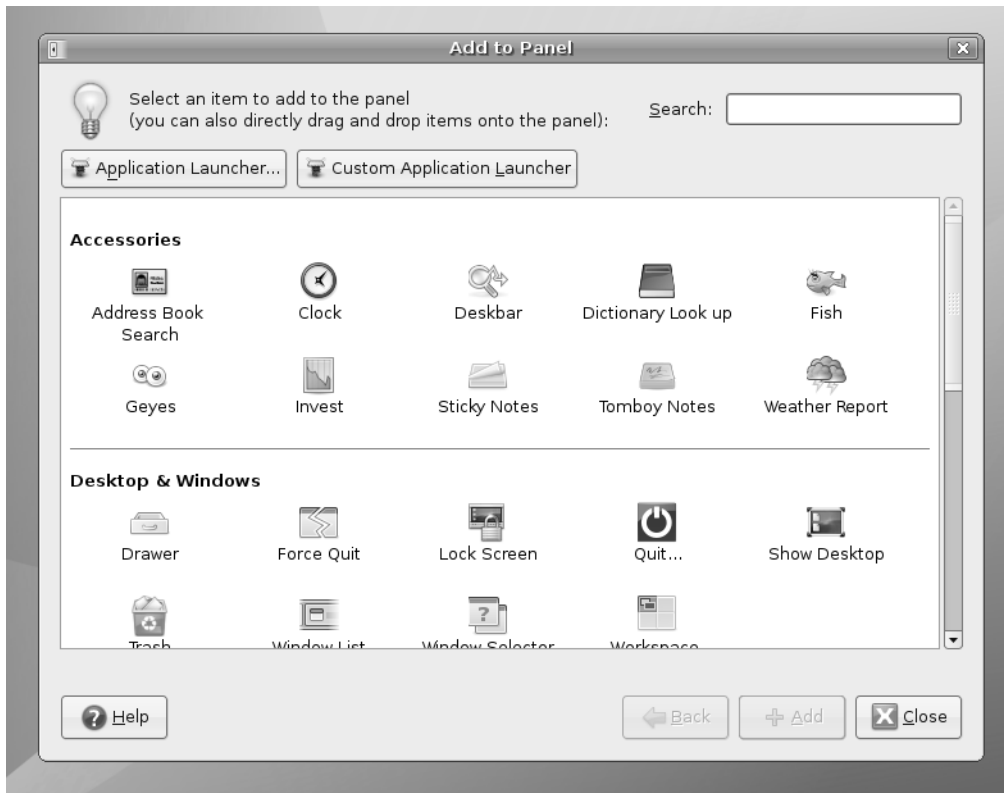


Figure 10-10. A wide variety of applets are available. Some are informative; others are just fun.

Table 10-1. Ubuntu Desktop Applets

Applet	Description	Configuration*
Address Book Search	Lets you quickly retrieve contact information from your Evolution address book.	None needed.
Battery Charge Monitor	Shows the battery level on notebooks and whether outlet power is in use.	None needed.
Character Palette	Displays a palette of accented or unusual characters; click a character to insert it into the text.	None needed.
Clock	Displays the time and date (active by default).	None needed.
Connect to Server	Lets you quickly connect to remote servers, such as FTP (equivalent of clicking Places ► Connect to Server).	None needed.

Table 10-1. *Ubuntu Desktop Applets (Continued)*

Applet	Description	Configuration*
CPU Frequency Scaling Monitor	Shows CPU frequency and, on compatible hardware and if correctly configured (see Chapter 8), lets you change CPU frequency.	Right-click to change frequency.
Deskbar	Adds a quick search text box by which Ubuntu software library or the Web can be searched.	None needed
Dictionary Lookup	Displays a text box that will look up words according to online dictionaries.	None needed.
Disk Mounter	Lets you quickly mount and unmount removable disks	None needed.
Drawer	Displays a drawer icon that, when clicked, “slides out” to reveal yet more applets.	Right-click the icon and click Add to Drawer to add applets.
Fish	Adds a couple of fish to the panel that, when clicked, will spout wisdom.	None needed.
Force Quit	Lets you quit a crashed program.	None needed.
Geyes	Displays two eyes whose pupils follow the mouse cursor.	None needed.
Invest	Adds a text-based scrolling stock ticker to the panel.	Right-click and select Preferences to add individual stock symbols to the list.
Keyboard Accessibility Status	Shows whether Sticky Keys or other accessibility functions are activated.	None needed.
Keyboard Indicator	Shows the current language settings of the keyboard.	None needed.
Lock Screen	Adds an icon that, when clicked, blanks the screen and displays password prompt.	None needed.
Main Menu	Lets you add a single icon Start-like system menu.	None needed.
Menu Bar	Adds a new Applications, Places, and Desktop menu bar to the panel.	None needed.
Modem Monitor	Displays virtual LEDs showing when modem data is sent/received and lets you quickly dial up with a single click.	None needed.
Network Monitor	Displays virtual LEDs showing data sent/received via networking devices.	None needed.
Notification Area	Adds a notification area to the panel (active by default).	None needed.

Table 10-1. *Ubuntu Desktop Applets (Continued)*

Applet	Description	Configuration*
Pilot Applet	Lets you quickly connect to Palm devices via gnome-pilot software.	If gnome-pilot hasn't already been set up, a configuration dialog box will appear.
Quit	Lets you log out or shut down.	None needed.
Run Application	Adds an icon that, when clicked, makes the Run Application dialog box appear.	None needed.
Search for Files	Provides one-click access to Nautilus's search mode.	None needed.
Separator	Simply inserts a graphical separator—useful for making several applets alongside each other look neater.	None needed.
Show Desktop	Minimizes all desktop windows (active by default).	None needed.
Sticky Notes	Lets you create virtual sticky notes.	None needed.
System Monitor	Adds a small graph that shows system resource usage.	Right-click and select Preferences to choose system areas to be monitored.
Terminal Server Client Applet	Provides one-click access to locations set up within the Terminal Server program (see Chapter 34).	None needed.
Tomboy Notes	Lets you add sticky notes to the desktop.	None needed.
Trash	Adds the Trash icon to the panel, where files can be dropped for removal to Trash.	None needed.
Volume Control	Adds volume controls (active by default).	None needed.
Weather Report	Adds an icon that shows current weather conditions.	Right-click, and select Preferences and then the Location tab to set your location.
Window List	Adds a list of windows, which you can use to switch between currently running programs (active by default).	None needed.
Window Selector	Adds an icon that, when clicked, switches between currently open windows (alternative to Window List).	None needed.
Workspace Switcher	Shows virtual desktop selector.	None needed.

* Nearly all applets have configuration options that can be used to tweak them in various ways. This column only indicates if immediate configuration is needed.

Summary

In this chapter, you've learned how to completely personalize Ubuntu to your own tastes. We've looked at changing the theme so that the desktop has a new appearance, and we've examined how to make the input devices behave exactly as you would like.

In addition, you've learned how to add and remove applets from the desktop in order to add functionality or simply make Ubuntu work the way you would like.

Finally, we looked at the power-saving functions under Ubuntu and how you can avoid your computer wasting energy.

In the next chapter, we will look at what programs are available under Ubuntu to replace those Windows favorites you might miss.