



Quick launcher for the desktop

PUSH BUTTON

Desktop icons are not the only way to launch programs; in fact, a kicker that is not hidden by a muddle of windows is often preferable. Tablaunch is a flexible and attractive program launcher for the Linux desktop. **BY ANDREA MÜLLER**

The kickers that come with the major desktop environments are full-fledged universal tools that offer a variety of features, including paggers, menus, and clocks. This was too much of a good thing for developer D. Lam; as a user who preferred a simple window manager, he did not fancy the idea of cluttering his machine with the KDE or Gnome libraries. While shopping around for an alternative, D. Lam discovered YeahLaunch, the launcher belonging to the YeahWM [1] window manager. This is a kicker that is easy on resources, and it automatically hides in the background when you don't need it.

The only drawback, from D. Lam's point of view, was YeahLaunch's very

plain appearance. This prompted him to fire up his editor and develop a new kicker based on YeahLaunch, which he dubbed Tablaunch [2]. Although Tablaunch is still easy on memory, the new kicker has vastly improved optics, adding options such as a zoom feature that activates when users hover the mouse over an icon. But if you prefer a more staid approach, Tablaunch is still an interesting option. If asked to do so, Tablaunch will give you simple pushbuttons rather than icons, and that should keep even the strictest of purists happy.

Installation

Before you can start working with Tablaunch, you will need to build the appli-

cation from the source code. In contrast to most open source applications, Tablaunch comes with an install script that handles most of the hard work. After unpacking the archive, change to the new *tablaunch-0.6* directory. Note that the installer does not prompt you for the *root* password, so you will need to *su* to *root* before running the script. The alternative would be to install Tablaunch locally in your home directory.

When you launch the script, by typing *./install.sh*, you are first asked to specify if you want to install Tablaunch from scratch or remove an installed version. Type *1* to move on to the next prompt, which asks you which graphics library the kicker should use. There are two options: *imlib* and *imlib2*. The latter will give you better results, if you do not have different sized icons for the program launcher, as the *imlib* zoom effect makes for grainy images.

The last question the script asks you concerns the installation directory. Type *1* to copy the program to */home/username/bin*, or *2* for a system global install in the */usr/local/bin* folder. Choose one of these options, and the installer will launch your compiler, copying the software to the target directory.

First Impressions

There is no need to pore over the documentation or modify configuration files to gain an initial impression of the launcher. The *examples* folder below the source code directory has four sample scripts that launch Tablaunch with various options, giving users a useful quick introduction to the program's basic functionality. The icons defined by the configuration files reside below the *icons* directory.

If you change to the examples folder and call *./tablauncher-buttons.sh*, Tablauncher will launch at the top of the screen and give you a mixed view. The

launcher has four ready-made icons that will start *Konqueror*, *OpenOffice*, an *xterm*, and the *xcalc* calculator, along with a collection of simple buttons (Figure 1). Clicking on the first button, labeled *Juggle*, calls *xlock* to lock the screen and display a screen saver from the XScreensaver package.

When you drag the mouse to the center of the screen, the kicker automatically hides in the background. You need to go to the top of the screen to unhide the kicker. Besides this default variant, you'll also notice the *tablauncher-icon-home* script, which also puts the kicker at the top of the screen but gives you a garish pink color scheme. Icon backgrounds are transparent in this mode, and this means that the zoom effect for active icons is extremely realistic. Tablauncher uses less garish colors when you launch the *tablauncher-bottom* script. As the name suggests, the launcher quickly settles down at the bottom of the screen (Figure 2). Purists might like to check out *tablauncher-noicons*, which gives you a program launcher with simple blue buttons.

Individual Launchers

No matter how pretty the examples may be, nobody really wants to be restricted to the applications preconfigured by the program developer. Tablauncher parses its configuration file, *.tablaunch*, in the user's home directory, or an arbitrary file to discover which icons it should display. If you use a non-standard path for the configuration file, you need to specify *-c* and pass the filename to Tablauncher when you start the program. The configuration file format is extremely simple. You will need a line with the following format for each launcher:

```
Name "command" icon big_icon
```

Tablauncher uses the entry label as a tooltip, which it displays when a user hovers the mouse over the icon. Replace "command" with the call syntax for the program you need. You only need quotes

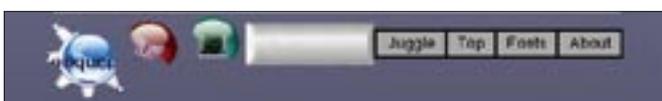


Figure 1: Tablauncher can use both simple buttons and graphical, animated icons as program launchers.

if the command comprises blanks, but of course this is always the case if you need to pass parameters to the program.

The entries for *icon* and *big_icon* are optional. If you do not specify an image file, Tablauncher will use square boxes that sport the program name. If you prefer a little more color, enter the name of an image file here. It is a good idea to store the image files in *\$HOME/.icons*, as this is where Tablauncher expects them to be by default. To improve the zoom effect, you might also like to give Tablauncher bigger image files. 32x32 pixels is fine for standard icons, but 48x48 is preferable for zoomed icons. If KDE is installed on your machine, you will discover a collection of neat icon images in the subdirectories below */usr/share/icons*. If you have Suse Linux, the */opt/kde3/share/icons* folder is the right place to look. The following entry

```
Thunderbird "thunderbird"
thunderbird_small.png
thunderbird_big.png
```

creates an icon for the Thunderbird mail program, for example.

Lots of Options

The configuration file takes you just half way there. Tablauncher's flexibility is down to the program parameters, which allow you to set the color for tooltips or icon transparency. You can display a list with these options, including a short explanation, by typing *tablaunch -help*. To prevent the settings being overwritten by an *.Xresources* file provided by your distributor, and to stop Tablauncher

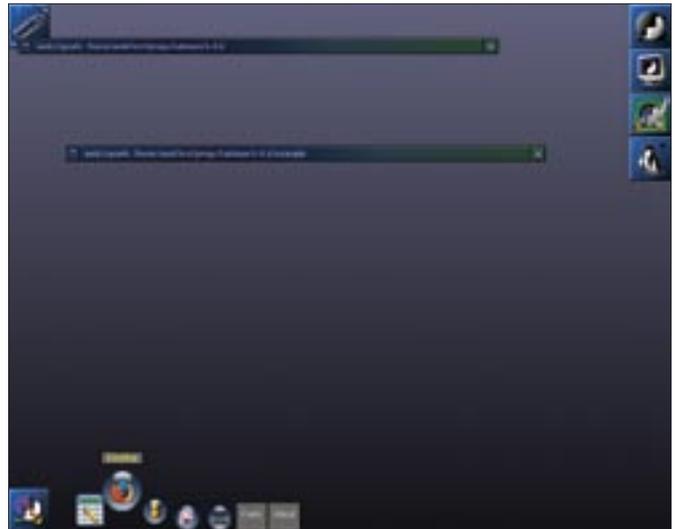


Figure 2: The *tablauncher-bottom* script sends the launcher to the bottom edge of the screen and uses a transparent background.

from crashing, you might like to add the *--ignoreXRM* parameter when launching the pro-

gram. *-fg* followed by a color name allows you to set the foreground color. The approach for changing the tooltip background is similar; just type *-bg*. The *showrgb | less* command tells you which color names the system understands.

The *sfg* and *-pfg* options define the colors for pushed buttons, and both options expect color names as arguments. If you prefer not to display the launcher at the top left of the screen, you can use a command like *tablaunch --ignoreXRM -x 100* to shift it 100 pixels to the right, for example. If icons do not give you a big enough clue about the programs hiding behind them, you can tell the program to display permanent tooltips. This text is displayed in the launcher immediately above the icons. If you prefer Tablauncher to hang around a little bit longer than the default delay, you can set the *-d* flag and specify the launcher hide delay in seconds. *--dock* followed by *bottom* sends Tablauncher to the bottom edge of the screen.

You can use various combinations of options, which can become so complex that you will want to avoid typing them every time you launch Tablauncher. In this case, you can follow the programmer's example and add the parameters to a start script, which launches your personalized version of the kicker. ■

INFO

[1] YeahWM: <http://phrat.de/>

[2] Tablauncher: <http://sourceforge.net/projects/tablauncher>