What's new in Gnome 2.24?

GNOME NEWS

The traditional Fall release of the Gnome desktop ushers in a number of useful new features. **BY CHRISTIAN MEYER**

The news is out – the current Gnome branch [1] is getting old, slowly but surely, and the time is right to think about a major version change. At the Gnome Users' and Developers' European Conference (Guadec) [2], which took place in Istanbul early in July 2008, Gnome developers looked into their options for Gnome 3.0. The result is that the number before the dot will change after version 2.28.

Of course, a major new version necessitates changes to the underlying Glib and Gtk+ libraries; however, the devel-opers are just planning clean-up work in the form of API consolidation for the first major 3.X release. The first evidence of this library upgrade is Glib 2.18 or Gtk+ 2.14, the underpinnings for Gnome 2.24. It is not entirely clear whether the new Gnome really will be around in two years; in the meantime, work on the current Gnome components is continuing at top speed. The tried and trusted architecture, which has been around for more than six years, is far from the end of its tether.

Improvements

In Gnome 2.24, the developers have again focused on details – and on the stability of the libraries and programs added last spring.

In addition to the stability enhance-ments, improvements to the Nautilus [3] file manager and new tools, such as the Empathy Instant Messenger client [4] and the Hamster time management ap-plet [5], reveal that this desktop is still in its prime.

The Nautilus developers have intro-duced some very visible changes. For many years, users have asked for a split view (see the "Split View" box), and both developers and usability experts have turned down this request many times. The new tabbed mode included with tools such as the Epiphany [6] web browser (Figure 1) and the Gedit [7] text editor is a more open response to a simi-lar idea. Users can press the keyboard shortcut Ctrl + T to open a new tab in a style reminiscent of Firefox.

Tabbed view, which is only available in browser mode, supports drag and drop: Dragging a file or folder to another tab causes Nautilus to move the tab into the foreground. Of course, actions be-tween windows work too. The develop-ers have also added a space-saving com-pact view (Figure 2), and the file man-ager now supports all the view modes that its competitors offer.

In previous versions, files or folders with long names tended to mess up the way icons were grouped. This phenome-

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Christian Meyer started to work with Linux in the mid-1990s and was a member of the Gnome Germany board from 2004 to 2006. Right now, Christian is working on his theses and preparing for his finals. Although he does not have much leisure time, ex-perimenting with new technologies in and around Linux is always at the top of his list.
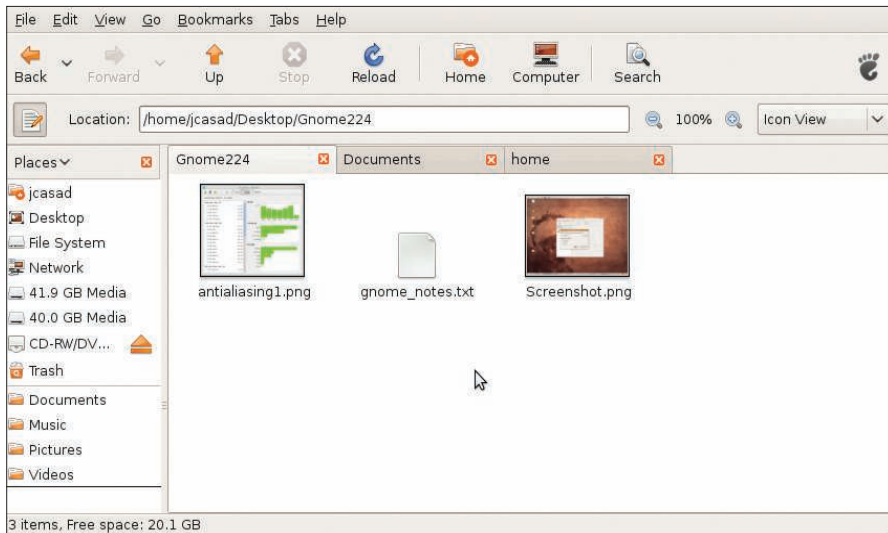
Figure 1: The new tab feature lets users drag and drop files between individual tabs.

non is a thing of the past: Nautilus now displays the first three lines of the file or folder name.

Experienced users might want to use the GConf */apps/nautilus/icon_view* key to change the default number of lines. The eject icon for removable media – such as USB sticks or iPods – is another new feature. Clicking the icon tells the computer to unmount the medium.

In the past, copying data from FAT32 partitions caused trouble if the filenames included non-standard characters. Nautilus would tend to trip over its own feet and fail to copy the files. The new version removes this issue, at the same time implementing the Freedesktop specification for the trash can.

Files a user deletes accidentally are restored to their original paths. Nautilus remembers the original filesystem location of every file or folder. If you want to add files to an archive called *test.tgz*, you can just drag the files to the icon and drop them on it. Internally, Nautilus launches File Roller [9], which handles the remaining tasks.

The developers have also corrected some errors in Nautilus. Gio and GVFS, which replaced the legacy GnomeVFS

last spring, now work more reliably. Right now, about 90 percent of programs rely on the new virtual filesystem library – perfect conditions for finally burying GnomeVFS sometime in the near future.

Multimedia Pleasure

The latest release fixes many bugs in the Totem [10] multimedia player, which now not only plays movies and audio files, but also YouTube videos. Totem also offers support for digital TV (DVB).

Fans of home entertainment PCs no longer need to waste time configuring the remote control (LIRC). LIRC support now works for most remote controls out of the box.

The media player thumbnailer now uses cover art – if it finds it – for movies, too.

Deskbar Applet

The developers of the Deskbar applet, which serves as a kind of Swiss army knife for desktop search tools (Figure 3), have reintroduced some new features. The program again displays the history in a separate window, which was normal up to version 2.18. By pressing Del, you can delete individual history entries. All told, the new version contributes six new add-ons to the existing collection:

- Calculator: Deskbar evaluates requests such as *2*78-6*1.5* directly and returns the results along with the request.
- Google Search: An alternative to Yahoo search. Note that you need an external package for this (*python-simplejson*) on Ubuntu.
- Google Code Search: An interesting plugin for developers that searches for functions in public source code.
- Yahoo Suggestions: Makes suggestions on the basis of requests entered by the user.
- Wikipedia Suggests: Similar to Yahoo Suggestions; searches Wikipedia pages for suggestions.
- Twitter and identi.ca: Support for blogging services.

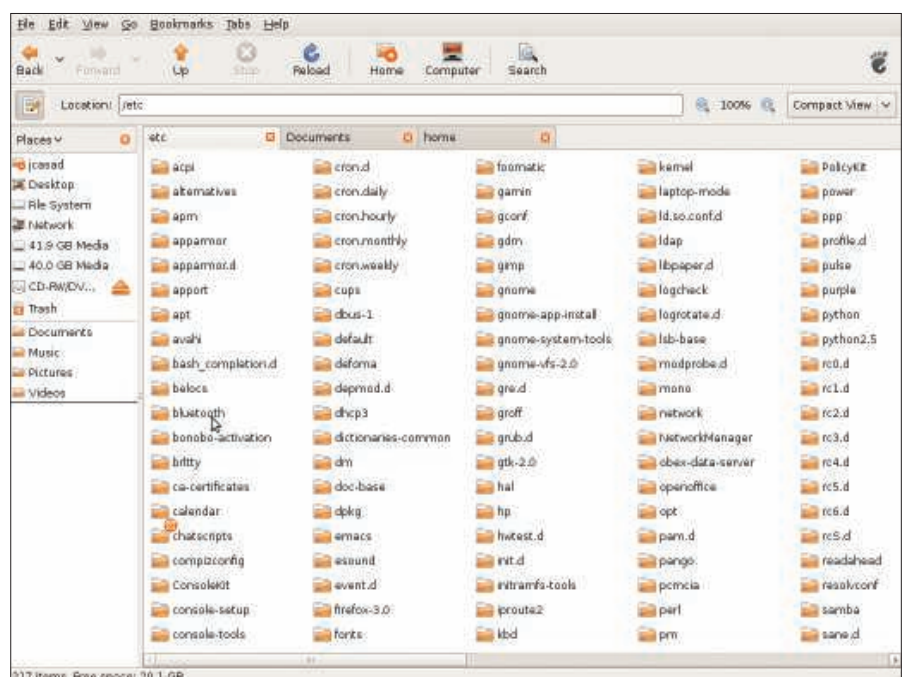On top of these add-ons, Sebastian Pölsterl has integrated Capuchin [11], a

Split View

File managers typically display the contents of one directory per window. In split view mode, which Gnome Commander [8] and other programs offer, the tool displays two folders adjacently in a single window. In many people's opinion, this makes file operations easier.
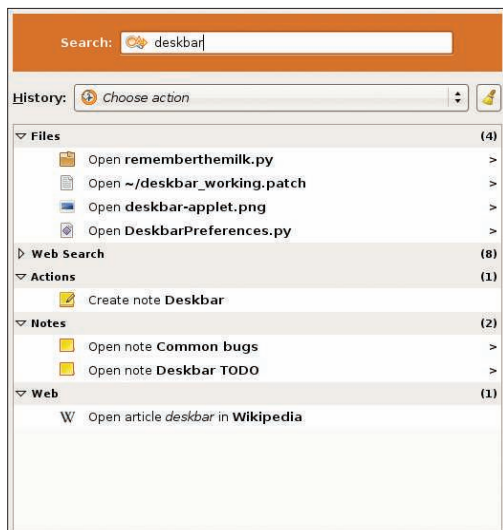

Figure 2: Nautilus' compact view displays far more objects in a single window.

Figure 3: Deskbar integrates search tools with helpful desktop apps such as Tomboy.

Figure 5: The Hamster project offers timekeeping for daily tasks. The program evaluates workflows in the form of graphs and even generates HTML files.

background service that downloads and installs plugins.

Remote Access

The Vinagre VNC client [12] and the Vino VNC server also offer some new features. In full screen mode, Vinagre does not display the toolbar until you move the mouse pointer to the top of the window. The new features also include improved screen content handling if the remote machine uses a higher resolution than the local machine (Figure 4). A new Panel applet supports fast access to bookmarks and host systems.

In a style similar to VirtualBox [13], Vinagre now supports the keyboard shortcut Ctrl + Alt + Del to shutdown the remote system.

Video Conferencing

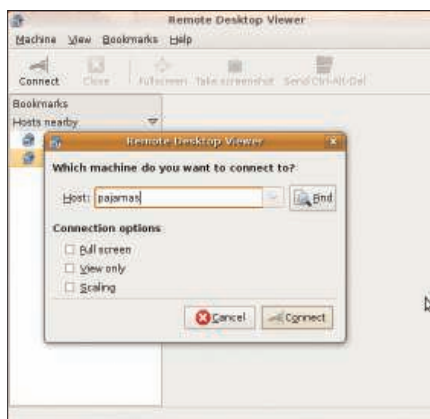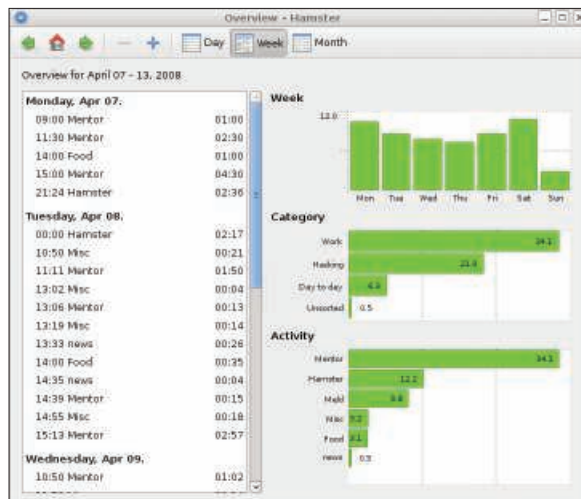After much work, version 3.0 of the Ekiga video conferencing program – for-

Figure 4: Ubuntu's Remote Desktop Viewer is based on the Vinagre VNC client.

merly known as GnomeMeeting – is now available. Besides adding a completely new user interface, the developers have also been working on the SIP features. More modern video codecs and a smoother display – in full screen mode too – make it quite clear how much work has gone into the program in recent months. For the first time, Ekiga will now install on Microsoft Windows.

New Programs

Developers have added two new programs: Empathy, an instant messenger based on Gossip, and the Hamster project, which helps users keep track of the time spent on various tasks. Although most users previously installed Pidgin – formerly known as Gaim – as their IM tool, the program's limited functionality made it difficult to use. Empathy is a welcome return to the *KISS* (Keep It Simple Stupid) principle, and it supports all the major messaging protocols, including ICQ, AIM, MSN, Yahoo, and Jabber. Empathy relies on libraries that keep to the Freedesktop specifications, although it also uses Libpurple, on which Pidgin was based.

The Hamster project provides a simple approach to managing time requirements for daily tasks. Output in HTML and several helpful visualization features leave a positive overall impression for this fairly recent project (Figure 5).

Some components failed to make the Gnome 2.24 freeze. The new version of Epiphany, for instance, was originally supposed to rely on Apple's Webkit ren-

dering engine. Although Webkit is now on a par with Gecko in many areas, it still has some issues with accessibility.

As a result of these issues, the developers decided to delay the Webkit integration until Spring 2009. The Conduit [14] synchronization tool was also delayed. In all likelihood, both Webkit and Conduit will make the next version of Gnome.

Gnome 2.24 offers no spectacular changes to basic libraries. For the most part, the developers have focused on stability, although several new tools and features debut with the latest version.

According to the Gnome project, at least two more Gnome releases will follow this version before Gnome 3 arrives. The next release in the 2.X series is Gnome version 2.26, which is scheduled to appear in mid-March 2009. ■

INFO
[1] Gnome: *http://www.gnome.org*
[2] Guadec: *http://www.guadec.org*
[3] Nautilus: *http://www.gnome.org/ projects/nautilus/*
[4] Empathy IM wiki page: *http://live.gnome.org/Empathy*
[5] Hamster project wiki page: *http:// live.gnome.org/ProjectHamster*
[6] Epiphany: *http://www.gnome.org/ projects/epiphany/*
[7] Gedit: *http://www.gnome.org/ projects/gedit/*
[8] Gnome Commander: *http://www.nongnu.org/gcmd/*
[9] File Roller: *http://fileroller.sourceforge.net*
[10] Totem: *http://www.gnome.org/ projects/totem/*
[11] Capuchin: *http://capuchin.k-d-w.org*
[12] Vinagre: *http://www.gnome.org/ projects/vinagre/*
[13] VirtualBox: *http://www.virtualbox.org*
[14] Conduit wiki: *http://live.gnome.org/Conduit*