

Getting around with the Avant Window Navigator

APPLE POLISHING

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The Avant Window Navigator brings a Mac OS look and feel to your Linux desktop. With just a couple of steps, you can add a taste of Apple to your Linux user experience. We show you how to set up this breezy panel alternative. **BY KRISTIAN KISSLING**

Avant Window Navigator (or Awn for short) is more than just a panel. This handy app brings the look and feel of Mac OS X to a Linux desktop (Figure 1). Although Avant is happier with Gnome, it also runs on Xfce and KDE. This attractive desktop companion offers numerous effects, such as rotating or expanding icons; it also scales and optionally replaces the exist-

ing panel. The latest version is not just pretty, it also knows a couple of neat tricks – if you install the right extensions. The panel only works if your

graphics adapter supports 3D acceleration and if you enable desktop effects.

After completing the preparation, enable desktop effects on both systems. On



Figure 1: The Avant Window Navigator provides an icon-based panel for a Mac-like desktop experience.

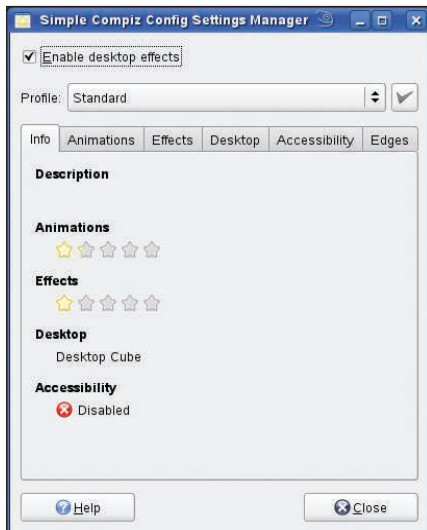


Figure 2: On Ubuntu and openSUSE, you need to enable desktop effects to use Awn.

Ubuntu, this means selecting *System | Preferences | Appearance*, then changing to the *Visual Effects* tab and selecting *Normal* to enable a more restrained variant of the effects.

On openSUSE 11, you can enable effects in the start menu by selecting *Applications | Utilities | Desktop | Desktop Effects*. Next, check *Enable desktop effects* and click *Close* (Figure 2), then pop up a console, become root, and add an *Option "Composite" "on"* entry to *Section "Extensions"* in the */etc/X11/xorg.conf* file, or change the existing entry from *"off"* to *"on"*. Now save the file and type *init 3* to terminate the X server. Again working as root, type *init 5* to relaunch the graphical desktop.

Navigating

If the desktop effects work, you are almost done. On Ubuntu, use Synaptic to install the *avant-window-navigator* and *awn-manager* packages. OpenSUSE users need to launch YaST and add the Packman repository as an installation source before installing the *avant-window-navigator* and *awn-extras-applets* packages. If you will be running Awn on KDE or Xfce, you are in for a surprise: The package manager will additionally install a whole bunch of Gnome dependencies – consider whether you have enough hard disk space for this before you press the button.

To launch Awn, press *Alt + F2* on Ubuntu 8.04 and openSUSE 11 and type *avant-window-navigator*. Doing so should take you to the panels shown in

Figure 3 (for Ubuntu 8.04). Ubuntu does not automatically launch Awn each time you launch the desktop. To change this behavior, select *System | Preferences | Sessions* in the Gnome start menu, and then press *Add* in the *Start programs* tab. In the dialog that follows, type the name of the program, *avant-window-navigator*, in the *Command* line.

Managing Awn

Avant Window Navigator is made up of two components. In addition to the panel (also known as the Window Navigator), a tool called the Awn Manager helps you customize the panel to reflect your own needs. For instance, you can choose effects or fix the icon alignment.

When you first launch the Navigator, you will not see very much – maybe a couple of icons from active applications. Of course, you will need a full-fledged taskbar that lets you open your choice of programs. To do so, press *Alt + F2* and type *awn-manager* to open the configuration dialog.

On the right, you will see a number of vertical tabs with the categories on the left. To start, go to the *General* category, change to *Launchers* and click *Add* (Figure 4). On openSUSE 11, first type a *Name* and a *Description* for the program. The last line is for the command that you would use to call the software at the command line, such as *firefox*.

A button on the left lets you select an icon for the starter: If possible, you should choose an SVG-formatted vector graphic. The advantage is that legacy icons are pixelated and out of focus when you scale the panel, whereas vector graphics scale to match their environment. OpenSUSE and Ubuntu include a number of SVG images in the */usr/share/icons* directory (check out the *Tango* subdirectory on openSUSE), but you will not find a matching motif for every application. In this case, you

can search for SVG files on the web, unpack your goodies in a local directory, and click on the *Directory* drop-down list in the image selection dialog – at least in openSUSE. On Ubuntu, press *Browse* to specify an alternative icon source.

The next step is to specify the panel's appearance. The first question is, "Do you want the bottom bar to be in view all the time or do you want to hide it while you are not working with it?" In the latter case, check *Automatically hide taskbar*. This tells the taskbar to disappear when you maximize a window. If you check the *Keep below maximized windows when not in use* option, the taskbar will hide behind maximized windows, unless you move the mouse down to the bottom of the screen.

Generally speaking, there is an issue in both cases: Awn juts into the full-screen window if you accidentally move the mouse too far down the screen. To prevent this, the *Maximized windows do not overlap the taskbar* option does about half of what it promises. The Ubuntu and openSUSE versions give you floating icons (Figure 5).

Either you should install a very recent version of Awn (see the "Applets and Themes" section) or you should do without this option. Check out the wiki [1] or the FAQ [2] or the project's FAQ for more tricks and options for configuring the panel.

Full Effect

The Awn Manager also manages the appearance of the bar. The *Icon Effects* drop-down conjures up various effects



Figure 3: Avant Window Navigator directly after launching on Ubuntu.



Figure 4: To install new applications in the panel, first launch the Awn Manager and then choose Launchers.

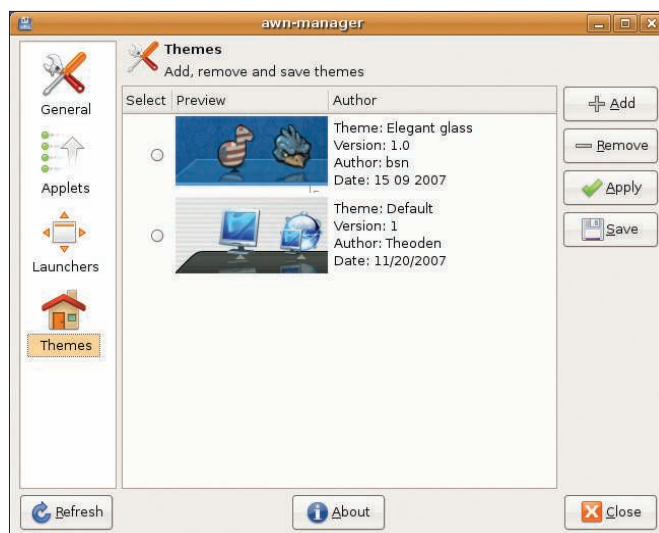


Figure 6: You can download themes as TGZ archives and apply them directly to Awn.

for icon presentation. If you select *classic*, your icons will jump up and down slowly. In contrast, *3D Spotlight Turn* rotates the icons in the light of a virtual spotlight – this is almost too much of a good thing. The *Label* tab lets you choose a label that appears when you hover the mouse over an icon. Also, you can change the shadow color, font size, and so on.

The *Taskbar design* tab is more exciting: Set the *Look* to *3D look*, and restart the Navigator to change the bar's appearance, color, and frame. Also, you can choose whether Awn displays a *Cutting line between launchers and windows*. If you like, you can also change the bar height and offset. This just leaves two final tabs: the *Glass Engine* tab lets you set the Awn menu colors and transparency, and the *Pattern Engine* tab lets you decorate the bar with a picture.

Applets and Themes

Applets and themes make the software even more attractive. In addition to icons that let you launch programs, applets handle specific tasks, just like in the Gnome panel. For example, a button will take you to Last.fm, another pops up a transparent console on-screen, and a

third brings a visually appealing start menu to life – just to name a few.

To use these Awn extensions, you need the add-on package *avant-window-navigator-extras*. This extra package did not make the official software repository until Ubuntu 8.10. OpenSUSE includes the package, but the applets failed to work in our lab.

To use a current version with applets and fewer bugs, Ubuntu users can add the Extras repository as a package source [3] and install the latest Awn developer version (*trunk*). First you need to remove the previous version and delete the configuration (see “Deleting the Configuration” box). The *Applets* tab in Awn Manager then lets you configure the helpers.

Users of openSUSE 11 will need to build from scratch for a more recent version. The Awn Extras website [4] has details of the build and dependencies. Also, you will need to choose between the more stable *Release* and the more recent *Development* variants.

More Awn themes are available [5]. First, save the TGZ archives in a local folder and then launch the Awn Manager. In the *Themes* tab, click *Add*, browse to the TGZ archive, and click *OK*. Awn tells you that you have successfully

installed the theme and displays it in the *Themes* tab (Figure 6). Now you can click on your choice of new

clothes and press *Apply* to try out the theme.

Conclusions

Awn adds a touch of glamour to the desktop. Although the software has some shortcomings, they are not too drastic. Ubuntu users can load a more sophisticated Awn variant with applets from an external repository, but openSUSE users need to invest more of their time to build the current version. ■

Deleting the Configuration

Before you can install a new panel version, you need to delete the existing Awn configuration to avoid a mess. To do so, pop up a console, type `rm -fR ~/.config/awn`, then remove the Gnome configuration settings with the `gconf-tool-2 --recursive-unset /apps/avant-window-navigator` command. The new Awn version will start without legacy settings after you do so.

INFO

- [1] Awn wiki: <http://wiki.awn-project.org/>
- [2] Awn FAQ: <http://wiki.awn-project.org/FAQ>
- [3] Ubuntu Awn Extras: <https://launchpad.net/~awn-testing/+archive>
- [4] Building Awn Extras from the source code: http://wiki.awn-project.org/Awn_Extras:Installation#Building_From_Source
- [5] Awn themes: <http://wiki.awn-project.org/Themes>



Figure 5: The version of Awn delivered by the two distributions in our lab had a bug: The icons “float” above the panel.