eyeOS and Ulteo desktops

IN THE CLOUD

The eyeOS and Ulteo online desktops offer different approaches to a web-based desktop, but they are both worth a closer look if you are in the market for a computing environment in the cloud. **BY DMITRI POPOV**

Today, when a pervasive and reliable Internet connection is no longer just a dream, the idea of using web-based applications makes a lot of sense. Google Docs and the Zoho office suite are prime examples of solutions for users who prefer to move their daily computing from the desktop to the cloud. But instead of replacing individual applications with their web-based equivalents, you can opt for a service that offers you a full-blown desktop that contains everything you need to work on your files and documents and collaborate with other users. In this article, I take a look at two such solutions: the eyeOS and Ulteo online desktops.

eyeOS

EyeOS [1] is not the only web-based operating system out there, but it's probably one of the most mature and feature-rich options to offer a complete computing environment accessible from your browser. With several ways to get your own eyeOS installation up and running, the easiest is to use the hosted version of the system [2] provided and maintained by the eyeOS project team. The advantages of this solution are obvious – you don't have to install anything, your system is automatically upgraded to the latest version, and you don't have to worry about maintenance. However, the hosted version is designed mainly for demonstration purposes and not for production use. Another solution is to create your own eyeOS installation on a hosted web space. This way, you retain full control over your system without running and maintaining the server yourself. Because eyeOS has its own virtual file system, it doesn't require a database back end, which means that the only thing you need is a server with support for PHP5.

EyeOS comes with its own installer, which makes the entire installation and configuration process a breeze. After you download the latest version of eyeOS, you should unpack the downloaded archive and move it to your server. Next, point your browser to *http://yourserver/ eyeOS/install.php* and the installation wizard guides you through the rest of the process. Finally, you can also install eyeOS on your own server, which not only gives you absolute control but also allows you to integrate eyeOS with OpenOffice.org if you want to add the ability to open and save documents in the OpenOffice.org or Microsoft Office formats. Making eyeOS work with OpenOffice.org does require some manual tweaking, but the entire procedure is pretty straightforward and is described in the accompanying *README.txt* file.

EyeOS does a pretty good job of mimicking a real desktop (Figure 1). A few default shortcuts on the desktop allow you to launch frequently used applications quickly. The dock at the top of the desktop gives you access to the applications grouped by categories, whereas a so-called *Common actions* floating bar lets you upload files, send messages, and
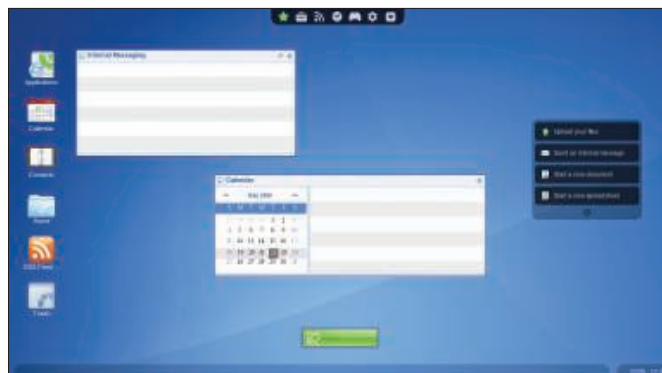
Figure 1: The eyeOS desktop, a complete computing environment accessible from your browser.

Figure 2: eyeOS sports a few simple widgets that you can place on the desktop.

create new documents with a single click. EyeOS fully supports drag and drop, so you can rearrange icons on the desktop and move windows around; you can even move files from one location to another by dragging and dropping them.

As with a conventional operating system, you can use the right mouse button in eyeOS to access contextual menus. Right-click, for example, on the desktop, and you can use the menu to upload files, create a folder or a file, access the Preferences panel, and create desktop shortcuts. EyeOS includes a few widgets that you can put on your desktop (Figure 2). For example, the miniCalendar widget provides a quick overview of events in your calendar, and miniMessages shows a list of internal messages. To place a widget on the desktop, choose it from the Accessories menu in the Dock.

An operating system is not of much use if it doesn't include key productivity applications, and eyeOS offers a well-rounded software bundle. The system comes with an office suite consisting of a word processor (eyeDocs), a spreadsheet application (eyeSheets), and a presentation viewer (eyePresentations). Al-

though these applications are not on par with web-based office suites like Google Docs or Zoho, they are adequate for viewing documents and basic editing.

The Calendar application allows you to manage multiple calendars and view them by day or by week. As with Google Calendar, you can create a new event by clicking on the desired day and dragging the mouse. As the name suggests, the Contacts application lets you keep tabs on your contacts, whereas the RSS reader provides a simple tool for managing RSS feeds. The default software bundle also has a few utilities, such as a text editor, FTP client, email application, and calculator, and easily can be extended by installing additional applications.

Like a real operating system, eyeOS sports its own package manager, which allows you to browse and install applications available in the eyeOS software repository (Figure 3). To access the package manager, you must log in as administrator, using the "root" username as the root password you specified during installation. Then click on the taskbar and choose *Applications*. In the Applications window, press *Install Apps* to

launch the application manager. After selecting the application you want to install, press the *Install* button. Although the list of available applications is a bit on the short side, it does include a couple of interesting tools such as eyeTerre (Figure 4), a map viewer that can pull data from Google Maps, Yahoo Maps, NASA Terra, and other sources.

When it comes to moving files and documents to and from eyeOS, you have two choices: with the eyeOS file manager, you can upload a single or multiple files by navigating to the folder in eyeOS where you want to upload files, right-clicking somewhere in it, and selecting *Upload*, or to add and upload files, you can use the *Upload* tool.

Downloading files from eyeOS to your local machine is equally easy. Right-click on the file you want to download and select *Download* or *Download as zip*. A more efficient way is to use the dedicated eyeSync tool. This simple cross-platform synchronization utility can monitor a specific directory on your machine and upload all the files and documents in it as you add or modify them. This turns eyeOS into a rather effective

Figure 3: eyeOS comes with its own package manager that you can use to install additional applications.

Figure 4: Use the eyeTerre application to view maps. EyeTerre pulls data from Google Maps, Yahoo Maps, NASA Terra, and other sources.

document backup solution. On Windows, eyeSync is available as a portable application that requires no installation, so you can put it onto a USB stick and sync your documents from any machine. Also, you can access your documents with a mobile device, courtesy of the eyeOS mobile interface. In your mobile browser, append /mobile to the URL of your eyeOS installation to open the mobile interface, which you can use to browse and create directories as well as upload and download files.

EyeOS also comes with a few features that allow all registered users to collaborate and communicate with each other. The eyeMessages email-like application lets users exchange internal messages, whereas the Public board can be used to post public messages. EyeOS supports groups, and it comes with a Public group available for all registered eyeOS users. The group has its own folder and anything you place in it will become available to all users. Also, you can set up other groups (if you are logged in as administrator) and add only selected users to it. This allows you to set up a group for a particular project and limit access to it by adding only those users who are involved in the project, for example.

Ulteo Desktop

The Ulteo online desktop [3] (Ulteo OD), designed by the company started by Gaël Duval of Mandrake/Mandriva fame, offers a different approach – a full-blown Linux desktop that users access as a remote desktop via the VNC protocol (Figure 5). The Ulteo OD requires Java Runtime Environment 1.4 or later (including JRE browser plugin) and a browser with JavaScript enabled. Also, you must create an account with Ulteo.
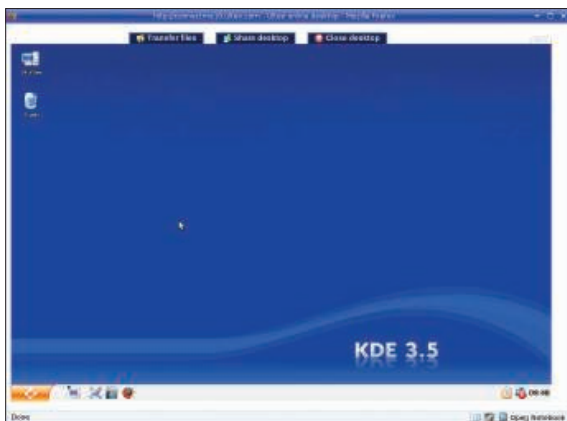
Figure 5: Ulteo online desktop.

Next, press the *Start Ulteo Now* button on the main page. This downloads a Java applet required for establishing a connection to the remote desktop. To start the desktop, press the *Launch session* button.

The Ulteo OD is a full-fledged KDE-based Linux system, minus configuration and management tools. This means, for example, that you can't use the command line or install additional applications. However, this is not a big problem because the Ulteo OD comes with a wide range of applications, including the Firefox browser, Thunderbird email client, OpenOffice.org productivity suite, and GIMP image manipulation application. Plus, it has tools that can help you manage your photos (digiKam), view PDF documents (KPDF), and chat online (Konversation and Kopete).

To make it easier to launch applications, the Ulteo OD comes with a launcher that organizes all the programs by categories. The launcher also features a search field to help quickly locate and launch the desired application.

The Ulteo OD uses a simple Java-based applet for transferring files and documents (Figure 6). To download a document from Ulteo to your machine, right-click on the file and select *Download*. The *Upload* section of the applet allows you to select multiple files on your desktop and upload them to Ulteo in one go.

Although the Ulteo OD doesn't include any specific document-sharing capabilities, you can use its KDE tools to access remote servers and shared folders. In the task bar, click on *System Menu* and choose *Remote Places*; now you can use the available wizards to connect to remote servers and shares.

Besides that, you can easily share your Ulteo OD with others using the *Share* desktop feature, which allows you to send a recipi-
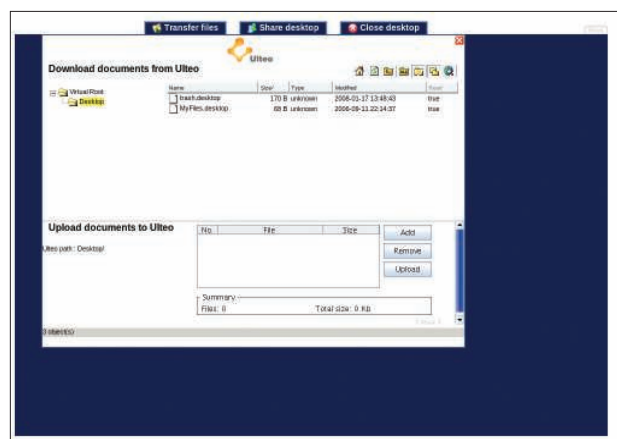
Figure 6: Transferring files to and from the Ulteo desktop.

ent an email containing a link to your current Ulteo session. You can choose to send either a view-only invitation or give the recipient control over your desktop.

In addition to the Ulteo OD, the company has two other products that can help you to get the most out of your Ulteo OD. The Ulteo Application System (Ulteo AS) is an operating system that you can install on your local machine. Although Ulteo AS might not rival other Linux distributions such as Ubuntu or Mandriva, it integrates with the Ulteo OD, providing a natural offline extension of the web-based computing environment. The key element of this integration is the automatic synchronization feature that syncs files and documents in a local directory with the Ulteo OD. For Windows users, Ulteo also provides a simple synchronization tool that can sync documents and files between a Windows machine and the Ulteo OD and Ulteo AS. ■

INFO

[1] eyeOS: *http://www.eyeos.org*

[2] Hosted version of eyeOS: *http://www.eyeos.info*

[3] Ulteo: *http://www.ulteo.com*

THE AUTHOR

Dmitri Popov holds a degree in Russian language and computer linguistics. He has been writing exclusively about Linux and open source software for several years, and his articles have appeared in Danish, British, North American, German, and Russian magazines and websites.