A preview of the Xfce 4.4 Desktop environment

FAST AND EASY

Xfce is a light and flexible desktop alternative. We took a look at what's coming with the latest version. **BY JON KENT**

If you want a user friendly and GUI-configurable desktop without the glut of Gnome and KDE applications, you may wonder if you have any choices. You can build Fluxbox into a nicely functional desktop once you add components such as a icon manager and pager, but it is still has some limitations. If you have slightly older hardware that cannot run KDE and GNOME at a usable speed, and if you're looking for an alternative that provides this middle ground between the big desktops and the lightweight window managers, try Xfce [1].

Xfce is designed to be lightweight but still easy to use and configure – without the need for manual editing of configuration files. The Xfce developers have created a desktop that is fast but still visually appealing. Xfce embodies the traditional UNIX philosophy of modularity and re-usability. The Xfce environment consists of a number of components that together provide a desktop with full functionality.

freedesktop.org standards

Xfce adheres to the freedesktop.org standard [2]. freedesktop.org is a project founded with the goal of unifying the Linux desktop through common APIs to help improve the desktop use of Linux. The project focuses on developing a shared platform, such as low level libraries, and it sets out to define standard specifications for desktop environments and applications. Both KDE and GNOME are supporters of freedesktop.org, and freedesktop support in Xfce means that using KDE or GNOME applications in Xfce still provide the functionality you'd expect, such as the ability to drag and drop files.

Roots

Xfce has gathered quite a following over the years. Previous releases have succeeded in the aim of offering a simple and very small desktop requiring minimal resources but providing an abundant collection of features. The good news is that with the latest version, they have continued to succeed. XFce will still run quite happily on low spec equipment without losing too much functionality.

Xfce is based upon another window manager called CDE. CDE was a mixture of Sun, HP, and IBMs desktop environments that was put together to compete with Windows in the early 90s. CDE itself is still available on Sun Solaris systems even today. However, Xfce has slowly drifted away from being a CDE clone to carve out its own place in the desktop world, and this latest release provides even more features.

First Look

Xfce shows its CDE heritage by the default layout that appears at startup. You'll find an icon panel at the bottom of the screen, where you place icons to startup applications. You'll also find
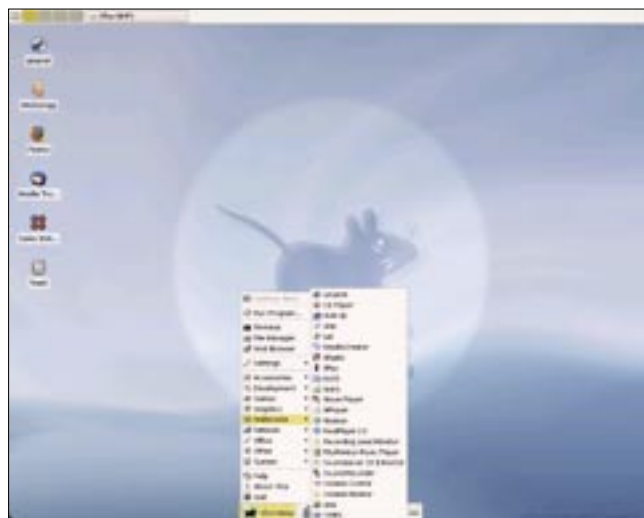

Figure 1: The default Xfce configuration comes with a menu button and desktop icons.
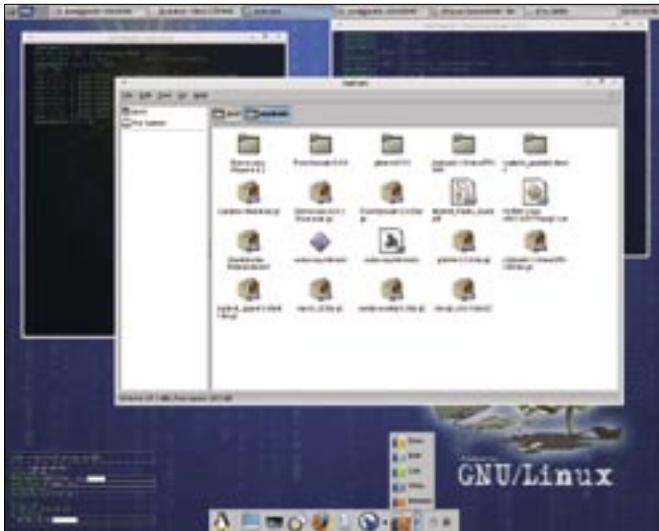
Figure 2: One of the biggest improvements in Xfce 4.4 is the new Thunar file manager.

Figure 3: Xfce provides easy and intuitive access to a generous collection of tools.

shortcuts to built-in functions such as locking the screen or quitting Xfce. If you have used Mac OSX, the icon panel will seem familiar, although it provides more functionality. You can attach a "drawer" to an icon, which is represented by an up arrow. When you click this arrow, the drawer opens, providing access to other applications. This feature allows you to keep your desktop free of clutter by avoiding the need for many icons on the desktop. At the top of the screen, you have a icon panel representing all applications that are currently in use or minimized. To both panels, you can add additional applets, such as a clock, system tray, volume control, and so on, much in the same way as you can in Gnome and KDE. The default position and size of these panels can also be modified via the Settings Manager.

Xfce provides its own window manager Xfwm4. As you would expect, Xfwm4 manages the placement of application windows on the screen, provides window decorations, and manages workspaces or virtual desktops, in addition to natively supporting multihead mode. It provides its own compositing manager (a manager for the X.org Composite extension, which brings true transparency to the Xfce desktop). The themes support image composition with PNG images as layers.

New Additions to XFCE

If you have used Xfce before, perhaps the most obvious change upon starting Xfce is that there is now a menu button, represented by the Xfce Mouse icon, on the bottom panel akin to the K button in KDE. This new button is a little odd, and I have yet to find myself using it, but it does allow you to have access to the whole suite of applications available on your system. You could always add this button to the panel with previous versions, but with this version, they obviously decided to add the button as a default setting for the application panel. Of course, if you do not want it, you can remove it from the panel.

Xfce has alway provided a desktop menu that is accessible by right-clicking the desktop. This feature is controlled by Xfdesktop, which is still available. Xfdesktop serves many purposes, such as managing the background image and gradients for the background color. The desktop menu and the window list have optional support for icons, so you can use icons if you want to, and if your computer has enough resources to handle them.

Aside from this new menu icon on the panel, you have to dig a little deeper to see where the changes are. One of these changes is the ability to have desktop icons, which will probably surprise some, but this option is turned off by default with the Release Candidate I used for this review. You enable this option via the Setting Manager within Desktop Preferences and select the icon type you want to use. These desktop icons can either be application launchers or icons representing minimized applications. I'm not sure Xfce really needed to have this ability, as it leads to a cluttered desktop, which is something most current Xfce

users do not want. But at least it provides you with more options, and if you like desktop icons, Xfce finally has them.

The other slighly odd option available to switch on is a trash can icon in the application panel, which is basically a link to the Thunar trash directory. You can drag and drop files onto this icon to delete them, as you would expect. I do not really see the point of this, as its easier to hit the delete key than to drag a file across to a trash icon, but its there if you want to use it. Other changes of note are that the window manager now automatically enables compositing support on accelerated hardware. The calendar, orage, has better support for recurring appointments and is now time-zone aware. The print manager now supports LPRng-based print backends; CUPS support is already in place. And there is a new keyboard shortcut manager.

Thunar File Manager

By far the biggest change in this release is the replacement of the Xffm file manager. Xffm was always a fairly poor and confusing file manager that required quite a bit of time to learn. I therefore have always replaced it with the excellent Rox Filer. However Xffm's replacement Thunar [3] is a big step forward, providing a more intuitive interface. Thunar aims to provide a new modern file manager for Xfce, although other desktop environments can also use Thunar. It has been designed from the ground up to be fast and easy-to-use, and it is at least as fast as Rox. The interface is clean and intuitive, and the extra options are kept to a minimum. Thunar is nicely responsive, with a fast startup time and a fast directory load time even for previews of photo files.

Thunar is in active development, and each new version has been more stable and usable. The most recent version I tested, 0.4.0 RC1, has proven very stable, and it is an improvement on previous versions, which were prone to crashing. The initial aims of the project have been met, and Thumar is looking extremely promising. Even if you do not want to use Xfce, I recommend you investigate Thunar.

Configuration

For a light desktop, Xfce allows you to modify pretty much everything you

would wish to change. You can dynamically set the size of your screen, modify the panels, define preferred applications, change the background, apply new themes, and control printing via CUPS or LPR. If you do want to use Gnome or KDE applications, you can configure Gnome or KDE services to start at system startup. You can also change the splash screen graphics, modify xscreensaver settings, and so on. Other little but nice additions are native multiscreen support, Xinerama support, and support for sudo shutdown/reboot, which lets you avoid having to exit and manually shut down you workstation.

You hardly ever need to edit configuration files with Xfce, since the entire configuration is exposed via the Settings Manager. The only exception is that Xfce does look for 2 environment variables to define which browser to use ($BROWSE and terminal $TERMCMD). These variables are a hangover from an older version of Xfce, as you can now define which default browser, mailer client, and terminal to use within the Settings Manager. However, with the terminal settings in the Settings Manager, you cannot add any additional arguments, so if you use a terminal such as aterm, you cannot set transparency arguments, so you need to use the $TERMCMD.

Conclusion

The latest version of Xfce is a lightweight and versatile desktop environment. The addition of Thunar addresses is my only real complaint, and the new additions build on the work done previously without affecting the lightweight aims of the project. Xfce's speed, configurability, and simplicity make it an extremely competent alternative to KDE and GNOME. Xfce is worth looking at even if you tend to use window managers such as Fluxbox. Indeed, once you set up Fluxbox then add a file manager, icon ability, and paging, you may well find you can get better performance with Xfce. ■

INFO
[1] Xfce homepage: *http://www.xfce.org*
[2] freedesktop.org homepage: *http://www.freedesktop.org*
[3] Thunar homepage: *http://thunar.xfce.org/index.html*