

Alternatives to Everything you Can Think of (and Probably More)

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Funny thing about computers: there are two popular operating systems that insist on people doing things their way, and yet no one uses a computer in quite the same way as anyone else. Fortunately, Linux is open source, so everyone who has a unique way of performing some common task has the ability to write an app which we, in turn, can all use if we like their method better! In fact, if Linux is criticized for anything, it's usually for having too many choices; for most Linux users, this is merely an embarrassment of riches.

Change Your Desktop Environment

Starting at possibly the most obvious set of alternatives, there are a number of different graphical user interfaces that you can use to interact with your computer. This often surprises new Linux users, because we have been trained to think of the what we see as the “operating system” when actually the operating system is code running in the background that we rarely interact with directly. What we see is just the environment we choose to use, and on Linux that's amazingly flexible.

To try out different desktops, you can install them the same as any other software application, via your distribution's package manager.

Here are some of the most popular:

- **GNOME 3** – a user-friendly, minimalist desktop with the goal of making interactions consistent and simple. You might think of GNOME 3 as the cutting edge of Mac OS X's Finder (there is actually no re-

lation, but many of the features OS X introduces with each new iteration is often uncannily similar to various GNOME 3 features).

- **KDE 4** – the Plasma Desktop is designed for customization and power. No two Plasma Desktops are the same; if you spend a little time designing how you want your environment to react, you'll find KDE unequalled in efficiency and comfort.
- **Xfce** – a back-to-the-basics desktop that features all of the usual functions of a computer desktop but avoids anything over-complex, fancy effects. People like Xfce because it stays out of their way.

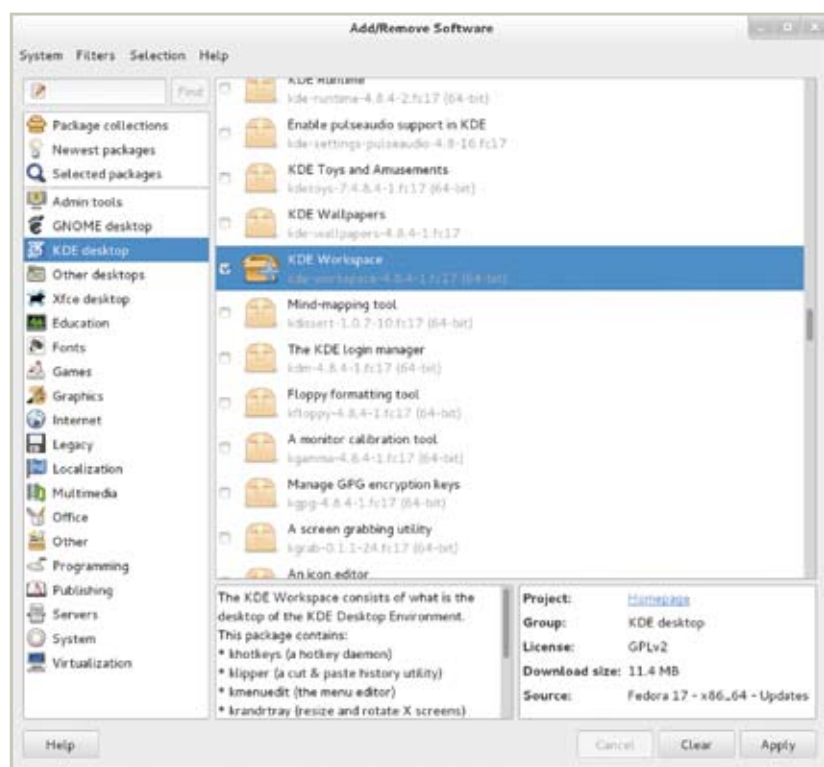


Figure 1. Most package managers make it easy to try new desktops

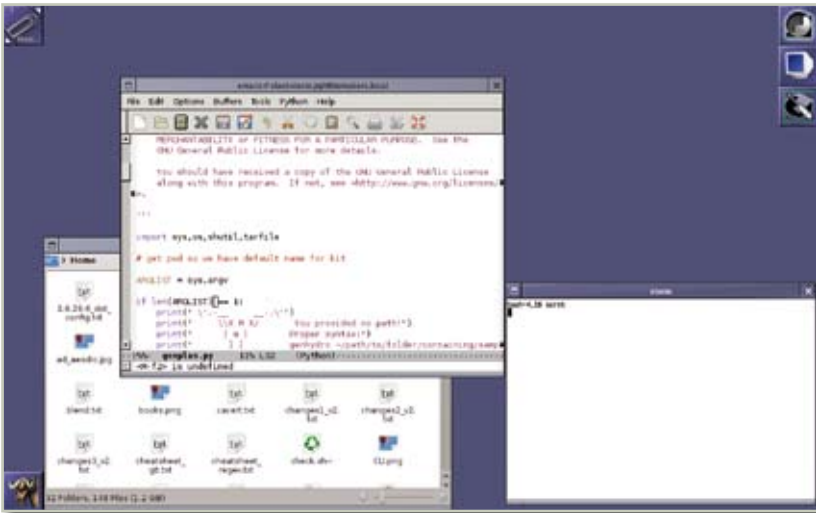


Figure 2. The Old is New again when you combine classic UNIX desktops with modern apps

- **Unity** – Ubuntu’s own spin of GNOME 3 technology. Usually difficult to find outside of Ubuntu.
- **Cinnamon** – Linux Mint’s theme for GNOME 3; difficult to find outside of Mint.
- **MATE** – Linux Mint’s development of an older GNOME desktop that some people seem to like. Difficult to find outside of Mint.
- **Fluxbox** – a radically different take on the desktop paradigm. Like KDE, it emphasizes quick and easy customization, but with drastic minimalism. Imagines turning on your computer and seeing a nearly blank desk-

top with no windows, one small panel, and no menus. If that appeals to you, explore Flux!

- **WindowMaker** – if you were using UNIX back in the early ‘90s, then you’ll love WindowMaker, a powerful desktop inspired by the NeXT interface.

There are many more, like OpenBox, Afterstep, FVWM, IceWM, Awesome, Emacs (actually not a desktop, but close enough), and Rat Poison. Some are charmingly “old school” while others radically change the way you think of the computing process. Try them all!

To log into a different desktop, just install from your package manager,

log out of your current session. Use the menu at your login screen to choose what desktop you’d like to use, and log back in.

Manage Your Files

One of the most common tasks we do on a computer is managing files, in some cases). Creating directories, moving

files around, placing files into .zip archives, making backups, moving photos from a phone, and all of these kinds of tasks are done in what can be generically called a “file manager” application. On Ubuntu, Linux Mint, and Fedora, the default file manager is called *Nautilus*. On openSUSE and Mageia, it’s *Dolphin*.

On Windows, you’re stuck with what’s called “Windows Explorer”, or simply “My Computer”. On Mac it’s the much-reviled “Finder”.

Since you’re using Linux now, you can use any file manager you want, but one of the most respected of them all is the Xfce Desktop’s *Thunar*. Thunar is fast and lightweight with all the usual features of a file manager such as icon views, list views, a side panel for bookmarks, and so on.

Probably its most popular feature is its ability to rename files in bulk. If you select multiple files and right-click on one, you can choose the *Rename* option and you’ll be presented with the bulk renamer. This allows you to replace common strings and patterns, like those annoying DSC00059.JPG filenames you get from your digital camera, with more meaningful names like summerVacation_59.JPG.

Network Managers

On Windows, you may have used the over-complex network settings control panel to configure and join networks. On Mac, you may have used the overly-simple Airport control panel to join wireless networks or the Network Control Panel to configure wired connections. On Linux, you’ll be happy to find that you not only have a choice of applications you can use for network settings, but that all of them are well-designed and strike a perfect balance features with ease-of-use.

The default network manager for many distributions is called, quite simply, Network Manager but there is another popular tool for the same job called Wicd (wireless connection daemon) which offers a variety of options including, perhaps most significantly, a command-line interface in addition to its GUI.

To install Wicd, use your distribution’s package manager, and then

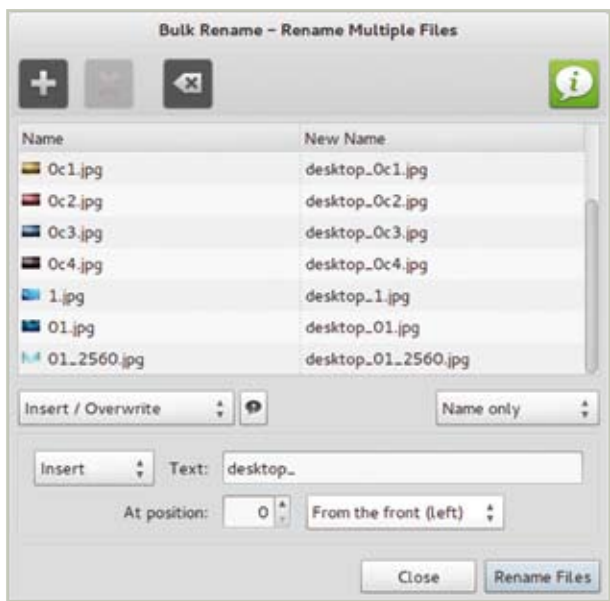


Figure 3. Easily rename multiple files with Thunar

launch it from your *Applications* menu. When you first run Wicd, you'll be asked to authenticate as an administrative user since Wicd accesses your hardware directly. Wicd will launch and sit in the system tray like any other network manager, but its real power is in its configuration options. From Wicd, you can easily set which network you want to autojoin, what protocol to use, whether that network requires a static or dynamic IP address, what back-end you'd like to use in order to sign onto the network, and much more.

If you learning to use your computer without a graphical interface, then you might find `wicd-curses` particularly useful. The use cases for this are plentiful; say you need to configure a computer that has no screen, or say you need to ssh into your home computer and change its network connection, or perhaps you just are using a minimalistic desktop and would prefer to run your system tools from a terminal. Whatever the case, you can run `wicd-curses` and get a simple, easy-to-use terminal-based interface that mimics the GUI version in form and function.

The top half of the screen displays the available networks, both wireless and the wired. At the bottom of the screen is a list of available actions; pressing the right arrow over any network name will take you into a configuration screen so you can define how you want to connect to that network, and pressing the [C] key will connect to that network. Visit the overall preferences with the [P] key, and use [Q] to quit.

Wicd is a powerful alternative to the standard-issue Network Manager, and even has a KDE-specific version that integrates into your Plasma Desktop.

Photo Managers

We all have digital cameras, even when we don't mean to have one. If there's not one in your phone, then there's probably one in your media player, and if all else fails then there's one in your laptop. With all of these digital photos being generated and stored, most of us want a good application for organizing and making sense of it all.

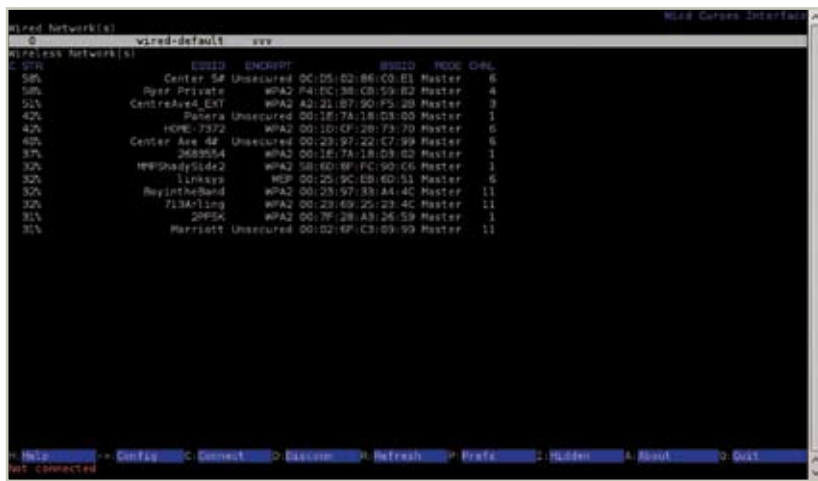


Figure 4. Network management from the command line

A few distributions bundle the popular F-Spot for photo organization. It's a good application if you're looking for a reliable, simple photo manager with all the usual features like red-eye correction, cropping, contrast control, and so on. It integrates nicely with the GNOME 3 desktop, since it is, after all, the GNOME photo manager.

Some photographers need something a little more robust, however, and so there is a professional-grade darkroom application called Darktable. This is a non-destructive, filter-based application into which you can import and organize your pictures according to subject, session, client, or any other criteria that makes sense for your work, and apply any number of color, light, and corrective software filters. In this way, you can have several different versions of the same photograph without

ever actually altering the source file! When you or the client decide which version is best, the photo with its filters can be exported as a new photograph.

Few distributions ship with Darktable, so more than likely you'll need to install it via your package manager. Once installed, launch it.

The first screen in Darktable is the Lighttable view; this is where you can look at a directory or set of photographs for a broad overview. Photographers use this to eliminate the obviously inferior shots. Since it's digital, you can also add custom tags so that you can quickly filter according to your own arbitrary tag system.

To create a new tag, click the *Tagging* palette. Create a new tag by typing into the tag bar and clicking *New*. Attach the tag by selecting a photograph (or a group of photos), clicking the tag in the *Tagging* palette, and clicking the *Attach* button.



Figure 5. Network management in a nice integrated GUI

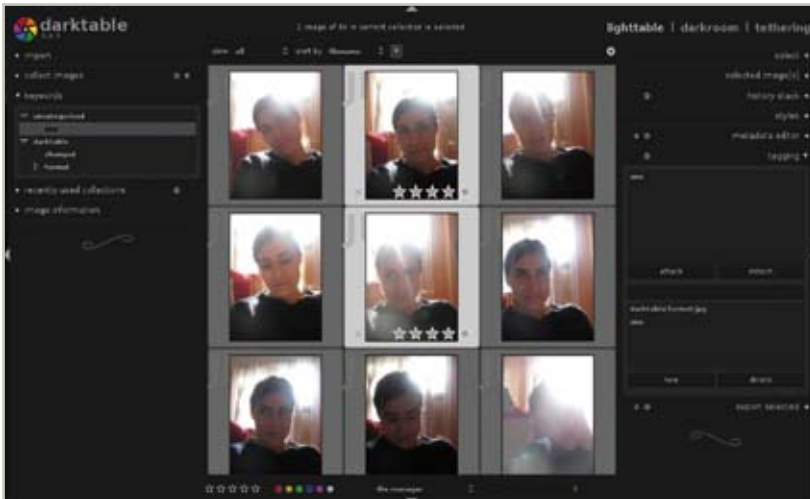


Figure 6. A bit of professional-grade imaging for the serious photographers

The real power of tags, of course, is the ability to then filter your photos according to your tags. To apply such a filter to your lighttable, open the *Keywords* palette on the left. Locate the tag that you've created and click on it. This will present only your tagged photos on your lighttable, meaning that you now have the power to categorize your photos according to any criteria you choose, rather than according to where they are on your drives, or what session they were taken, or their filenames, and so on.

Once you've chosen the best shot of the group, double click the photo to open it in Darkroom mode. In this mode, there is nearly every conceivable filter you could ever want located on the right side of the screen. Correct gamma, contrast, color tone, rotation, cropping, apply effects, all with complete autonomy.

On the left side of the screen is the *History* palette, allowing you to flip back and forth between the original and your altered image; and of course you can always activate and de-activate any given filter to see what the image looks like without that particular effect.

To preserve versions of the photographs, use the *Snapshots* palette on the left. Using this, you can have the original photograph and, for instance, a black and white version, a color corrected version, a cropped version, and a stylized version, all without actually making a duplicate of the file, and all with the ability to adjust and change settings whenever you want.

Darktable is a powerful alternative to the beginner-level F-Spot. Wield it when your photography becomes too serious for simple tools, and use it well.



Figure 7. VLC – All you'll ever need for media playback

Movie Players

There are a few dozen movie players for Linux; the standard-issue movie player that ships with many distributions is Totem, a powerful and modular player with a number of extra features like a playlist for nonstop playback.

One of the most popular free video players on any OS, however, is VLC. VLC is a powerful player that can handle nearly anything from DVDs to streaming media to webcams. It can do on-the-fly video adjustments, it can synchronize sound and video, play subtitles either embedded or from a separate subtitle file, and so much more. It is often said "if VLC can't play it, then it can't be played" and generally, it's true.

You can download VLC from your repository, and use it for everything, from music (it has a nice media browser as well as playlist function), to movie files, to streaming videocasts, DVDs, fansubs, webcam recording, and nearly anything else that involves images or audio.

To make VLC your default media player, just right click on the different media types (an mp3 file, an mp4 file, an mkv file, ogg, webm, m4a, m4v, and so on) and choose the *Open With* option. Choose to open the media with VLC, and be sure to check any box telling your file manager to remember that choice, and from then on any file of that media type will open in VLC.

So Many Choices, So Little Time

With so many alternate applications to choose from, it's easy to get overwhelmed. Remember that the reason so many choices exist is for your convenience; try a few different applications for any given task, and see which one fits you best. Give it some time and soon you'll find yourself easing into a specific set of applications that may well be completely unique to you. And that's the beauty of Linux; each person's computer can be different, and yet they all work together. Unlike a lot of other operating systems out there, Linux assures us all that it's OK to be different. So go be different! ■