

K DESKTOP ENVIRONMENT

Beginners' Guide to Linux – KDE

PART 3 Offering a combination of familiarity and innovation, the K Desktop Environment is becoming the face of Linux for an increasing number of users. It could be all you need...

Linux is blessed with two complete, competing desktop environments which include everything from basic file management and information display to a growing range of integrated applications. While GNOME (which we'll be covering next issue) has been gaining favour with the likes of Red Hat and Ximian, developers such as SuSE, Lindows and Xandros have focused more on the K Desktop Environment (KDE), an ever expanding collection of applications, plugins and K-Parts developed to cover almost every area of personal computing.

There is a lot of detail to cover when it comes to KDE, but it all starts with the desktop and the Kicker/taskbar, the things you'll encounter when you boot up for the first time.

A. Desktop

It has been suggested that if you work with computers, you're likely to spend more time gazing at your monitor than at your loved ones, so it makes sense to at least make your PC's desktop look appealing! To quickly change the look of your desktop, right click on any clear space and select 'Configure Desktop...' from the menu. In the Desktop dialog, choose 'Background' and click on the 'Wallpaper' tab. There are quite a few options here, so go wild and experiment. Images can be stretched, tiled (for patterns) or centred and you can set up a common wallpaper, that is, it's the same on each of your virtual desktops, or choose a picture or pattern for individual desktops. KDE comes with a range of images for you to use, or you could hit the 'Browse' button to select your own pictures – perhaps of the loved ones you're missing while sat at your PC!

Fig1 The constituent parts that make up the KDE desktop. The letters refer to the explanation of each element in the text of this tutorial.

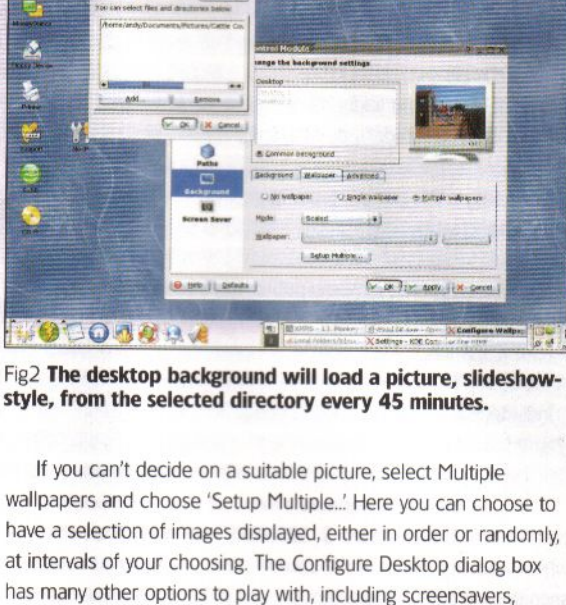
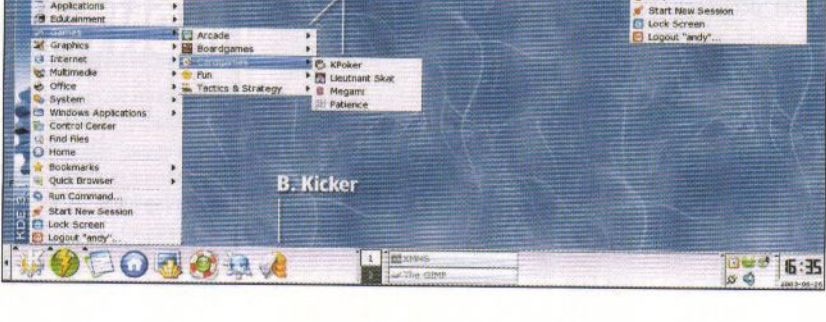


Fig2 The desktop background will load a picture, slideshow-style, from the selected directory every 45 minutes.

If you can't decide on a suitable picture, select Multiple wallpapers and choose 'Setup Multiple...'. Here you can choose to have a selection of images displayed, either in order or randomly, at intervals of your choosing. The Configure Desktop dialog box has many other options to play with, including screensavers, screen font selection, and virtual desktop setup as shown in Fig2.

B. Kicker

In KDE the task bar (usually running along the bottom of the screen, though this is not set in stone) is called Kicker and is divided in various elements.

The Kbutton on the far left of the bar is probably the first thing you'll click on. This is similar to the Start button in Windows and, depending on your distro choice, may have a 'K' icon, a lizard or a Red Hat on it. This is where you launch the KMenu (see point D on page 92) to open applications or access other parts of the computer such as the Control Center. Next to the start button, you'll often find some application launchers, a link to your /home directory and, occasionally, a document browser.

It's important to remember that, as Linux is all about choice, you aren't stuck with what you're given. For instance, you could add a new application to the bar by simply right clicking on a free space and selecting Add > Application Button > [selection]. The application, complete with icon, will be added to the bar. You can remove an icon by right clicking on it and selecting Remove [selection]. There is quite a range of buttons you can add here, including recent documents, Konqueror bookmarks, a quick file browser and Desktop Access, which handily minimises all the windows on a given desktop.

Next up is usually the virtual window manager. KDE can run a number of desktops which makes it easy to, for instance, have

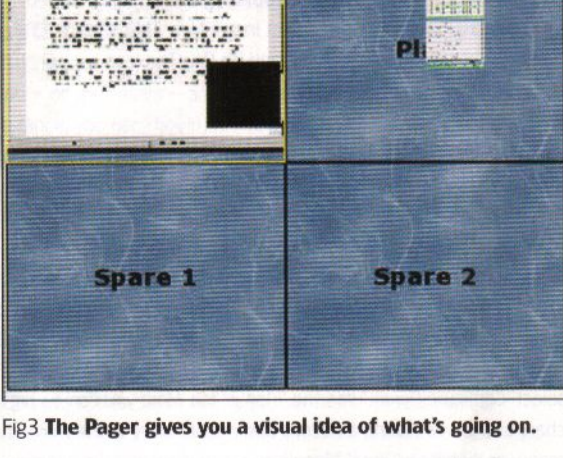


Fig3 The Pager gives you a visual idea of what's going on.

your background applications (email client, media player etc) running without their interfaces getting in the way of your main work apps. You can have anything up to 16 virtual desktops, but most people manage with two or four. To configure, right click on the 'applet' and select 'Configure Virtual desktops...'. This launches a dialog box which will let you choose how many desktops you require and also name them. If you want a more visual representation of what is going on in each individual desktop, right-click the applet and select 'Launch Pager' to see a display of all your desktops and their contents similar to that shown above in Fig3.

Beyond the Virtual Desktops is what KDE likes to call The Taskbar, a visual representation of running applications and open documents. Right-clicking on each individual bar will allow you to minimise, maximise, close, shade (just show the title bar) or send an entry to a different virtual desktop.

You can de-clutter your Kicker somewhat by moving the 'taskbar' section to the top of the screen where the buttons are still just a click away. Right-click on some free space and select Add > Extension > External Taskbar. By default, the new taskbar will appear below your existing Kicker, but you can change this by right-clicking the main Kicker again and selecting 'Configure Panel'. You should see something similar to Fig4. Now highlight 'External Taskbar' and select the Top Left icon in the position grid. Hit 'OK' and your task bar should be at the top of the screen. Finally right click the Kicker again and do 'Remove > Applet > Taskbar'.

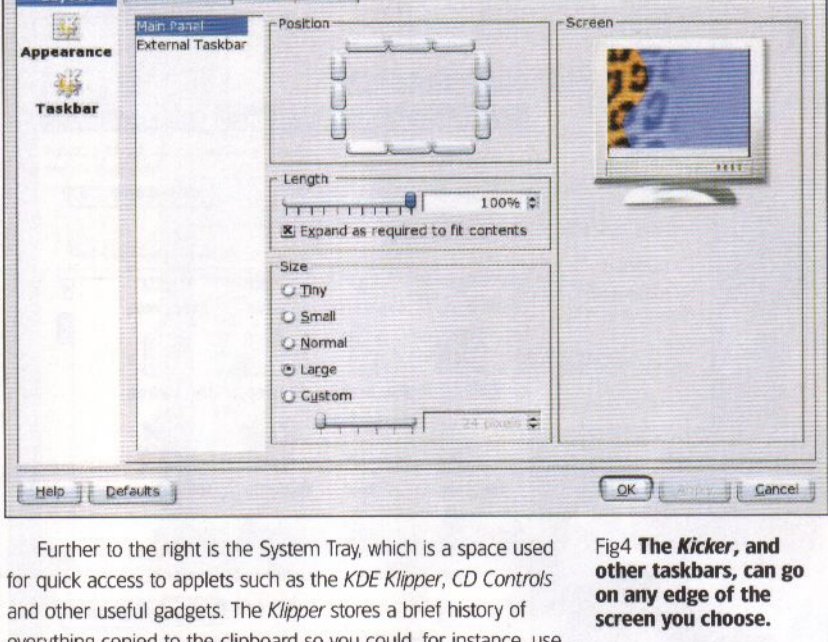


Fig4 The Kicker, and other taskbars, can go on any edge of the screen you choose.

Further to the right is the System Tray, which is a space used for quick access to applets such as the KDE Klipper, CD Controls and other useful gadgets. The Klipper stores a brief history of everything copied to the clipboard so you could, for instance, use it to store a series of cuts to be pasted into a document later on during a session. It can be configured to store as many entries as you like, though obviously if you're running a low resource machine, it does take up memory.

Finally we have the clock. But this isn't just any clock! Right clicking will give you a plethora of options including selecting different styles – analog, digital, plain or the always cool Fuzzy clock – a range of timezones, colours, time formats and other options (some would say too many). Left-clicking on the clock launches a small but useful calendar applet, shown on this page below left in Fig5.

The really great thing about the clock though is that you don't have to limit yourself to a single timepiece – especially handy if you're a commodities trader with an office in New York or a Wolfenstein player with an opponent in Berlin. To add a new clock to the Kicker, right-click on a blank space and select Add > Applet > Clock. The new clock will most likely be dropped onto the bar in the wrong place, so drag it to the correct location using the small grab handle to the left of the dial. You can then change the timezone by right clicking the clock face and selecting 'Show Timezone'. If your desired timezone isn't in the menu, select 'Configure Timezones' to add the one you want.

Tip

If you've moved to Linux from Windows, you may notice that often icons are launched with a single click. While some people find this useful, it can be a chore if – being set in your ways – you keep accidentally starting two versions of everything! Changing this to a double click is simple. Open the KMenu and select the 'Control Center'. Now click Peripherals > Mouse and then select the 'Double-click to open files and folders' radio button. Hit 'Apply'. Now single-clicking an icon or folder once will select it, which is good if you want to delete something, while double-clicking on an icon will launch it.

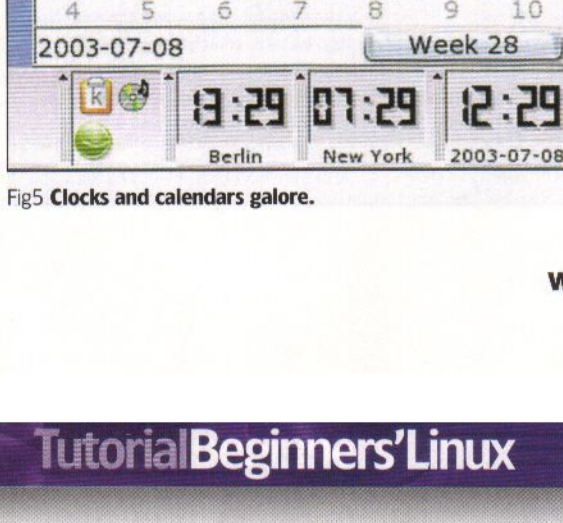


Fig5 Clocks and calendars galore.

C. Icons

Icons on the desktop can be links to applications, files (images, MP3s etc.), websites, scripts or devices, and just like almost everything in Linux, there's plenty you can do to change them. To see what we can do, right click on the CD/DVD icon and have a look through the menu. Some of the entries are obvious – 'Open' will mount the disk and launch Konqueror to display its contents, cut/paste works on the icon itself not the contents of the device – while others will be specific to the device.

One of the more important entries is 'Mount' which makes a volume (which can be a CD, DVD, Zip, USB camera, or any file system basically) available to the operating system. Most removable devices will be mounted as soon as you click an icon, but it's always good practice to unmount a device before you >>>

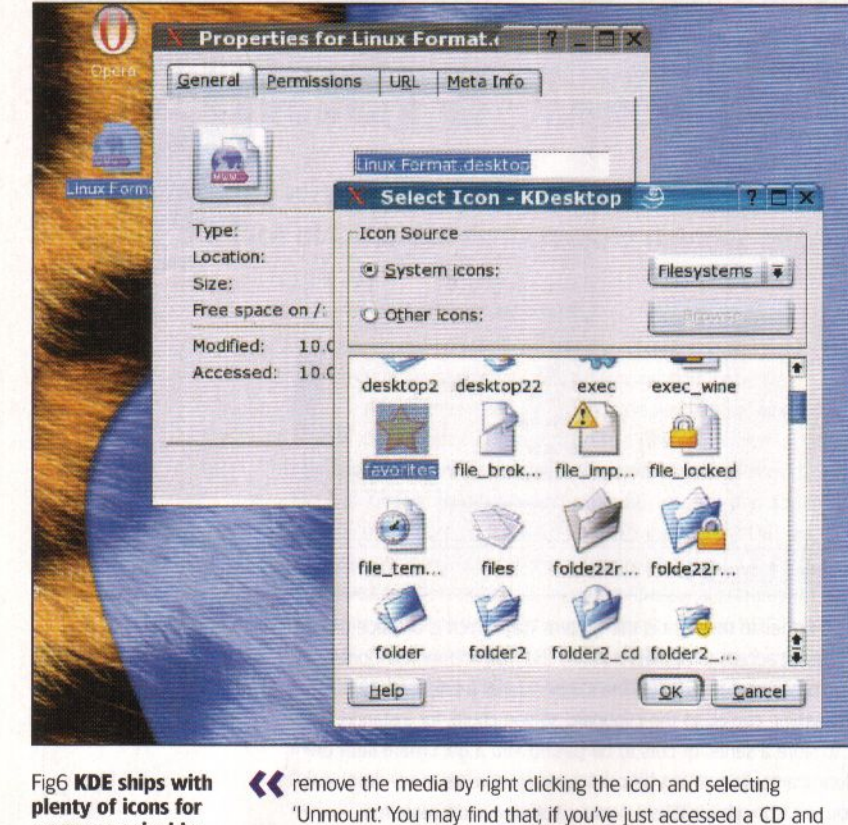


Fig6 KDE ships with plenty of icons for every conceivable occasion.

remove the media by right clicking the icon and selecting 'Unmount'. You may find that, if you've just accessed a CD and then try to unmount it, you get an **unmount failed/device is busy** message. Don't panic! Give it a minute and unmount again.

You can attach lots of different things to icons. For instance, you could link to the *Linux Format* website directly from your desktop: right-click any free space on the desktop and select 'Create New > Link to Location (URL)'. Enter the name for the link that you are creating (*Linux Format*) and the web address (<http://www.linuxformat.co.uk>) and click 'OK'. A new icon with the default *www* image will appear on the desktop.

You can change this icon by right-clicking it and selecting 'Properties!'. In the General tab, click on the icon image to launch a browser where you can select from a range of pictures split into groups such as Applications, File Systems and Film types. If changing one icon at a time doesn't satisfy, you can change them

all by opening the Control Panel and selecting Appearance and Themes > Icons and choosing from the installed sets. More can be downloaded from www.kde-look.org and can be installed from the original zip file. Just select Install New Theme and browse to the download location and hit OK. The icon set will then be available in the main dialog box.

D. KMenu

You may have noticed by now that the KDE project is very fond of the letter K – it's the one before 'L' for Linux. The KMenu is where you access applications, help, documents and system settings. It looks quite bewildering, especially if you've opted to install millions of applications, but on most distros the structure is quite logical; have a browse.

Don't like where things are? Well, right-click on the Kicker, select 'Configure Panel...' and the 'Menus' tab. Here you can do big changes such as adding a Recent Documents entry to the main menu, or, by hitting 'Edit K Menu', you can burrow into the actual menu and add, remove or alter individual entries as in Fig7.

E. Context menu

This is what appears if you right-click on a bare space on the

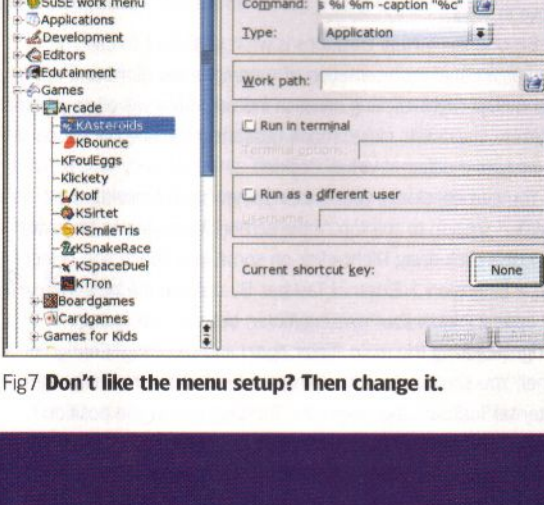


Fig7 Don't like the menu setup? Then change it.

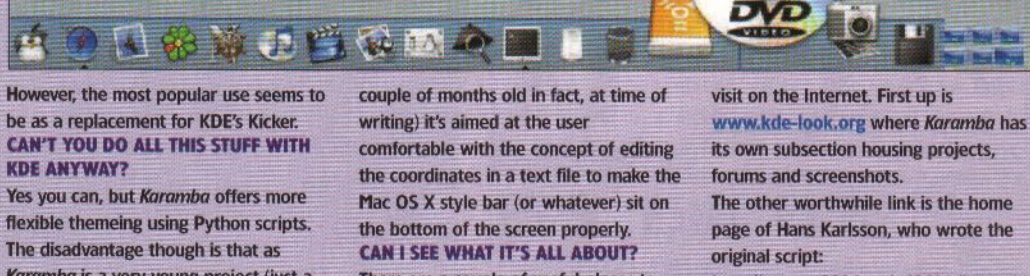
What on Earth is Karamba?

Dynamic system information

ANY KARAMBA! ANYTHING TO DO WITH THE SIMPSONS?

Nope. *Karamba* is an extension to KDE which, among other things, allows KDE to have its own Mac OS-X style dock with zooming icons and all manner of eye candy. It was inspired by a Windows project called *Samurize* (www.samurize.com) which started life as a tool for adding dynamic system information to the Windows desktop.

AND WHAT IS THE POINT OF IT? As well as beautifying your desktop – if you like that sort of thing – it can also be used to monitor various processes including network access, memory/hard disk usage, email and the weather.



However, the most popular use seems to be as a replacement for KDE's Kicker. **CAN'T YOU DO ALL THIS STUFF WITH KDE ANYWAY?** Yes you can, but *Karamba* offers more flexible theming using Python scripts. The disadvantage though is that as *Karamba* is a very young project (just a

couple of months old in fact, at time of writing) it's aimed at the user comfortable with the concept of editing the coordinates in a text file to make the Mac OS X style bar (or whatever) sit on the bottom of the screen properly. **CAN I SEE WHAT IT'S ALL ABOUT?** There are a couple of useful places to

visit on the Internet. First up is www.kde-look.org where *Karamba* has its own sub-section housing projects, forums and screenshots. The other worthwhile link is the original script: <http://www.eird.lth.se/~d98hk/karamba/>

desktop. The same mouse action on an icon, folder or the Kicker will bring up a different menu.

Eye candy

Making your desktop look nice is not just good for your eyes. If you – or your users – are used to Windows or Mac OS, for instance, you can mould the KDE desktop to mimic that OS, with similar window decoration, style and colours. You control the visual aspects of KDE by launching the Control Center and navigating to the 'Appearance and Themes' section as in Fig8.

We've already covered the icons and backgrounds earlier in this tutorial, but there are many other things you can change in here. The two most significant elements are Style and Window Decorations. The former determines how UI widgets, that is buttons, tabs, progress bars and the like, look. If the chosen style supports it, this is also where you set menu effects such as transparency, animation and fades, and also where you can alter a selection of toolbar settings, add text to buttons or stick the application menu to the top of the screen Apple style.

KDE's default style is Keramik, which is blessed with a number of good-looking effects which should only be attempted on a processor faster than 500MHz. If you have processing power to spare, select the 'Effects' tab and click on 'Enable GUI effects'. Click on the 'Menu effect' drop down and select 'Make Translucent'. You can also add a drop shadow with the radio button below and adjust the opacity of the menus. Hit 'Apply' and open the KMenu to see the effect. Don't go overboard though, the idea behind a GUI is to make your computer easier to use, not beautiful it to death, as it has been in Fig9!

The Keramik Style is complimented by a similarly named window decoration, though the options available here aren't quite as extensive. Once you've selected the window decoration, you can go into the 'Colors' section and either choose one of pre-installed colour schemes or create your own. Keramik comes with a trio of schemes and there are many more installed with KDE. If one of the schemes is almost what you want, you can alter specific parts of it by selecting what you want to change – desktop background, active title bar, etc – and then selecting the new colour. Remember to hit the 'Save Scheme' button and give your work a name!

The great thing here is that you can't mess up your system (unless you make everything black) and if you end up with something that would make even Lawrence Llewellyn Bowen wince, you can just move through the menu hitting 'Default' to get back to the appearance that you started with.

Konqueror

At the core of KDE is *Konqueror*, an application for which the epithet file manager is a definite understatement. It is, thanks to the modular design of KDE, equally at home dealing with local file systems, web pages, photo albums, sound files, ftp locations and a variety of office formats. We'll look at *Konqueror* as a web/network browser, and as a multimedia organiser later in this series, so we'll just mention basic file management and previewing here.

The quickest way to get to *Konqueror* is by clicking the Home icon on the Kicker or desktop. This will launch the application within your /home directory, which is the best place to save your documents, photos and music files.

Just below the top menu bar is the toolbar which is used for basic navigation. The up arrow will move you up the structure of your file system until you get to /root, while the back and forward

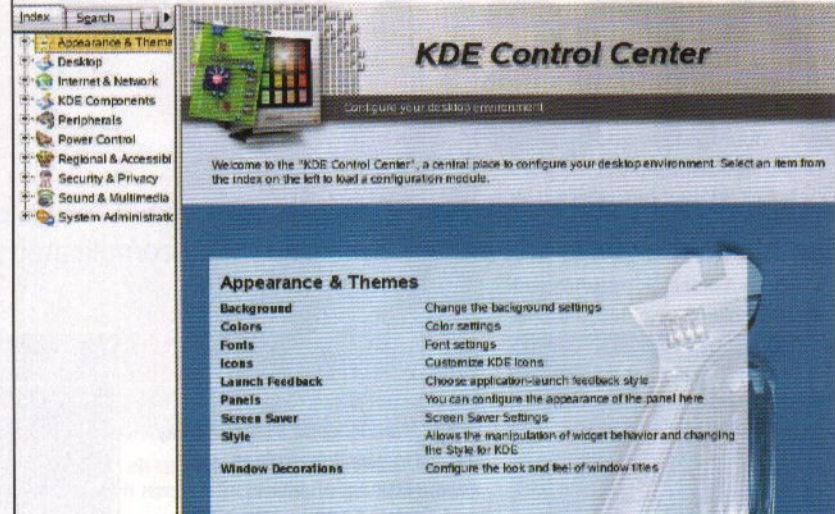


Fig8 Change your themes in Control Center – the computer equivalent of a make-up bag.

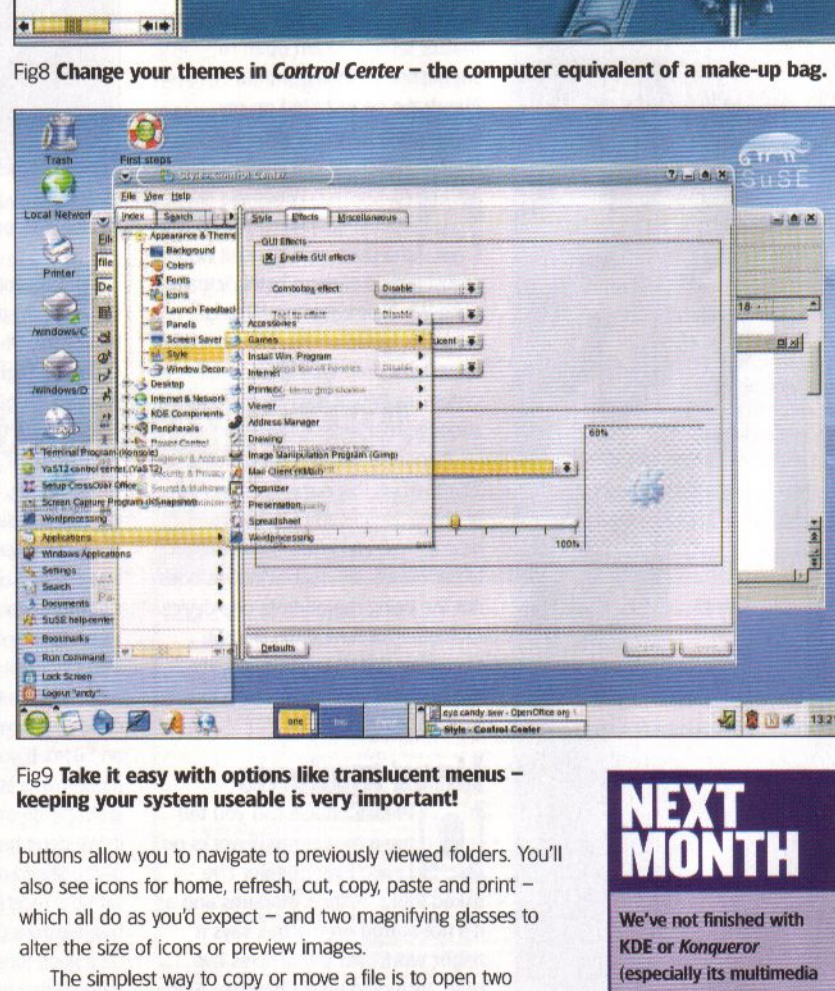


Fig9 Take it easy with options like translucent menus – keeping your system useable is very important!

buttons allow you to navigate to previously viewed folders. You'll also see icons for home, refresh, cut, copy, paste and print – which all do as you'd expect – and two magnifying glasses to alter the size of icons or preview images.

The simplest way to copy or move a file is to open two *Konqueror* windows – one as the source, the other at the destination – and then drag the file across. When you drop it in the window, a dialog will ask whether you want to move or copy the file. You could also use the cut/copy and paste method, or right-click on the file and select 'copy/move to' and use the quick browser to select the destination.

The right-click, context sensitive menu can also be used to create new folders or documents, open documents in specific applications and preview files. >>>

NEXT MONTH

We've not finished with KDE or *Konqueror* (especially its multimedia features) yet, but next month we'll be looking GNOME, the alternative desktop environment. Before then, see if you can get *Konqueror* to show, play and rip (to MP3 or Ogg) the contents of an audio CD without using any other application.