

Managing Themes and Styles

Richard Dennis and Simon Steinbeiß

Xubuntu, the pairing of Ubuntu Linux with the Xfce desktop environment, is stable yet flexible. Xfce4's native window manager that manages its themes is called Xfwm4. It allows its user a wide array of visual options and the default Greybird theme and window borders and the *Elementary Xfce* icon set are refined and highly usable in a their default state. This distribution's progress with the default themes has been steady and impressive: starting with Albatross, progressing to Bluebird and Greybird, which is the current default theme. Xubuntu starts as a simple palette, but can be easily configured.

First steps

Creating a customized desktop starts with finding a theme and/or an icon set you wish to install.

Searching through the Synaptic Package Manager offers some (older) options. If you want to live on the edge, the newest version of the Greybird theme is available in the Shimmer Project PPA at <https://launchpad.net/~shimmerproject/+archive/ppa>. If you install a theme package from the package repositories (including any PPA's), you can skip the manual installation part. These themes will automatically be installed for all users on the system.

There are also many options for finding and downloading themes for Xubuntu on the Internet. *Xfce-Look.org* and *DeviantArt.com* offer an array of visual elements for the desktop designer to implement. Xfce-look categorizes themes and icons, offers previews and critiques, and groups the themes to different categories, including icon themes, GTK themes and Xfwm4 themes (more on these later). DeviantArt is desktop-agnostic and offers resources (themes, wallpapers, icons) for the prospective themer.

Installing a theme manually

After being searched for and downloaded, a theme can be installed in

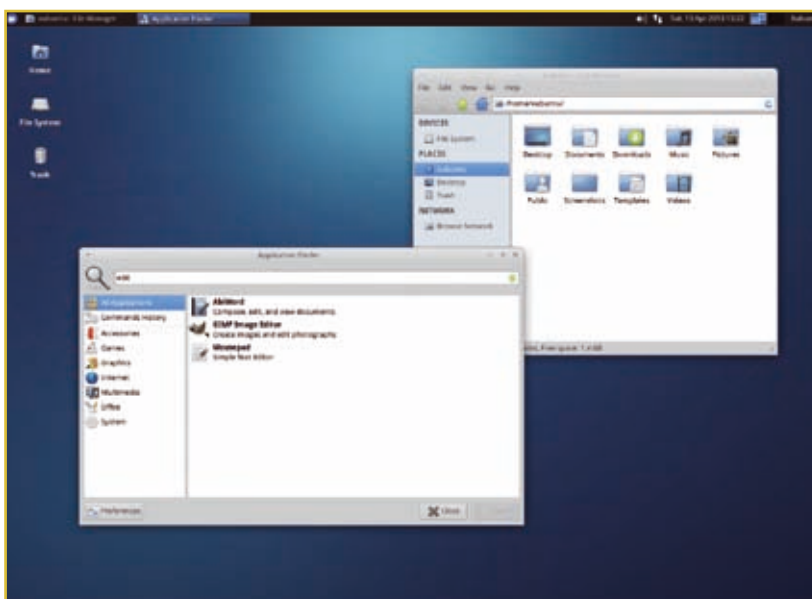


Figure 1. Default Xubuntu Desktop

one of two ways: for a single user or all the users using the computer.

Installing a theme for a single user

From Xubuntu 12.10 onwards it is possible to install themes (excluding icon themes) for a single user by dragging and dropping the theme archive into the appropriate Settings Manager window.

If you're using an earlier version of Xubuntu or are installing an icon set, the process to install a theme for a single user is as follows:

- Open the file manager and open the Home directory, open the View menu, check the box next to *Show Hidden Files*.
- If they don't exist already, right-click and create two directories: *.themes* and *.icons*
- Navigate back to the location where you saved the theme archive.
- Double-click the theme archive; this will launch Archive Manager.
- Using the Archive Manager, extract the theme to */home/username/.themes/* or the icon set to */home/username/.icons/*

Installing a theme for all users

The process to install a theme for all users is a bit different and requires you to have administrative rights on the system. The process is as following:

- Open the file manager and open the directory where you saved the theme archive.
- Double-click the theme archive; this will launch Archive Manager.
- Using the Archive Manager, extract the theme to the current directory.
- Open a terminal in the current directory: click on an empty area on the file manager, right-click to open the context menu and select *Open Terminal Here*.
- In the terminal window, type `sudo mv theme-name /usr/`



Figure 2. Xubuntu with a customized theme”

`share/themes` or `sudo mv theme-name /usr/share/icons` for an icon theme, replacing *theme-name* by the extracted theme directory.

Applying changes

At this point, we expect you to have installed a theme on the system. That's great! But how do you actually change the appearance of elements of the system?

In Xubuntu's Settings Manager, there are two relevant applets: *Appearance* and *Window Manager*.

The *Appearance* dialog box includes 4 tabs: *Style*, *Icons*, *Fonts* and *Settings*. The *Style* tab controls the overall look of the appearance: the color and gradient of the panel(s), menus, highlights, notifications. To change a theme

select one from the list and it will automatically become active. The *Icons* tab is as advertised and allows you to select the icon set, once chosen the icon set automatically becomes active. The *Fonts* tab lists available fonts on the system for use, giving options allowing the user to change the displayed font and the type of font aliasing. Finally, the *Settings* tab in *Appearance* controls advanced options such as the toolbar style, whether icons are shown on buttons and menus.

Window Manager, the second of the two options, allows the user to make changes to the position of window controls and changes to the appearance of window decorations (the border surrounding every window, usually holding



Figure 3. Xubuntu with a customized theme

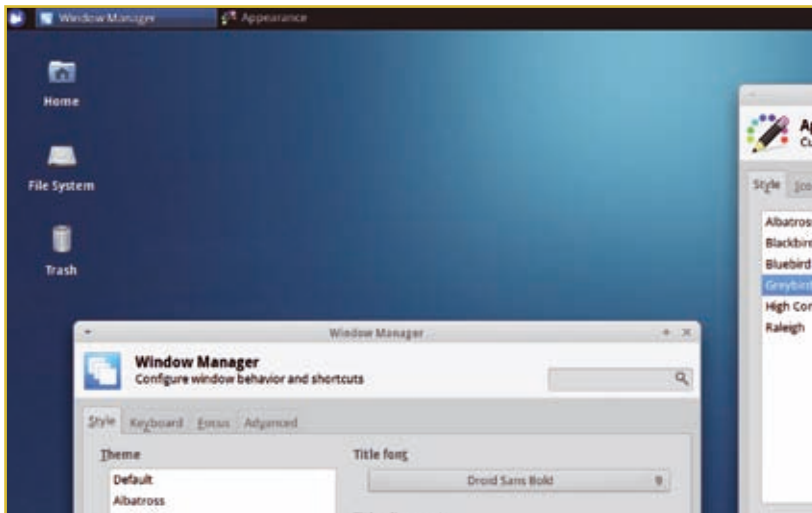


Figure 4. Appearance and Window Manager tools

the close, minimize, maximize-buttons and window-title), all under the *Style* tab. The *Theme* in this tab allows you to change the type of window decorations. The options include *Title Font* for windows, *Title Alignment* (Left, Center or Right), and *Button Layout* (Menu, Title, Minimize, Maximize, Close, Stick, Shade). These layout options may or may not be rearranged, depending on the theme, and some can be concealed – hiding a window button only requires that the it be dragged from *Active* to *Hidden*.

Contemporary themes for Xfce are generally unified, so that the window decorations, buttons, colors highlights, notifications are all complementary and the overall look of the desktop is seamless.

The theory behind the practice

Xfce uses two different approaches for decoration, and there are several different aspects which can be adjusted: window decorations, the GTK theme itself (which defines the looks of everything *inside* the window decorations), the mouse cursors, the notifications, and the icons.

Theme compatibility

Since Xfce uses Xfwm4 as window-manager to draw the window-decorations, themes for other window-managers, such as Metacity, Mutter, Compiz or Emerald aren't compatible with it. Making the themes compatible involves installing GNOME dependencies which makes the Xfce system less integrated and congruous.

Currently, Xfce relies on GTK2 to draw the widgets inside its programs' window decorations. However, applications built with GTK3 can be used in Xubuntu. In order for them to look well integrated, you need to have a theme which supports both GTK2 and GTK3 properly, as all themes by the Shimmer Project shipped by default in Xubuntu do.

To check if a theme supports the theme parts you need, open the theme-folder (`/home/username/.themes/theme-name` or `/usr/share/themes/theme-name`) and look at the directories inside. If the theme has an "xfwm" directory, you can use that theme to control your window borders. If the theme has both "gtk-2.0" and "gtk-3.0" directories, the theme supports both GTK2 and GTK3.

✓ Note: In Xubuntu 12.10 and later, the GTK3 theme rendering engine is present by default, but in earlier versions it is not. To install it on Xubuntu 12.04, open a terminal and in the terminal window, type `sudo apt-get install gtk3-engines-xfce`

Conclusion

With different themes, you can control all aspects of the appearance in Xubuntu from window borders to icon themes. There are many tastes for looks, but fortunately there are lots of themes around the Internet as well.

We wish you much enjoyment with customizing your system look to discover the perfect one! ■



Figure 5. Xubuntu with a customized theme