

Navigating Xubuntu's Xfce Desktop

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What makes Xubuntu's desktop environment Xfce such a great one?

Xfce is a swift and beautiful desktop environment that is suitable for users of all kinds. Its default user interface is simple, yet elegant and its intuitive configurability allows power users to adjust it to their needs with ease. From tinkerers to casual users, Xfce has what it takes to exceed any user's expectations!

The applications menu

In the top left corner, the applications menu (or "start" menu) with the Xubuntu mouse head logo gives you access to changing settings, launching applications and even links for how you can learn about and get involved with the Xubuntu project itself. The menu itself is split into several items and categories.

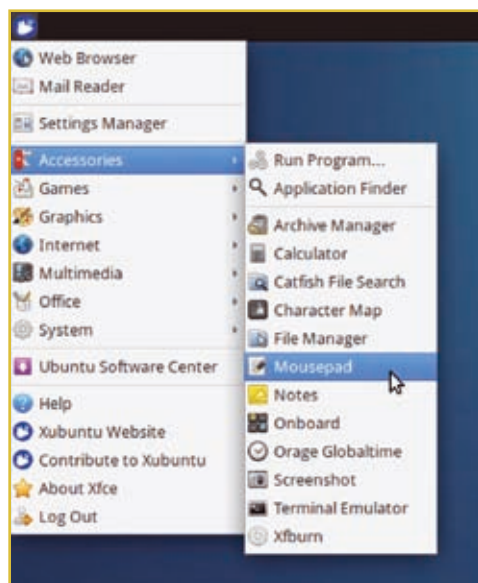


Figure 1. Applications menu, open to Accessories

Settings Manager

This is a series of tools allowing users to tweak settings that range from changing keyboard shortcuts to network connection settings.

Accessories

This category contains common tools such as Catfish, Archive Manager, Terminal, Notes, and many more. Of all these tools, I found Catfish, Notes, and my personal favorite, Application Finder to be very useful.

Catfish is used to search for a filename within a chosen folder. The best part of Catfish is that it runs super quick!

Notes is a small, simple program that allows you to take notes which are saved automatically and doesn't get in your way, you take notes with ease! By default, when Notes is run, it can be found on the system panel.

The Application Finder is also particularly useful, it does what you think it does and more. By typing in a keyword of the application you are looking for, it searches in real time for the program quickly. Your search can be further refined by using the option to limit it by category. Also, Application Finder allows you to drag and drop the application onto your panel so you can launch it from there.

Games

Some of the games included in this menu category are Mines and Sudoku, and through the Ubuntu Software Center you can install hundreds of other free games which will then be put in this category. Now you will never be bored again (as long as you are running Xubuntu)!

Graphics

The Graphics category has standard tools that allow you to modify and view images. Such tools range from Ristretto Image Viewer to GIMP, a powerful tool to edit images that deserves an article of its own.

Office

The Office category contains a set of applications needed to edit and view documents. Xubuntu comes preinstalled with Abiword and Gnumeric, the word processor and spreadsheet editor of the GNOME office suite, respectively. This category also contains Orange, an easy to use calendar application capable of notifying the user of important dates and events at specific times, which can be added to the Xfce panel.

System

The System category contains utilities that allow you to manage packages, change user and group settings, and perform system updates. If you need to make system wide changes, the common utilities can be found in this category.

Exploring further you'll find *Internet* and *Multimedia* menus which include your web browser, email client and music players. You may also notice new items and categories showing up as you install new software.

The panels

The Xubuntu desktop comes with two panels by default. The first spans the top of your screen and includes the applications menu, window buttons, indicator area, workspace switcher and more.

The second panel is a dock-like bottom panel hidden by default, you bring your mouse to the bottom of the screen to show it. This second panel includes several launchers for commonly used applications as well as the Thunar file manager, the Application finder and Catfish file search.

Panels in Xubuntu can be customized considerably: you can add more panels, make them vertical rather than horizontal, change their appearance or delete them entirely.

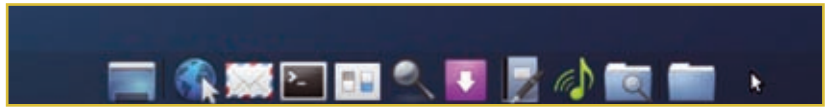


Figure 2. Bottom panel

The notification area

The notification area in the panel contains alerts from various programs that you want to monitor. These notifications can be configured to display battery life, bluetooth detection, network connectivity and more. There are also many plugins which allow you to add notifications about weather, system information and much more.

The launcher

The launcher is almost like an application menu, except you are in complete charge of what goes in and what goes out of the menu, including using the launcher to just launch a single application. You can add to the launcher any program that you have installed, just add a launcher to your panel and in the configuration select the program that you have added to it. You also have the option of specifying a name and icon for each application.

Workspaces

Linux desktop environments have a concept of *workspaces* which are essentially separate desktops where you can run applications and switch to them as needed. For instance, you may want to have your image editor open on one workspace, but your web browser open in another. By default Xubuntu has two workspaces and you can switch between them with the Workspace switcher at the top right hand side of your screen or by scrolling the mouse wheel on the desktop.

The desktop itself

Do not let the simplicity of the default Xubuntu desktop fool you. The desktop can be configured with different wallpapers, background colors and

styles. In addition you are able to define which icons show up on the desktop and how they should look like. With the compositing option enabled, you even have the ability to control different transparency levels of windows. If you want to learn more about the themes and styles in Xubuntu, read the other article discussing them more closely.

Also, when right-clicking the desktop itself, you can access your application list, perform a file search (with Catfish), create a launcher, and more. The desktop itself also will provide links to removable drives you plug in for quick and easy access.

Log out and shutdown

On the furthest top right of your screen you will see your name. By clicking on your name you will see the *Action* menu which gives you the ability to lock the screen, switch users, suspend, shut down or log out.

Tinkerers and beyond

For many users there are many things which are familiar and comfortable about the Xfce desktop environment in Xubuntu and in the default state, it has proven to be a highly productive environment. Many advanced users will find value in the easy configuration of keyboard shortcuts, while multitaskers will enjoy the ability to add many workspaces without adding much overhead to their environment.

With a few (or a lot of!) personal tweaks, Xubuntu users find they have a very flexible, highly customizable desktop that can suit many different needs. ■



Figure 3. Indicator



Figure 4. Workspace switcher