

Chapter

6

Customizing Your Desktop (or Making Your World Your Own)

After having taken the first steps into the Linux world, you are probably thinking, "Hey, this is pretty easy" and "I wonder what the fuss was all about." For what it's worth, I'm thinking the very same thing. Now that the fear of dealing with a new operating system is gone, it's time to get really comfortable.

In this chapter, I show you how to make your system truly your own. I show you how to change your background, your colors, your fonts, and anything else you'll need to create a desktop as individual as you are. Would you like some icons on your desktop, perhaps some shortcuts to programs you use on a regular basis? No problem. I cover all those things, too.

I Am Sovereign of All I Survey . . .

As I've already mentioned, working in the Linux world is working in a *multi-user* world. What this means is that everyone who uses your computer can have his or her own unique environment. Any changes you make to your desktop while you are logged in as yourself will have no effect on little Sarah when she logs in to play her video games. If she happens to delete all the icons on her desktop or changes everything to a garish purple and pink, it won't affect you either.

Let's start with something simple. The first thing most people want to change is their background. It's sort of like moving into a new house or apartment. The wallpaper (or paint) that someone else chose rarely fits into your idea of *décor*. Same goes for your computer's desktop. Let's get you something more to your liking.

Changing the Background

Start by right-clicking somewhere on the desktop. From the menu that appears, choose *Configure Desktop* and the *Configure* dialog will appear (see Figure 6-1). On the left side of that dialog is a sidebar that allows you to change various settings. One item is called *Background*. Click on that, and you will be able to modify your background settings.

Over on the right side, a display shows you a preview of what your new desktop will look like. Right at the top is a drop-down list labeled *Setting for desktop*—this gives you the opportunity to change your settings for all your virtual desktops or each individually. When you start feeling *particularly creative*, you can play around with creating a unique identity for every virtual desktop, but for now leave the setting at the default, which is *All Desktops*.

To change the background image, make sure the *Picture* radio button is selected. To the right of the *Picture* label is a drop-down list with the default system backgrounds. You'll find that quite a few are already installed. Scroll down the list, highlighting titles as you go, and notice that a preview of your new background appears in the small monitor image. To find images in something other than the default directory, click the directory navigator icon to the right, and a Konqueror-like file manager will pop up, allowing you to navigate the disk in search of your personal images. When that file dialog opens, make sure you click on the icon directly beside the drop-down navigation bar. Those are the navigator settings, and one of them is *Show Preview*, which, as the title implies, turns the image preview on. You'll definitely want it *on*. Pressing <F11> has the same effect.

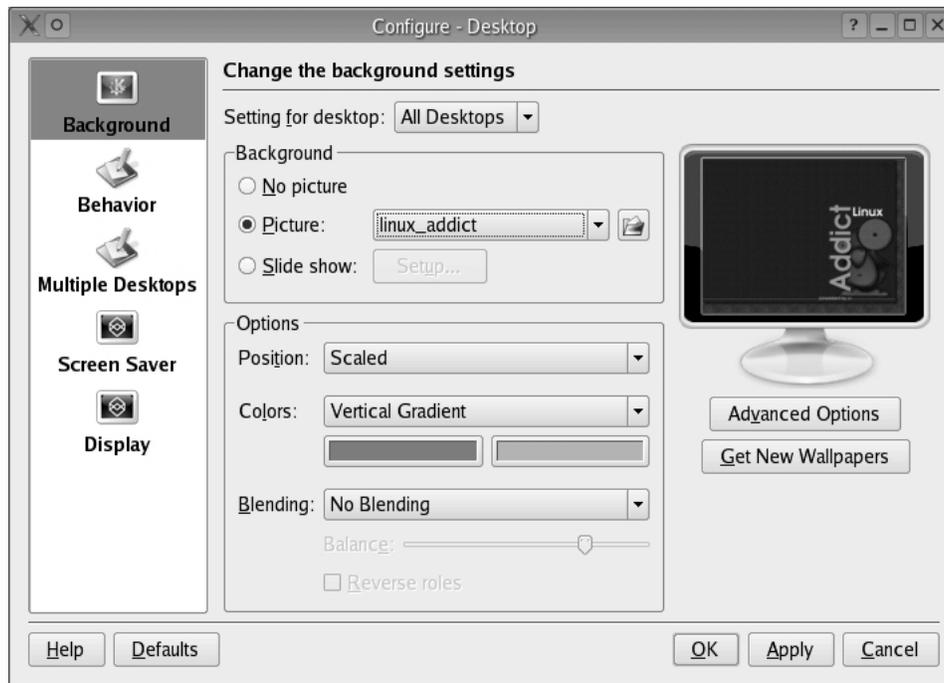


Figure 6–1 Choosing a background image for your desktop.

When you see something you like, click on either OK or Apply to make it official. The difference between the two is that OK will exit the configuration program, whereas Apply will change your background but leave the settings program running (in case you are feeling particularly indecisive).

It is also possible to configure multiple backgrounds. What this does is provide you with a means of picking several wallpapers that you can set to automatically switch at whatever interval you decide on (the default is 60 minutes). Click on the *Slide Show* radio button instead of *Picture*. The *Setup* button will become active. Click here, and you'll be asked to select the time interval for the images to rotate. There's a checkbox here to turn on random mode instead of the default sequential display. I happen to like random. Now click *Add*, and that Konqueror-like file manager will pop up so that you can select the images you want to use in the random rotation. Select as many or as few as you like, click OK to exit the various dialogs, and you are done.

Directly below the Background selection area is an area labeled *Options*. One of these options is *Position*. This tells the system how to treat the image

you select. Some images are only small graphic *tiles*, designed to be copied over and over until they fill your screen. For these, you would change the mode to Tiled. If the image you are using is a bit small for your screen, you might consider Centered Maxpect, which will grow the image as much as possible while retaining the relative width and height. If you just want the image to fill your screen and you don't care what it looks like, go for Scaled. Play! Experiment! These are *your* walls.

Incidentally, you don't *have* to have a background. You can create a nice, plain background by selecting the *No picture* radio button. Then, in the Options section, you would select different patterns, color schemes, and different ways of blending those colors.

Save My Screen, Please!

Okay, screensavers don't really do much screen saving these days. The idea, once upon a time, was to protect screens from phosphor burn-in. Old-style monochrome screens were particularly bad for this. In time, the letters from your menus (we were using text in those days) would burn in to the phosphor screen. Even when you turned off the monitor, you could still see the ghostly outline of your most popular application burned into the screen itself. As we moved to color screens and graphics, that changed somewhat, but the problem continued to exist for some time, partly due to the static nature of the applications we were using.

Time passed, and some bright light somewhere got the idea that if you constantly changed the image on the screen, that type of burn-in would not be as likely. What better way to achieve this than to have some kind of clever animation kick in when the user walked away from the screen for a few minutes (or hours). Heck, it might even be fun to watch. The screensaver was born. Modern screens use scanning techniques that all but banished burn-in, but screensavers did not go away. Those addictive fish, toasters, penguins, snow, spaceships, and so forth have managed to keep us entertained, despite the march of technology. Let's face it, we are all hooked.

Depending on your distribution, your screensaver may or may not already be active by default. Getting to your screensaver setup involves the same first steps as changing your background. Right-click on a clear part of the desktop and choose Configure Desktop. The desktop Configure dialog will appear. On the left side of that window is an item called *Screen Saver*. Click away.

Like the background manager before this, you get a nice little preview window over to the right that gives you an idea of what your screensaver will look like (Figure 6-2). The first thing you will want to do is check the box that says *Start automatically*, assuming, of course, that it isn't already checked. Under that checkbox is the length of inactivity you want to allow before the screensaver starts. The default is 3 minutes. Now pick a screensaver from the list and watch the results on the preview screen. To see the real thing in action, click the Test button. To go back to the configuration screen, press any key. Some screensavers can be modified, which is why you also have a Setup button. For instance, the *Rock* screensaver, which simulates flying through space, lets you change the number of rocks (or asteroids) flying toward you and whether your spaceship moves or rotates through the mess.

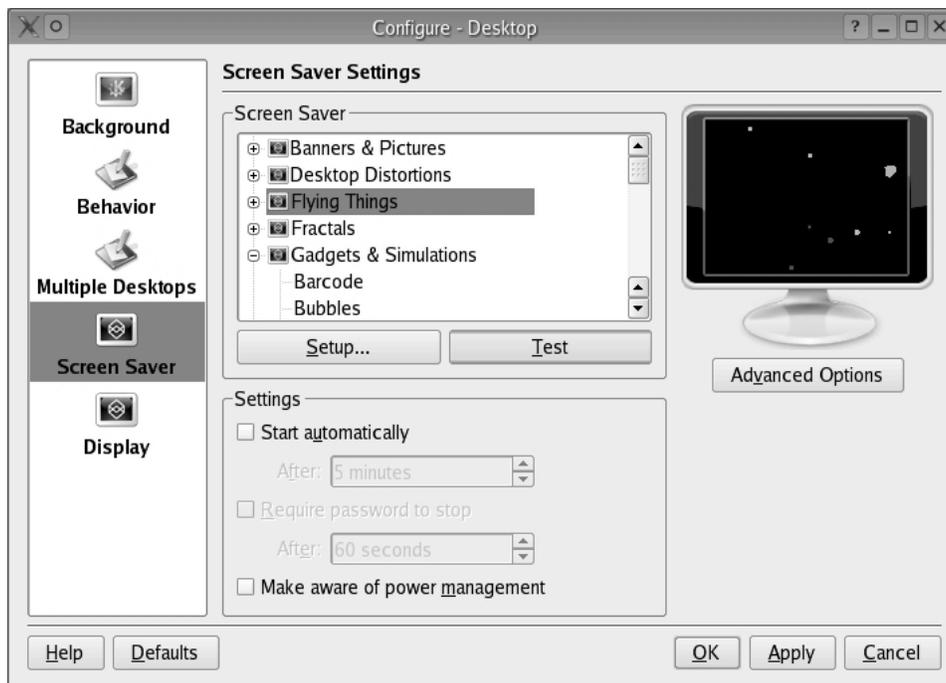


Figure 6-2 Selecting a screensaver.

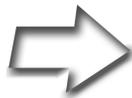
Before you click OK, you may want to change the default time before your screensaver kicks in. Mine is set for 5 minutes. In an office environment (or a busy household), you will probably want to password-protect your

screen when you walk away. To do this, check the box for *Require password to stop*. When the screensaver starts, you will need to enter your login password to get back to your work. Always remember that your password is case-sensitive.

Moving Things Around

If you haven't already done this, click on an icon (hold the click) and drag the icon to some other spot on the desktop. Easy, isn't it?

The taskbar is something else you may want to move. Just drag the panel and drop it to one of the four positions on the desktop (top, bottom, left side, or right side). The location, by the way, can also be changed by right-clicking on the taskbar and selecting *Configure Panel*. On the card that appears (Figure 6-3), you can select the location, the size of the panel and its icons, and the length you are willing to allow the panel to extend on your desktop. For instance, you might decide you don't want a panel with a lot of blank space, in which case, a centered Kicker that takes up only 80% of the screen might look better to you. If you do go for a shorter panel, make sure you click the *Expand as required to fit contents* checkbox.



Semantics Technically, the taskbar is that portion of the *panel* that shows your open programs, letting you quickly click from one to the other. That said, you may find that some people speak of the taskbar and the panel interchangeably.

On that customization card, you can lock in on some taskbar-specific configurations. For instance, by default, your taskbar will *Show windows from all desktops* you have open on your desktop, regardless of which virtual desktop you opened them on. Some people like this feature, but I am not one of them. This is something I leave unchecked because I want to see only the programs on the virtual desktop I am currently running on. Remember, these settings are a personal thing.

The *Show window list button* checkbox option provides a small pop-up right next to the taskbar. This pop-up shows a quick list of all windows on all desktops—handy if, like me, you turned off the first option. *Group similar tasks* is another very personal option. Let's say you opened up three Konsoles.

If you have this option set, only one task group will show up in the taskbar—a small black arrow on the task will let you know that there are more like that. If you click on the Konsole task (in the taskbar), you'll see all three. This option is configurable so that you can elect to have this grouping occur never, always, or only when the taskbar is full.

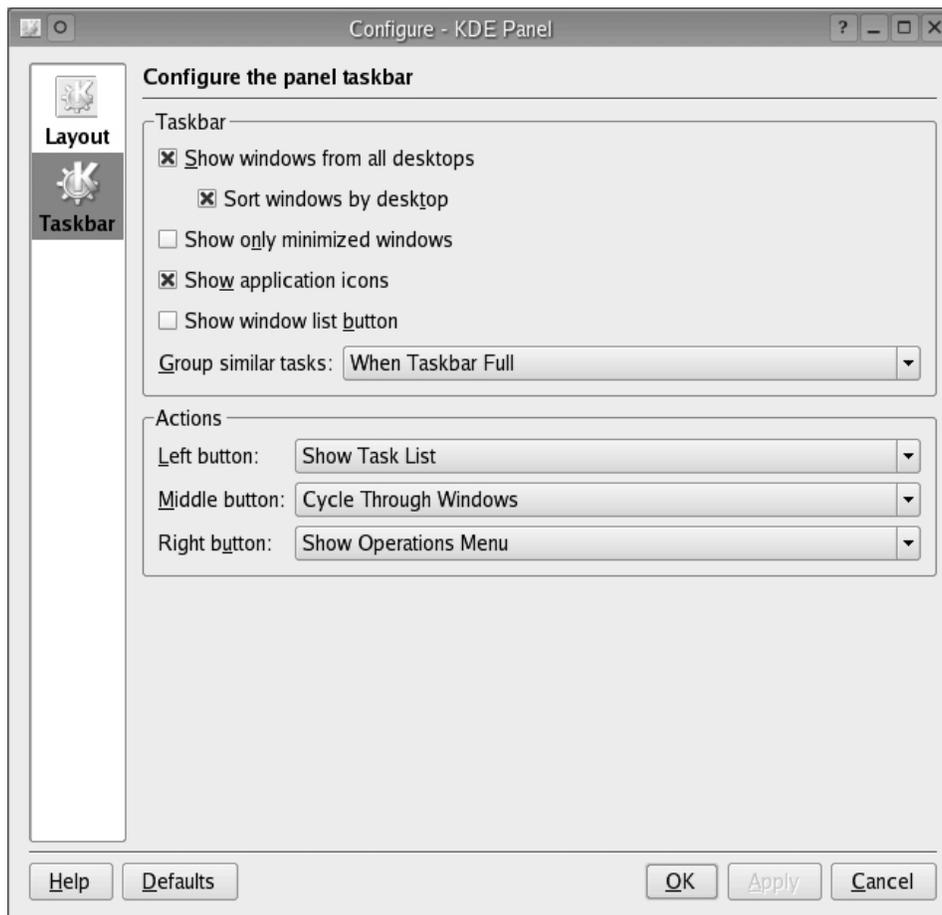


Figure 6–3 Panel and taskbar settings.

Is That a Theme or a Motif?

I'm referring not to a musical theme but to a desktop theme. A *theme* is a collection of buttons, decorations, colors, backgrounds, and so on, preselected and packaged to give your desktop a finished and coherent look. Some themes even incorporate sounds (for startup, shutdown, opening and closing program windows, etc.) into the whole package. It can be a lot of fun.

Then we have *styles*, which are sort of like themes but are not as all-encompassing. Styles tend to concentrate on window decorations and behavior as well as *widgets*. Widgets are things like radio buttons, checkboxes, combo boxes (drop-down lists), sliders, tabs, and so on.

All right, I know you want to get to it and change your theme a time or two, but first I'm going to tell you something rather important. Most (if not all) of the things I've shown you so far on customizing your desktop can be done through the *KDE Control Center*. You'll find it by clicking on the big K and looking for Control Center. If you are having trouble locating it, remember that you can bring it up by pressing <Alt+F2> and typing in `kcontrol`, its program name.

As soon as the KDE Control Center loads up, it displays some capsule information about the system, its hostname, and the version of Linux running on it. Over on the left side, an index page covers a number of items that can be either viewed or modified on the system. I say *either* because some of what you see here is just information and cannot be changed. One of these items is *Appearances and Themes*. Click the plus sign beside it, and you'll get a list of options for changing your desktop environment's look and feel (Figure 6-4).

Almost everything you could possibly ever want to do to alter your desktop experience is here. Change the background, colors, fonts, icons, screen-saver . . . you name it. It is all here! That includes your themes and styles. Go ahead: Click on Style and select a style from the Widget Style list. As you click, the preview window will show you how it affects the overall look. If you just want to see it in action but you don't want to commit yet, click Apply. When you know you can live with the changes, click OK.

Let's look at a couple of those look and feel changes and see how they affect what you do and how you work.

Is That a Theme or a Motif?



Figure 6-4 Changing the look and feel in KDE's control panel with Appearances and Themes.

Window Decorations

This is also your opportunity to undo something I had you change back in Chapter 4. When you ran `kpersonalizer`, I had you select the Plastik style so that we could all be on the same page (so to speak) in terms of what you see in your title bar. Figures 6-5 through 6-7 show the KDE2 (Classic), Plastik, and Keramik window decorations, respectively.

If you would like to use something else, you can make that change now. Just remember that things may look a little different than what I show you in the book from here on. With that little disclaimer in place, you may now express your individuality.



Figure 6-5 KDE 2 Classic window decoration.



Figure 6-6 Plastik (KDE 3.4 default) window decoration.



Figure 6-7 Keramik (KDE 3.3 default) window decoration.

Themes and Styles

Themes and styles are essentially collections of look and feel changes. A style is a collection of definitions affecting primarily widgets (buttons, tabs, etc.; see Figure 6-8). A theme, on the other hand, might encompass changes in

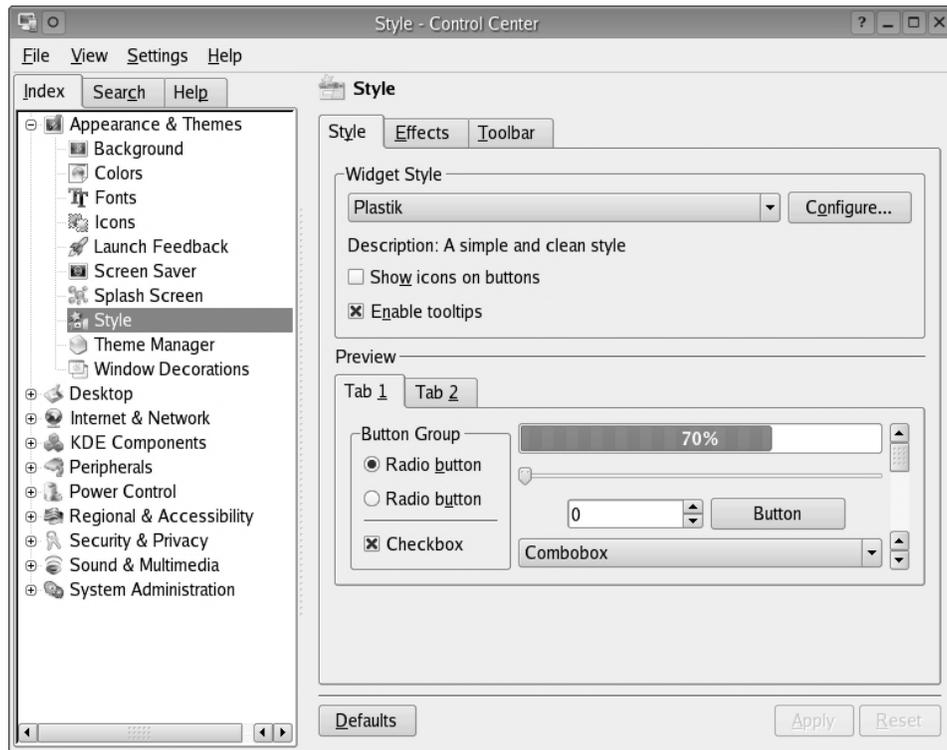


Figure 6-8 Changing styles are reflected in the KDE Control Center.

window decorations, wallpaper, colors, and icons to create a cohesive, integrated desktop experience, whereas a change in window decoration would affect only the window decoration itself.

The theme manager (Figure 6-9) is similar. Under the heading *Choose your visual KDE theme*, you'll see a list of the installed themes, with a preview window to the right. Below is a list of buttons that allow you to override the settings that come with a particular theme. If you don't like the theme's default background (but you like everything else), click the Background button and make your changes. You can even create your own themes if you feel the creative urge.

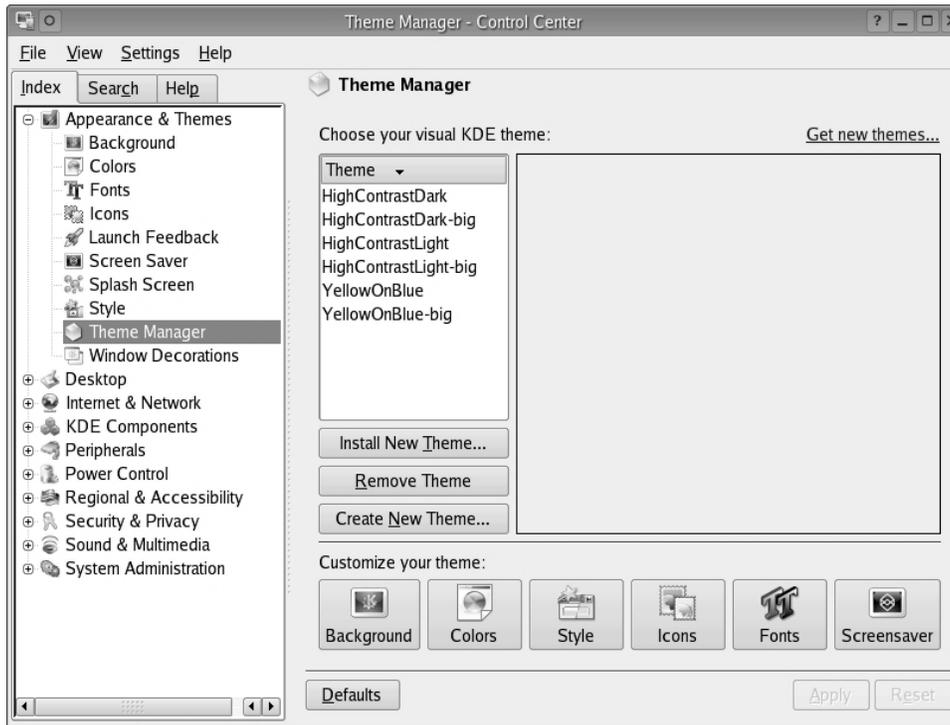


Figure 6-9 Theme manager options in the Control Center.

The fashion slaves among you will quickly grow tired of the themes and styles your system comes with—there are quite a few, but not nearly enough for those surfing the edges of what's hot today. That's why you should keep this little Web site in mind:

<http://www.kde-look.org>

This site has tons of themes, styles, alternative wallpapers, and icons—enough to keep you busy for a long, long time. Now, I know we haven't talked about getting on the Net yet; we still have a few things to cover. If you just can't wait, then jump ahead to Chapter 9, "Connecting to the Internet." Just make sure you come back here. You wouldn't want to miss anything.

Adding Icons and Shortcuts to Your Desktop

I covered this topic somewhat in the last chapter, but it is time to look at this in detail. While working with Konqueror, you might recall that you had a directory called *Desktop* and that this directory actually *was* your desktop. If you wanted to get a file onto your desktop, you could just drag and drop (copy or link) a file there. A good reason for doing this is that it puts things you use on a regular basis (a business spreadsheet perhaps or a contact list) right where you can quickly get to them.

The single most useful icon you will want to add to your desktop is a link to a program on your system (*Link to Application*), something you might have called a *shortcut* under your old OS. Maybe you need to have your word processor or your CD player handy. Whatever it is, you would like it there in front of you.

The second most useful link is a Uniform Resource Locator (URL) to a regularly visited Web site. We already looked at creating a Link to Location in the last chapter because a URL can point to a file just as easily as a Web site. Instead of the path to a file, simply type in the URL to your favorite site. I cover surfing the Net in greater detail later in this book. Let's continue by adding a program to your desktop.

What you need to understand is that you won't really be putting the program there but rather a link to it. Right-click on the desktop, move your mouse cursor over *Create New*, and then select *Link to Application*. The dialog box or card that opens has three tabs. The first, *General*, lets you choose a name for the program. Notice that the words *Link to Application* are highlighted. You can just type a name that makes sense to you here. For instance, if you are putting a link to the CD players, whose program name is *kscd*, you might just want to enter "CD Player" for the icon's name. To the left of the name is a square with a gearlike icon. Clicking this square brings up a large collection of icons from which you can select whatever happens to take your fancy (Figure 6-10).

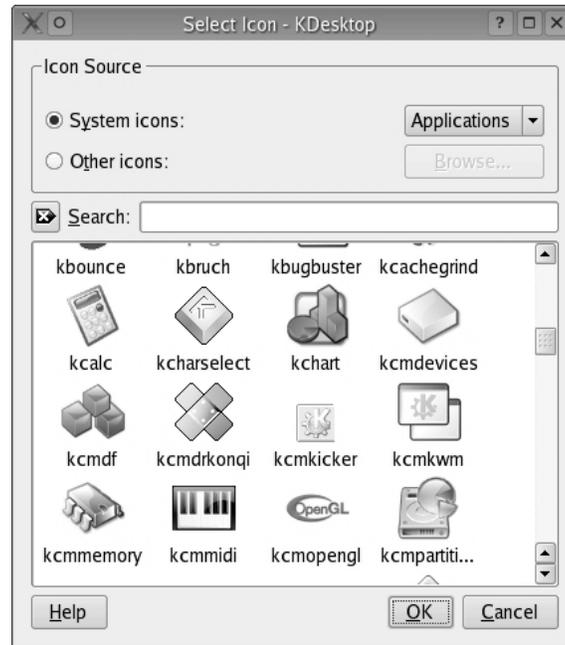
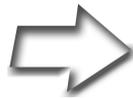


Figure 6–10 Selecting an icon for your new shortcut.

Once you have chosen an icon, skip over to the third tab, *Application*. The field labeled *Command* is where you enter the program's real name. For example, if you wanted a link to the calculator, you would enter `/usr/bin/kcalc`. Another way to get there is to click the *Browse* button and navigate your way to the application. The *Permissions* tab lets you decide whether others can see, modify, or execute the icon. (Remember that it is possible to create these links in other directories, including public directories.) If you are creating an icon for your personal home directory, you can pretty much ignore this.

When you are happy with your changes, click *OK*. Your new program link (which you can launch with a single click) should appear on your desktop.



Shell Out To create a shortcut icon for a command, you first have to know what the command is and where it is. To be honest, a command or program (such as the KDE calculator, `kcalc`)

could be almost anywhere on the disk. For the most part, programs tend to be in one of the “bin” directories, `/bin`, `/usr/bin`, or `/usr/local/bin`. You can also use the `whereis` command to tell you exactly. For instance, in order to know where the `kcalc` program is, I would do the following at the Konsole shell prompt (the “\$” sign):

```
[mgagne@mysystem mgagne]$ whereis kcalc
kcalc: /usr/bin/kcalc
```

In some cases, you may see more than one file associated with a program’s name, but the actual executable to use is in `/usr/bin`. The `bin`, in this case, stands for “binary”—in short, a program.

Miscellaneous Changes

Now that I have shown you how to find all these things, I’m going to let you explore the Appearances and Themes menu on your own. Check out the Fonts dialog if you would like different desktop fonts than what is set by default. You might find it interesting to note that different icon sets are available than the ones you currently see. Click Icons and go wild. If you do change the icons, just *be aware* that those I describe when pointing to the panel or to various applications may look a little different than what you now see.

Let me give you one final *treat* before I close this chapter. Still working from the KDE control center, look for Keyboard Shortcuts (under *Regional and Accessibility*), and you’ll discover lots of interesting keyboard shortcuts to do things such as switching from one application to another, switching from one desktop to another, opening and closing windows, getting help, taking a desktop screenshot (in case you want to share your fashion sense with others), and so on.

Resources

KDE-LOOK.org

<http://www.kde-look.org>