Chapter 1

Some excerpts from *Ubuntu Kung Fu*

1 See Your File-Browsing History

Nautilus includes a little-known feature that will track folders you view, just like a web browser tracks the sites you visit. This can be useful when performing system maintenance, especially if, like me, you tend to forget where you've just located that all-important file.

To activate it, click the Places drop-down list above the left pane, and select History. The history view places the most recently visited folders at the top of the list.

2 Avoid Programs Quitting When the Terminal Is Closed

You might have noticed that, whenever you run a program from a terminal window, it quits when the terminal window is closed (there are some exceptions to this, such as the Firefox web browser, but it's generally the case). There are a handful of ways around this. Perhaps the easiest is to precede the command with nohup. For example, to run Gedit, you

might type nohup gedit. Try this now. Then close the terminal window, and see what happens (or, actually, what doesn't happen).

The reason Gedit doesn't quit is that nohup tells the new program to ignore any future "hangup signals," which is to say Gedit is told ignore requests to terminate that are sent to it when the terminal quits.

See also Tip 206, on page 219 of *Ubuntu Kung Fu*, which describes how to use the screen command to create a command-line login that's independent of any terminal window.

3 Use Ubuntu's Built-in Download Manager

Downloading big files that take a long time to arrive, such as new Ubuntu installation ISO images, can be fraught with difficulties. You'll need to have a perfect connection for the duration of the download (not always possible with wifi), and the remote server may sometimes drop the connection. Restarting from scratch to download a 670MB file when 669MB of it has arrived fine can be a very frustrating experience!

The solution is wget, Ubuntu's built-in command-line download manager. It runs at the command line, and all you need do is specify the complete URL for the download file, including the http:// or ftp:// components, as applicable. For example, at the time of writing, the Ubuntu 8.04.1 release can be found at http://releases.ubuntu.com/hardy/ubuntu-8.04.1-desktop-i386.iso, so to download this I would type the following into a terminal window:

```
$ wget http://releases.ubuntu.com/hardy/ubuntu-8.04.1-desktop-i386.iso
```

As the download progresses, you'll see a percentage figure progress display, along with figures showing how much has been downloaded and the speed of the transfer. If wget loses the connection for any reason, it'll automatically try again and attempt to resume where it left off. If you want to quit the download, type Ctrl+C. Don't forget to clear up the partially downloaded file.

Because large downloads can take a long time, you might want to use nohup with wget to avoid wget quitting when the terminal window that started it is closed. This will effectively invisibly download the file in the

background and will persist even if you log out (to stop the download if needed, type killall wget into a terminal window/virtual console). See Tip 299, on page 323 of *Ubuntu Kung Fu*, for more information. Alternatively, you might consider using screen to start the wget download in a background command-line instance that you can switch in and out of in order to check progress—see Tip 206, on page 219 of *Ubuntu Kung Fu*, for more information.

You might also be interested in kget, which can be installed using Synaptic (search for the kget package; don't install the KDE4 version) and provides a GUI front end to wget. It's officially a component of the KDE desktop and is designed to work with the Konqueror web browser but works fine under the GNOME desktop and Firefox of Ubuntu. Once installed, you'll find it on the Internet menu. You can drag and drop download links to its program window to start them downloading or click Settings → Show Drop Target for a small window onto which you can drag and drop the download links, like with some Windows download managers. (Tip: Right-click the floating window's minimize/maximize buttons, and select Always On Top; this will stop it from falling behind other program windows.)

4 Turn Your Desktop into Your /home Folder

Do you use your desktop as a dumping ground for files and pretty much ignore your actual /home folder, which is where you *should* store things? If so, you might be interested in this tweak, which effectively makes Ubuntu use your /home folder for the desktop, instead of the actual /home/username/Desktop folder. Anything saved to the desktop, such as files/folders dropped there, will be placed in your /home folder. Additionally, anything in your /home folder will appear on the desktop.

To try this, start gconf-editor, navigate to /apps/nautilus/preferences, and put a check alongside desktop_is_home_dir. Then log out and back in again.

Remember that the contents of your desktop haven't vanished. They're still in the Desktop folder in your /home folder.

5 Install the GNOME Wallpapers

The GNOME Project supplies the desktop technology used by Ubuntu, and the default installation of GNOME includes several very pretty wallpapers that sadly aren't included with Ubuntu. However, you can get them by using Synaptic to search for and install the gnome-backgrounds package. Once installed, just right-click the desktop as usual, and select Change Desktop Background. The new wallpapers will be included in the list.

6 Switch to a Lightweight File Manager

Thunar is the default file manager used in the stripped-back Xfce4 desktop of Xubuntu. It starts quickly and has a low-memory footprint, yet it is very powerful and provides all the features you are likely to need. In fact, it beats Nautilus in many departments when it comes to features.[1] It can be used to replace Nautilus within the Ubuntu desktop for some operations, although bear in mind that Nautilus windows will still appear sometimes, such as when using Nautilus CD-R/DVD Creator.

1. One feature of Thunar I particularly appreciate is the ability to rubber-band-select many files in list view, something Nautilus doesn't allow. Thunar also includes the ability to define your own right-click functions, something that is possible in Nautilus but only if you add the Nautilus Actions component, as described in Tip 295, on page 333.

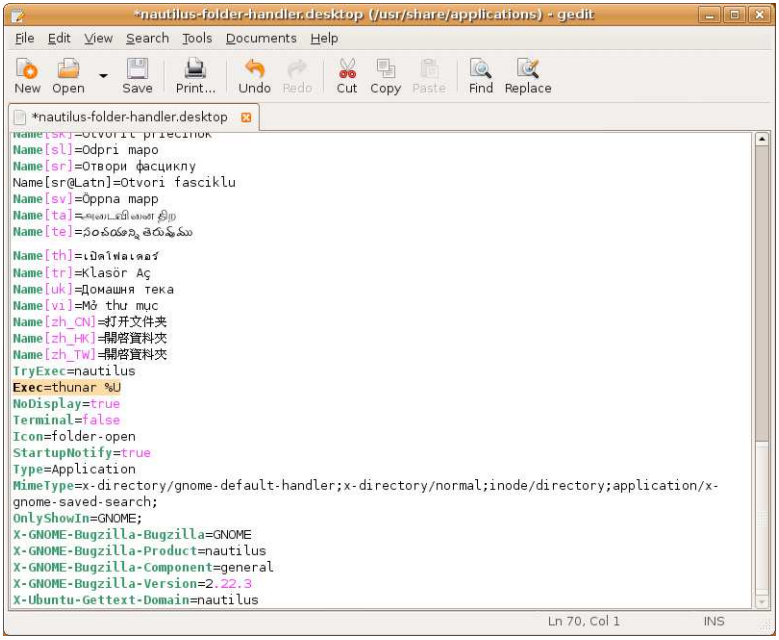

Figure 1.1: Configuring the system to use an alternative file manager (see Tip 6)

Follow these steps to switch to Thunar:

1. Start Synaptic, and search for and install the thunar and thunar-archive-plugin packages. After installation, you can run Thunar by typing thunar in a terminal window.

2. To cause Thunar to open whenever you click an entry in the Places menu, you'll need to edit a configuration file: open a terminal window, and type the following:

   ```
   $ gksu gedit /usr/share/applications/nautilus-folder-handler.desktop
   ```

   Scroll to the bottom of the file, and look for the line that reads Exec=nautilus --no-desktop %U. Change it so it reads Exec=thunar %U. For an example taken from my text PC, see Figure 1.1.

   Then save the file and test the changes by selecting Places → Home.

This tip works equally well for any alternative file manager. Others you might like to try are Konqueror (KDE's file manager), Dolphin (KDE4's file manager), and Rox-filer, a stripped-down file manager that is extremely lightweight. Just use Synaptic to search for and install konqeuror, doplhin, or rox-filer, respectively. When altering the earlier nautilus-folder-handler.desktop file to make Rox-filer the default, change the line to read Exec=rox-filer, without the %U; Dolphin and Konqueror still require the %U after the command. Note that Rox-filer's configuration is carried out by right-clicking a blank spot in its program window. It doesn't use a traditional menu system, like most application windows.

If you want a lightweight command-line file manager, install Midnight Commander (search for and install the mc package using Synaptic). Then type mc at the prompt to start the program. Once it's started, hit Alt+1, use the cursor keys to highlight Contents, and then hit Enter. This will display the help file explaining how to use the program. If you ever used Norton Commander back in the days of DOS, you'll find Midnight Commander very familiar, because it's modeled on that product.

To go back to using Nautilus after installing Thunar (or Konqueror/Dolphin/Rox-Filer), just edit the nautilus-folder-handler.desktop file again, and change the line you edited to read Exec=nautilus --no-desktop %U. Then save the file, and log out and back in again.

7 Play MP3/Ogg Files at the Command Line

So, you've tweaked Ubuntu into a state of disrepair. Any hope of a GUI is a pipe dream, at least for the moment. While you hack away fixing things, wouldn't it be nice to have some music to console you at the console?

Just switch to an unused virtual console, log in, and type sudo apt-get install vlc. VLC is the GUI media playback application mentioned in Tip 230, on page 249 of *Ubuntu Kung Fu*, but it can also run with a text-mode interface—just start it with the -I ncurses command option (note that's a capital *I*, not *L*). For example, to play back filename.mp3, I would type vlc -I ncurses filename.mp3. Multiple files can be specified one after the other, thus creating a playlist, or a wildcard can be used to play

back all files in a particular folder (that is, vlc -I ncurses ~/Music/*.mp3). Use a and z to alter the volume.

Once the music starts playing, switch back to the original console to continue enacting repairs (and maybe see Tip 30, on page 72 of *Ubuntu Kung Fu*, which explains how to install a text-mode web browser; very useful for looking-up solutions!). See Tip 75, on page 116 of *Ubuntu Kung Fu*, to see how to alter the master volume of the audio system at the command-line—this might be necessary if playback is too quiet.

8 Use Desktop Widgets

The fashion amongst desktop operating systems is to utilize desktop widgets. These are small programs that float on the desktop and provide specific but useful functionality, such as telling the time or showing the weather. Mac OS X has included them since version 10.4 in the form of its Dashboard component, while Windows Vista introduced them upon release in the form of the desktop sidebar.

As you might expect, Ubuntu offers its own variation on this theme in the form of Screenlets. This needs Ubuntu's desktop effects to work—for more information, see Tip 73, on page 113 of *Ubuntu Kung Fu*.

To install Screenlets, use Synaptic to search for and install the screenlets package. While Synaptic is open, also search for and install the compizconfig-settings-manager package. This is needed because, before running Screenlets, you first need to enable the "widget layer" visual effect. To do this once the software is installed, click System → Preferences → Advanced Desktop Effects Settings, and in the program window that appears, put a check in the box alongside Widget Layer, under the Desktop heading.

Then close that program, and start Screenlets by clicking System → Preferences → Screenlets. Note that Screenlets will automatically start each time you log in, and when you click the icon in the notification area, the Screenlets configuration panel will open.

When the program first starts, you might see a warning about how there is "no existing autostart directory." Click the Yes button to create one. After this, to add a Screenlet to your desktop, just select it in the list, check the Auto start on login box at the bottom right of the

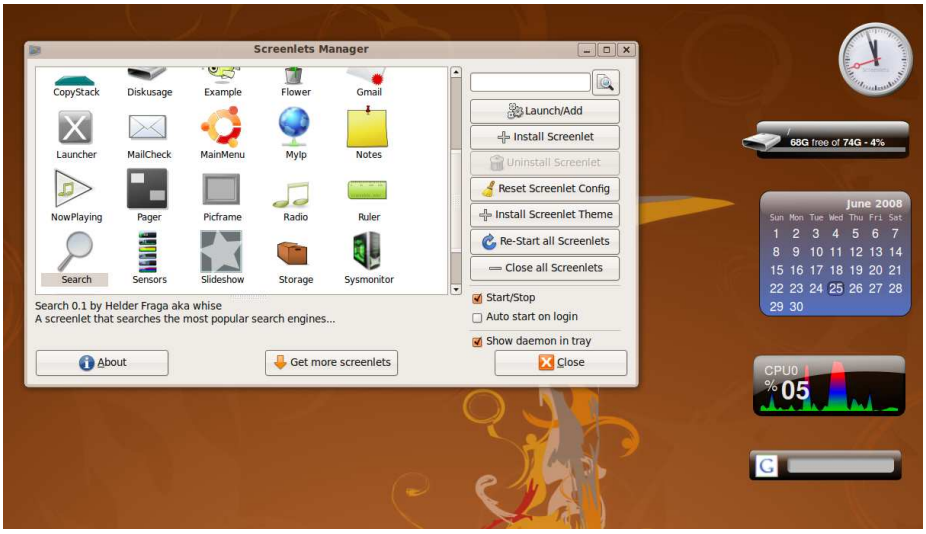

Figure 1.2: Adding Screenlets to the desktop (see Tip 8)

program window, and then click the Launch/Add button. The Screenlet will be placed somewhere on your screen (probably the top left), but you can then drag it to wherever you want, as shown in Figure 1.2. Right-clicking each Screenlet will let you configure it.

Instead of having Screenlets floating on the desktop (or in addition to), you can create a setup like Mac OS X, where the widgets are on a floating layer that appears whenever you hit F9. To add a widget to the floating layer, add it to the desktop as described earlier, and then right-click it and select Window → Widget.

Many more Screenlets are available in addition to those provided out of the box. To download them, visit http://www.screenlets.org. Look for the Downloads heading, and click an entry beneath the Third-party Screenlets link. To install a new screenlet, download it to your desktop (don't unpack it if it's an archive!), open the Screenlets configuration program (System → Preferences → Screenlets, or just click the Screenlets notification area icon), and click the Install Screenlet button. Then select the download using the file browser, and select it from the list of Screenlets in the main program window once it's been added to the main collection. After this, add it to the desktop as described earlier. You can delete the file you downloaded once it's installed.