other projects that relied too much on it ceased to exist when the major funding sponsor keeled over or lost interest. Because of that, KDE survived many trends and hypes in the Free Software world and continuously maintained its development momentum.

In April 2002, KDE 3 was ready. Since KDE 2 was considered well-designed, version 3 was more evolutionary and matured closer and closer to perfection over five major releases and six years. Important applications that became standard on free desktops have been developed based on the KDE 3 technologies: K3B, the disk burning program; Amarok, one of the slickest music players in general; Kontact, a full personal communication suite. Most interestingly, for the first time these applications use KDE not only as one target desktop, but also as the platform on top of which end-user applications are built. With version 3, KDE started to separate into two things: the desktop and the environment, usually called the platform. But since KDE was still confined to X11, this split was not easily recognized by users. That was the next step.

In 2004, one of the toughest calls in its history had to be made by the KDE team. Trolltech was about to release version 4.0 of Qt, and it was very advanced and very different compared to both previous releases and any other toolkit on the market. Because of the massive changes in the toolkit, going from Qt 3 to Qt 4 was not an adaptation, but a port. The question was whether KDE 4 was going to be a straight port of KDE 3 from Qt 3 to Qt 4 or a major redesign in the process of porting. Both options had many supporters, and it was clear to the vast majority of those involved that, either way, an immense amount of work had to be done. The decision was made in favor of a complete redesign of KDE. Even if it is now accepted that this was the right choice, it was a very risky one, because it meant providing KDE 3 as the main line for an extended period of time in parallel until completing the huge porting effort.

One major new feature of Qt 4 needs particular emphasis. The GPL and Commercial dual licensing scheme Trolltech was using already for the X11 version was now extended to all target platforms Qt supports, most notably to Windows, Mac OS X, and embedded platforms. KDE 4 thus had the potential to become something relevant beyond the Unix world. Although the Unix desktop remains its home turf, applications developed for KDE can now run on Windows and Mac OS X computers. This possibility was received controversially. One argument against it was that the Free Software community would provide neat applications for those proprietary desktops, thus reducing the incentive to switch away from them to free alternatives. Another one was, “What do we care?” or more politely, “Why should we invest scarce development time in supporting nonfree target systems?” Proponents argued that providing the same applications everywhere would ease the transition for users from proprietary to free operating systems and allow gradual replacements of key applications. In the end the trend was set according to KDE’s long-term mantra of “those who do the work decide.” There was enough interest in the new target platforms to gain the attention of sufficient contributors, so in the end, there was no reason to deprive the KDE users of a capability many obviously longed for.

To become platform-independent, KDE 4 was rearchitected and separated into an application development platform, the desktop built on top of it, and the surrounding applications. Of course the dividing lines are blurry at times.