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Alternative GUIs: SymphonyOS

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Notes:

- This is the first of two articles; the second one will take a look at GoblinX [2].
- SymphonyOS was originally reviewed on this site in May, 2006 [3], and again in December, 2006 [4]. Since then, SymphonyOS suffered through some financial problems [5], but seems to be alive and well today.

We're all familiar with the "big two" desktops for Linux ? KDE and GNOME. Of course, there are many more to choose from [6]. If you asked a group of Linux users, "Which one is best?", the ensuing debate would likely take on religious overtones. Some would even argue [7] that a desktop like KDE is too hard for newbies to use.

One of the things that can be difficult for Windows users to understand is how Linux users have a choice of graphical user interfaces [8] (GUIs). Even though Windows itself used to be a graphical shell running on top of DOS, until the advent of Windows NT and beyond, Windows users just get one choice of GUI.

It's a safe bet that most Linux users don't stray too far away from those "big two," KDE and GNOME. So it's especially interesting to look at some innovative alternatives.

SymphonyOS

[9]SymphonyOS [10] is a departure from the normal desktop interface. Since the distro is still in beta, it's not ready for mass consumption by any stretch. I wanted to take a look at the just-released version 2007.06. The reason I used version 2006-12 for this overview is that the hard disk installer in version 2007.06 simply didn't work. (Installing 2006-12 wasn't exactly easy, either ? more on that below.) Hopefully they'll iron out the bugs, because users new to Linux might well appreciate SymphonyOS' simplicity.

The SymphonyOS desktop (named "mezzo") seems to be a marriage of the fvwm [11] window manager with Mozilla's scriptable layout engine, Gecko [12]. On the desktop, there are areas with links in them (known as "desklets" and "launchers"). When clicked, the links can bring up Web pages or programs. In the four corners of the desktop, there are hotspots that bring up what are referred to as "menus," which are actually full-page views of four specific functional areas: Computer (settings); Files; Programs; and Trash. In the top center of the main page, there's a hotspot containing the clock, that also works as the way to refresh the desktop after the desktop background image has been changed through SymphonyOS' Desktop Manager.

SymphonyOS comes as a live Linux CD, and uses [ROX-Filer](#) [13] as its default file manager, and also includes Firefox; Thunderbird; Gaim (for instant messaging); and the VLC media player (the latter didn't work until it was reinstalled).

 [14]
SymphonyOS login screen

Once logged in, the user is presented with the main screen, which has an area for favorite programs on the left, an area for favorite directories on the right, a bunch of news feeds, and a Google search box. On the whole, it has the feel of Web page, but one that gives you access to programs and directories as well.
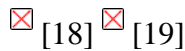
 [15] [16] [17]

The Desktop Manager allows you (in theory, at least) to change the contents of the desklets and launchers, as well as to change the desktop's background image.
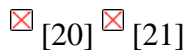
 [18] [19]
The Desktop Manager

When you click on the hotspot in the upper left-hand corner, it brings you to the "Computer" page, offering you access to your partitions, various settings, and "tasks" such as shutting down the computer.
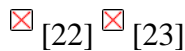
 [20] [21]
The Computer menu

The hotspot in the lower left-hand corner brings up the "Programs" page, with launchers for favorite programs; all programs; and tasks (such as installing software).
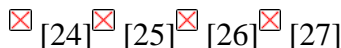
 [22] [23]
The Programs menu

The hotspots in the upper right-hand corner and lower right-hand corner bring up the "Files" page and the "Trash" page, respectively. At this point, they don't seem to do a lot. (Perhaps you'll be able to "drag-and-drop" in future editions.)

 [24] [25] [26] [27]
The Files menu and Trash menu

I'm looking forward to SymphonyOS' continued success and development. It's an innovative and novel concept.

On a personal level, it passed the "wife test" ? she praised its ease-of-use. (Since I've been trying to get her to allow me to put Linux on her computer, but only (so far) managed to get her hooked on playing Shisen-Sho (a game that comes with KDE) on *my* computer, this may eventually be the distro for her.)

One could also easily imagine a SymphonyOS-like desktop operating completely within a web browser. The trend seems to be pointing that way already. It's not hard to imagine the day you'll be able to start up a Web browser on a Windows-based computer in a library someplace, and have something very similar to SymphonyOS come up with your

files and settings, ready to go.

Boring Technical Stuff

This version of SymphonyOS (2006-12) is based on Debian Etch. The new version (2007.06) is Ubuntu-based. Either way, it would seem that you could install other desktops (like GNOME) if you wanted to. Note how it offers "Mezzo" as a choice among login sessions in the following gdm ("GNOME Display Manager") screenshot.

 [28]

As noted above, the installer for version 2007.06 simply didn't work.

There were multiple problems with installing version 2006-12. It didn't install GRUB, like it said it would ? not a big deal, since an openSUSE installation already controls GRUB on my test box ? but it also didn't install a kernel to boot from ("vmlinuz") or an initial RAM disk ("initrd") in /boot. I had to copy those off the live CD. The next problem was that the "initrd.gz" I copied over went with the live CD (which, for 2006-12, is based on the Slax subsystem [29]), not with the actual installation, so it went looking for the live CD and its loadable modules upon boot. Fortunately, that didn't ultimately stop it from booting. Once installed, it was easy enough to create a compatible "initrd" by installing and using normal Debian-based tools.

Another problem I encountered was that the live CD (of version 2006-12) didn't properly configure my display's resolution or sync rates. I had to use the vi editor to configure /etc/X11/xorg.conf. Yikes! (However, the newest version did.)

Finally, here's something to ponder: Will the developers of this system create tools to change desktop elements that are as easy-to-use as the OS itself, or will the desktop user need to turn to someone with a knowlege of scripting in order to make changes? Arthur C. Clarke is quoted as saying, "Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic." How well will SymphonyOS succeed at making its magic accessible to the end user?

Purchase a 2007-06 CD [30] from On-Disk.com.

StumbleUpon [31]
Linux

Source URL: http://www.tuxmachines.org/node/17107

Links:
[1] http://www.tuxmachines.org/taxonomy/term/123
[2] http://www.goblinx.com.br/en/
[3] http://www.tuxmachines.org/node/6982
[4] http://www.tuxmachines.org/node/12118
[5] http://www.tuxmachines.org/node/8572
[6] http://xwinman.org/
[7] http://opensourcelearning.info/blog/?p=359
[8] http://xwinman.org/intro.php
[9] http://www.tuxmachines.org/gallery/v/SymphonyOS_2006-12/main-desktop-1.png.html
[10] http://www.symphonyos.com/cms/
[11] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fvwm
[12] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gecko_%28layout_engine%29
[13] http://rox.sourceforge.net/desktop/ROX-Filer

[14] http://www.tuxmachines.org/gallery/v/SymphonyOS_2006-12/Login%20screen%20(gdm)

[15] http://www.tuxmachines.org/www.tuxmachines.org/gallery/v/SymphonyOS_2006-12/main-desktop-4.png.html

[16] http://www.tuxmachines.org/gallery/v/SymphonyOS_2006-12/main-desktop-5.png.html

[17] http://www.tuxmachines.org/gallery/v/SymphonyOS_2006-12/main-desktop-6.png.html

[18] http://www.tuxmachines.org/gallery/v/SymphonyOS_2006-12/main-desktop-2.png.html

[19] http://www.tuxmachines.org/gallery/v/SymphonyOS_2006-12/main-desktop-3.png.html

[20] http://www.tuxmachines.org/gallery/v/SymphonyOS_2006-12/computer-menu-1.png.html

[21] http://www.tuxmachines.org/gallery/v/SymphonyOS_2006-12/computer-menu-2.png.html

[22] http://www.tuxmachines.org/gallery/v/SymphonyOS_2006-12/programs-menu-1.png.html

[23] http://www.tuxmachines.org/gallery/v/SymphonyOS_2006-12/programs-menu-2.png.html

[24] http://www.tuxmachines.org/gallery/v/SymphonyOS_2006-12/files-menu-1.png.html

[25] http://www.tuxmachines.org/gallery/v/SymphonyOS_2006-12/files-menu-2.png.html

[26] http://www.tuxmachines.org/gallery/v/SymphonyOS_2006-12/trash-menu-1.png.html

[27] http://www.tuxmachines.org/gallery/v/SymphonyOS_2006-12/trash-menu-2.png.html

[28] http://www.tuxmachines.org/gallery/v/SymphonyOS_2006-12/login-2.png.html

[29] http://www.slax.org/

[30] http://on-disk.com/product_info.php/manufacturers_id/41/products_id/284

[31]
http://www.stumbleupon.com/submit?url=http://www.tuxmachines.org/node/17107&title=Alternative+GUIs:+SymphonyO