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Trying out KDE3



About the author:

Lorne lives in Chicago and works as a computer consultant specializing in getting data in and out of Oracle databases. Since making the switch to programming exclusively in a *nix environment, Lorne has completely avoided 'DLL Hell'. He is currently working on his Master's Degree in Computer Science.

Abstract:

KDE released their latest code as version 3 recently. This article will give you an idea what it would be like to try it for yourself. Though the article uses SuSE 7.3, but binaries should be available for any major distribution.

What is KDE3?

KDE is the default desktop environment for many linux distributions like SuSE and Turbolinux. It is written in an object oriented language called C++. Its a great choice for a graphical user interface because it allows a programmer to easily take pieces of functionality they know work and to put them together into a working application. KDE uses a library called QT and KDE released KDE3 to take advantage of the newest version of its foundation library, QT3. They have done a great job and I am now using KDE3 as my every day desktop.



How to give it a try

The great thing about KDE3 is that you can test it out and still use KDE2 if you want to. If you're still using KDE1, you might want to upgrade your distro right away!

The problem for the KDE1 crowd is that the version of KDE3 I got in the rpm's uses the `~/kde` directory so it can conflict with KDE1. You can get around that, too, if you work at it. KDE starts in the directory defined in the environment variable 'KDEHOME', so if you set that before starting KDE you should be set.

You can download the files for your distro from the KDE recommended mirror nearest to you:

- Europe
- America
- Australia

I am using SuSE 7.3, but most of the big distros have binaries here.

What keeps KDE3 from interfering with previous versions? The programs and libraries go into their own directories so nothing gets destroyed when you install. Not like some OS's that put everything into some crazy 'registry' that no one really understands and that makes your machine useless when it gets corrupted by, for example, recompiling your code. That's a real problem when you develop software for a living and recompile constantly. On SuSE the KDE3 libraries go into `/opt/kde3` and qt3 goes into `/usr/lib/qt3`. You should double check that there is no conflict by doing a `'rpm -qpl <package-name.rpm>'` and look at the list of files the package contains. Also, rpm should give you a warning before you install anything.

You can install using rpm's pretty easily. I put all the rpm files I wanted to install in a separate directory and typed `'rpm --install *.rpm'`. If it complains about dependencies, install the needed packages and try again. I did get one error about a file conflicting between KDE2 and KDE3. When I looked into the differences, it was two characters in one line of a script. I didn't think that it was a big deal, so I used

'rpm --install --force *.rpm' and haven't had a single problem.

Then you make one change to the kdm login manager. You go to KDE Control Center->System->Login Manager and add a session called kde3. This will call the /usr/X11R6/bin/kde3 that is a link to the KDE script that sets everything up so KDE3 runs correctly. KDE will ask you if you want to import your settings from KDE2. I did, and a couple of times the import of KMenu did not work correctly. Not a major issue, but it was inconvenient. I would recommend not using your old settings and taking the default setup instead. You can change it in 'kmenuedit' later if you like.

That should do it.

What are the risks?

No matter what, I think it's a good idea to have a scheduled backup of all your important files. Hopefully, one that moves the files off the machine - like onto a CD you burn, if possible. You do that, don't you? If not, that should be a top priority whether you try KDE3 or not.

The really safest way is to wait for your distribution to put a tested upgrade onto a CD and go through their process. Let's face it, trying out new things isn't for everyone and just because I haven't had any problems doesn't mean you won't. I see the actual risks as very small. I upgraded 3 different machines so far and I wouldn't incur the wrath of those people if I thought KDE3 would ruin their machine. Having said that, as mentioned above you might have to force install over a script conflict. If this makes you nervous, you can back those files up and restore them if you have problems. Trying the upgrade does involve some basic knowledge of the system that could be intimidating. Not everyone likes to play around with new software since they just want to get things done.

What's good?

- Konsole rules. It looks great and has lots of options to make it easy never to touch your mouse again. I do a lot of work in Konsole, so this is a big plus for me.
- Font Anti-aliasing works really well, even for Konsole. KDE3 looks great. It feels good, too. You can make menus transparent in Kcontrol Center/Style/Effects Enable GUI Effects, though it seems to require a restart of KDE3. You change the look of Konsole with many built in schemas. There are some more themes, too.
- KDE now has a Pager. You can drag and drop applications from one desktop to another.
- You Alt-Tab between windows and type directly into the active one without clicking in the text area.
- The 'Edutainment' section has some great programs like the KTouch typing program that guides you through typing exercises. I really need some improvement there (as maybe you can tell from this article) , and it has already helped a lot. It has a small planetarium called KStars that's cool and let's not forget the geometry program KGeo.
- No retraining because it works like KDE2, only better.

What's needs more work?

I did not encounter any major bugs or suffer any type of data loss. I can only mention a few things that I find to be minor annoyances, partly due to my own ignorance I'm sure.

- Sometimes logout takes forever. This has always been my number one pet peeve with KDE and it seems to have reappeared. I would at least like to see it darken the screen so I know it's working on it. Also, KDE3 gets very confused when the Kpager is open - you have to log out again.
- I couldn't get kdm to start a desktop correctly. It presented the login screen correctly, but it only showed me the grey background from X Windows. This must be a setting, but I didn't figure it out. I continued to use the old kdm with no problem.
- Importing the Menu from KDE2 doesn't work, so you lose the distribution specific commands like SuSE's yast2. When KDE3 comes prepackaged in the distributions I'm sure they'll put all that stuff back.
- Sometimes using KDE window focus you can only Alt-Tab between two windows at a time. This annoys me because I do a lot of file editing using Konsole, Konqueror, and gvim. I can only go between the last two windows I've used. But this works in other log ons though, so it's a little flaky. You do have a choice of CDE style, so all is not lost.
- Someone out there's going to complain about the speed and the size. It doesn't present a problem for me, so I'm not complaining. However, if your resources are limited then you might need to use the smallest footprint desktop. I show some numbers below.

Is it faster?

Since what people really mean when they ask about speed is the perception of speed. Everyone has their own (sometimes forceful) ideas about the speed of an application and about the best window manager/ text editor/ curly-brace style. I'm not interested in flame wars. These are my best estimates of the time after several tests. Your mileage may vary. I realize there are lots of other Window managers out there, but I thought testing these would give a general idea. I find KDE fast enough, but I realize that some window managers bring up an application even faster. Let's begin with startup times.

Startup Speed

Application	Enlightenment	Gnome	KDE2	KDE3
Startup from console	7	12	16	18
Startup from kdm	3	10	10	12
Browser	*	X	2.5	2.5
Terminal	<1	1	1.5	1.5
Mail Client	*	5	2	2.5
Media Player	1	1	2.5	3
X - Didn't work for me because I broke it. * - Not Applicable.				

For Gnome I used Evolution as the Email client. It has a lot of functionality so I expect it to start slowly. Also, since I have upgraded my mozilla, Galleon doesn't work for me.

I am willing to wait that extra second when I'm starting an application because it's easy to use KDE the way I want to use it. This is where your personal preferences and needs kick in. I like Konsole more than I like eterm. Since I start a few applications and then use them for hours, startup time doesn't make any difference to me.

What about the memory usage?

I have tested a little using Ksysguard and here are the measurements:
Memory Size

Application	KDE2		KDE3	
Konqueror	29,358	19,128	35,968	24,944
Kicker	24,340	13,820	26,708	15,644
KDesktop	23,608	13,156	28,580	17,972
Klipper	22,848	11,096	24,672	13,224
Kwin	21,976	11,200	22,920	11,064

As you can see, it takes as much or more RAM than KDE2. If you are short of memory, an upgrade won't help you. However, since RAM is cheap it's not that big of an issue for a lot of people. I think if you have 128 MB you should be fine.

Is it worth it?

I tried to give you enough information to decide how well KDE3 suits your particular needs. I have tried it on 3 different machines and I haven't encountered a real problem yet. If you're the kind of person that doesn't mind doing a little Sys Admin work and you like to experiment with relatively new software I think you'll like KDE3. If you're looking for a strictly low maintenance, 'just let me do my job' experience then I would only do security upgrades and not worry about it. I personally use KDE3 as my everyday desktop because it makes my life easier. That's what I want my desktop to do. I think it's worth giving it a try to see if it suits your needs.

Links

- KDE
 - KDE FTP Mirrors
 - Trolltech - QT
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