

IN TOUCH



Marcel Gagné, Senior Editor

Dear Ubuntu User Reader,

In the movie adaptation of Phillip K. Dick's *Minority Report*, Tom Cruise stands in front of a virtual screen, manipulating the computer system using hand gestures, pulling this image here, setting that one aside, zooming in, and pushing that one back. For techie geeks like me, that user interface was the real star of the show and, years later, what I remember most about the film.

However useful such a user interface might be, it was seriously cool.

The inspiration for that gesture-based interface was an actual product called the "g-speak Spatial Operating Environment" designed by John Underkoffler and developed by his company, "Oblong Industries." Underkoffler also did some work on other visualization and interface techniques including holography and animation while at MIT. For a really cool demonstration, and a fascinating talk by Underkoffler, visit ted.com and pop his name into the search field.

The idea of gesture-based systems is obviously an attractive one because we keep exploring it. If you've seen *Iron Man 2*, you know that Tony Stark interacts with his own supercomputer via gestures without special gloves. But Stark doesn't just use gestures; he also talks to the system in a conversational way. The system reacts to his speech and actions almost organically, as though the system were just an extension of himself, much like his suit. As I write this, there's news of a group of scientists at Fraunhofer FIT, near Bonn, Germany, who've apparently developed what might be called the next generation of human gesture-based systems. Unlike Oblong's system, this three-dimensional interface doesn't require any special gloves.

Ever since computers got into the hands of everyday users, we have been trying to reinvent the way people interact with them. From inputting code via jumpers and switches, to keyboards, to the graphical UI that made Apple a household word (the company, not the fruit), it seems we can't find an interface that we like. At least not for long. All of us work happily (more or less) with a keyboard and mouse, but it is

limiting – hence all these fascinating developments into human-machine interface design. We want to touch, wave to, pinch, tap on, and talk to our machines. From the everyday mouse to futuristic artificial intelligences to direct neural interfaces, we keep looking for other ways to interact with computers.

In this issue of *Ubuntu User Magazine*, you can do your own exploring into gesture-based computer interaction. You can read an article about Ubuntu's new uTouch multi-touch technology or one about EasyStroke, a cool little program that lets you interact with your Ubuntu system using configurable mouse gestures. And because physical control is, in part, based on navigation, in my article, I'll show you how to get all touchy-feely with your browser, whether it be Firefox or Chromium or KDE. Did I say KDE? Oh yeah, Kubuntu users are going to be up close and personal with their desktops.

We're also giving a big welcome to Ubuntu 10.10, Maverick Meerkat, with a tour of what's new and exciting in this release. Meerkats, by the way, are very social creatures and like to hang out in groups called gangs. In some regions, Meerkats are considered lucky ("sun angels"), protecting people from werewolves or moon devils. Hey, I don't make this stuff up. But I can tell you that the Meerkat discussed in this issue of *Ubuntu User* is an entirely different kind of animal.

What else can you expect? Æleen Frisch, our scripting guru, continues her Bash scripting series. Amber Graner tracked down Canonical's Chris Kenyon for an interview. Admins will enjoy our article on the Sighhttpd streaming server for real-time input, such as video to multiple clients. We've got MPD, a popular open source multimedia server, as well as the amazing Inkscape vector graphics editor. We've got K3b, Minitube, Geotag, Thinkingrock, and a whole lot more.

Turn the page. Read. Enjoy!

