

Ubuntu tips and tricks

UBUNTU TWEAKS

Many of our readers have requested more tips and tricks for Ubuntu. In this article, we focus on tips for Unity and its components. **BY KRISTIAN KISSLING**



©Kirsty Pargeter, 123RF.com

Unity originally was updated and tweaked for Ubuntu 11.10. If you use the traditional approach to toggling between active applications – that is, Alt + Tab – you will see a window that contains icons for the open programs.

This window offers a practical feature: If you are working with applications such as LibreOffice, Firefox, or Evolution, which can open multiple windows at the same time, you can press Alt + Tab to navigate these windows. To do so, you can just leave the selection box on the icon for the multiple-window application, such as Firefox, and then the windows belonging to the application will appear (Figure 1).

Another new feature is that you always see an icon that represents the desktop – even if only one application is open. When you click on the icon, Ubuntu will show you the complete, empty desktop. This feature used to be hidden behind an icon in the launcher.

Preventing Automatic Fading

Ubuntu 11.10 is based on Gnome 3, which does away with screensavers; however, the system still dims the screen after a certain period of time and will lock it. If you are away from your computer for an extended period of time, this feature prevents somebody else from accessing your personal data.

Dimming the screen also saves power, which is important if the computer is running on batteries. Of course, this feature can also be a problem if you're watching a movie, for example, and the application is unable to prevent dimming.

To change this behavior, click on the indicator in the top right corner of the screen and then select *System settings* | *Screen* (Figure 2).

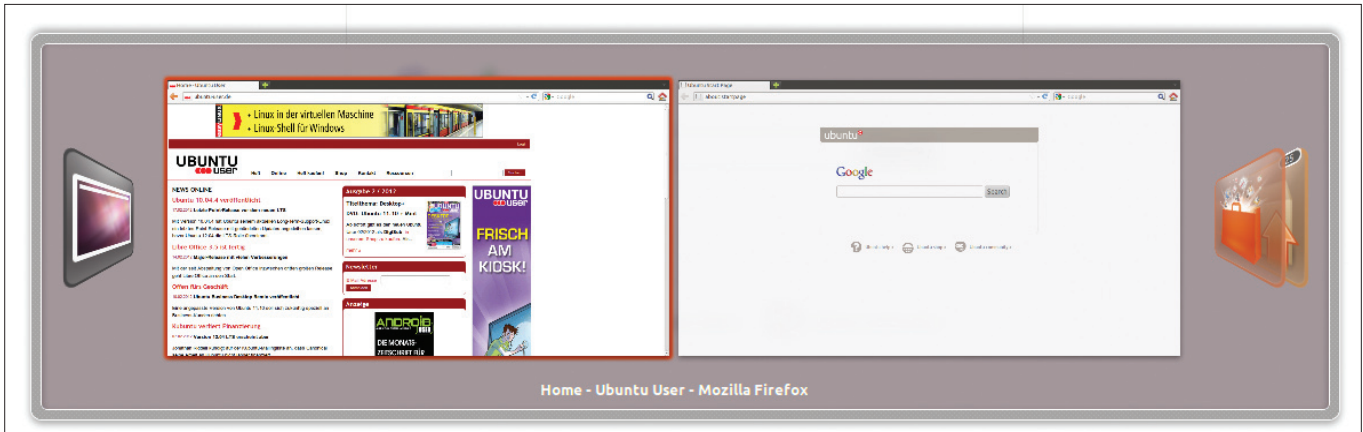


Figure 1: When you toggle between windows by pressing Alt + Tab, you can browse multiple active windows that belong to a single application.

Besides setting the *Brightness* of the display, which will also help you save energy, you can disable both dimming of the screen and automatic keyboard locking. To do this, uncheck *Dim screen to save power* and push the switch below lock to the left.

Into the Lens!

The new Unity in Ubuntu 11.10 again contains lenses. Lenses are filters that help you handle certain tasks more quickly. For example, you can use the application lens, which was introduced in Ubuntu 11.04, for quick access to installed applications by pressing Windows + A.

Whereas Ubuntu 11.04 used to have an icon for this lens in the launcher, the approach has now changed. To access the new lenses, press the Windows key and click on one of the icons at the bottom edge of the Dash (Figure 3).

The music lens, which you can use to search through your collection of tracks, is a new addition. To allow this lens to work properly, you need to start Banshee up front and scan your collection of music. When you are done with this

step, you can press Windows + M to open the lens, and type the name of an artist. The alternative approach for accessing this lens is to press Windows and then click the small note symbol at the bottom.

New Indicators

The introduction of Unity in April 2011 put an end to the panel applets; they were replaced by the indicator applets, or *indicators* for short. They handle a major part of the legacy tasks, but you cannot integrate them with the panel using the centralized selection menu or move them around to suit your taste. If you click on an icon, you will see the available options. For example, the battery indicator icon lets you modify the power settings.

To add new indicators that show you the weather or system processes, open the Software Center and type *indicator* in the search box. Then, below the resulting list, click on *Show technical items*; the Software Center then shows you all the available indicators. New indicators are being added all the time [1].

laptops is the lack of space in the panel. Because of this, the indicators might cover the menu entries of some applications, which typically appear in the panel by now. You have various options to fix this. For example, uninstall any indicators that you don't use, but this might not be the most elegant solution. Also, you can remove your own user name, which appears top right corner of the panel and doesn't have any specific function. To do so, press Ctrl + Alt + T to pop up a terminal, and then enter

```
$ sudo apt-get install dconf-tools
```

to install the dconf editor. The editor works much like the registry in Windows. You can enable and disable many values here that influence the desktop appearance; however, be careful so you don't remove important desktop components. If you forget what changes you've made in the menu, you can always click on *Set to Default* (Figure 4).

To launch the dconf editor, first press the Windows key and type *dconf*. Then, look for the *Apps | indicator-session* setting, and on the right-hand side, select the *show-real-name-on-panel* entry. Uncheck the box next to this entry and close the window. After logging off and back on again, you will just see a small head icon in the top right corner and your name will be gone.

There is yet another way to make space for an application in the panel – don't use the panel for the menu. You can tell Unity to move the menu entries into the windows themselves. This assumes that you launch them in a terminal.

I'll look at the Empathy Messenger as an example. Press Ctrl + Alt + T to pop

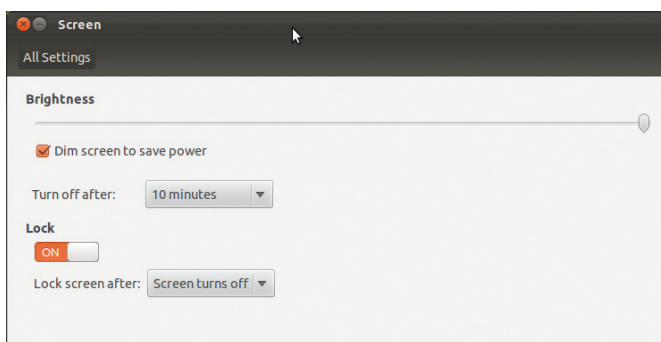


Figure 2: Using the system settings to prevent dimming and locking the screen.

Lack of Space in the Panel

One issue that mainly affects netbooks and smaller

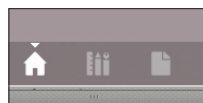


Figure 3: Lenses in Ubuntu 11.10 located at the bottom of the Dash.

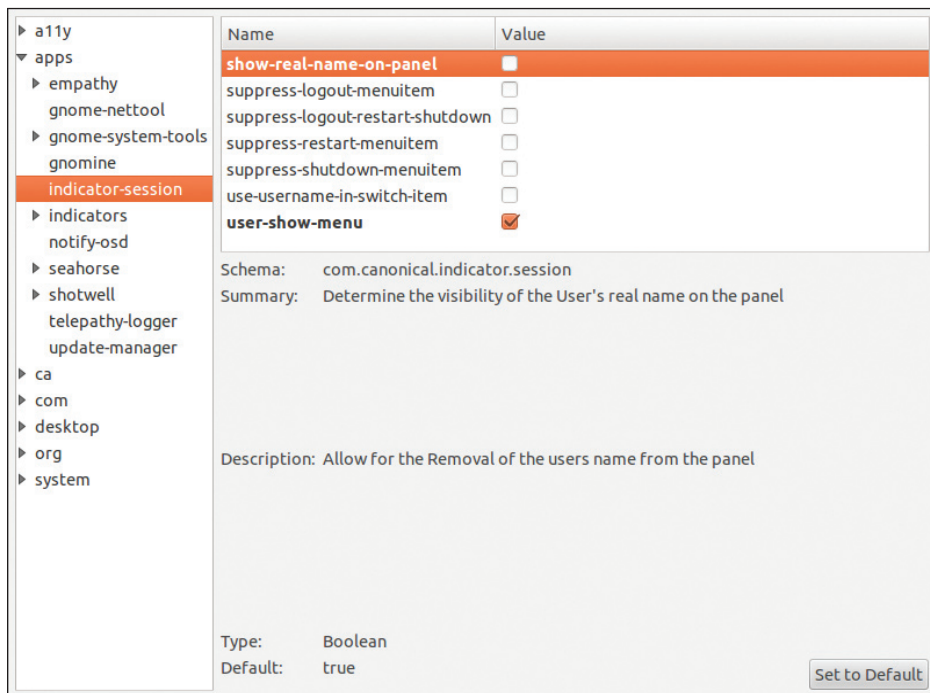


Figure 4: The dconf editor lets you modify a number of settings.

up a terminal and then enter `UBUNTU_MENUPROXY=0 empathy` to tell the software to keep its menu entries in its own window. This approach will not work for some applications, such as Firefox.

If you want to apply the settings to all of your applications, calling a terminal for each one can be tedious. Listing 1 shows how to save this configuration. Start by using the `cp` commands to create backups of the two files that you will be modifying. Then modify these files by using the `echo` command to feed new data to them. After you reboot the system, the setting should be in place.

Rebooting the System

If you want to reboot your system, you might click on the indicator icon in the top right corner of the panel (Figure 5), but you won't find an entry called *Reboot*. What the GUI designers were thinking is hard to say because the button is actually hiding be-

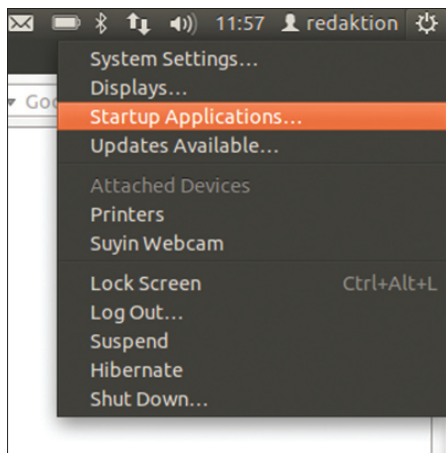


Figure 5: The most important indicator icon is located on the far right of the panel. This is where you configure the system, install updates, and manage the connected devices.

hind the *Shutdown* entry (Figure 6).

The LightDM X display manager login screen paints a similar picture; you can only reach the reboot button by pressing *Shutdown*. To log off from the desktop quickly, you can press `Ctrl + Alt + Del`, which will present the button that you need.

Another tip involves rebooting when working with multiple user accounts on your machine. Suppose that you use one account for programming, called *coding*. The second account, *play*, handles private correspondence or gaming. And a third account, *job*, is for job-related tasks. You can use the icon I referred to

previously with the user name to jump back and forth between these accounts, but the keyboard shortcut gives you a fast approach to paging between user desktops: `Ctrl + Alt + F8`, `Ctrl + Alt + F9`, and so on.

This process assumes that you logged on previously with the various user accounts. If you click on the reboot icon as the *job* user, you were taken to still active *play* user account. And if you log off here, you are taken to *coding's* desktop, which is time-consuming and not always desirable.

Shutting down and rebooting the computer at the command line is faster. To do so, press `Ctrl + Alt + T` and type `sudo reboot` or `sudo halt`. Ubuntu does so immediately and without prompting you to confirm. If you have any applications running, they are forcibly closed, which can mean a loss of data.

And now for the ultimate shutdown tip. If you press your computer's power button, you can reboot a computer that has crashed. Again, this can mean some loss of data, but what alternatives do you have after a freeze? Well, there is one thing you can try.

If there is an SSH server running on your computer and you know your computer's IP address, you might be able to log into the frozen system, identify the offending app using `top`, and then kill it. Unfortunately, this approach will work in only special cases.

To try it, first log into the frozen computer:

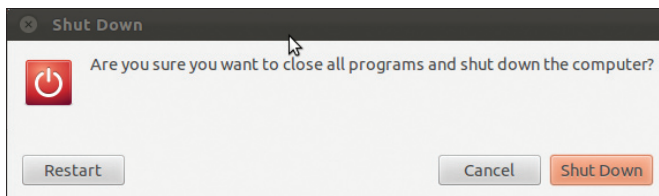
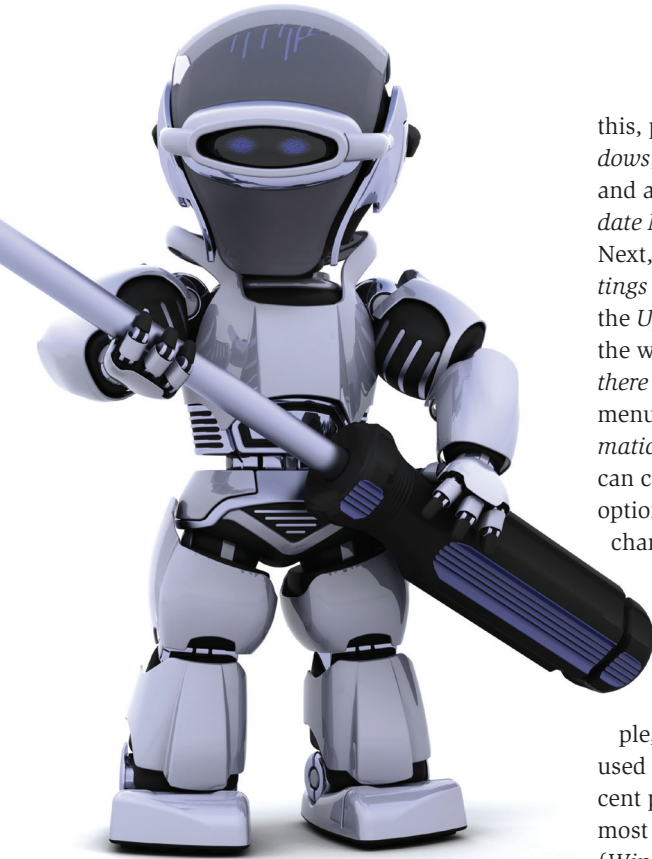


Figure 6: To reboot the computer, you first need to shut it down.

Listing 1: Save the configuration

```
01 $ sudo su
02 $ cp /etc/X11/Xsession.d/80appmenu /etc/X11/Xsession.d/80appmenu.BACKUP
03 $ cp /etc/X11/Xsession.d/80appmenu-gtk3 /etc/X11/Xsession.d/80appmenu-gtk3.BACKUP
04 $ echo "export UBUNTU_MENUPROXY=0" > /etc/X11/Xsession.d/80appmenu-gtk3
05 $ echo "export UBUNTU_MENUPROXY=0" > /etc/X11/Xsession.d/80appmenu
```

```
ssh {USER}@{IP address}
```

Of course, you will need to replace the two variables with your real user name and IP address. Then, execute *top* and check which process is blocking the CPU or RAM. Make a note of the process ID that *top* outputs and then type `sudo kill {PROCESS ID}`. Then, proceed to see if you can detect any activity on the crashed computer.

Updates

The way that the Ubuntu project handles updates almost comical: Every six months, with every new version rolled out, there is yet another approach to notifying users about security updates and patches. Some approaches are better than others, and this is true of the current one.

If you click the icon to the right in a panel, you will see an entry that reads *Updates Available* (Figure 5), assuming that there are any. Clicking this item opens the update manager where you can download and install the available patches. Highlighting these in a different color would be a nice touch; after all, you will probably want to install security updates as quickly as possible.

To remove the need to keep checking whether the update also includes security patches, you can simply automate the process of installing security patches as a background operation. To configure

this, press *Windows*, type *update*, and access the *Update Manager*.

Next, select *Settings* and click on the *Updates* tab in the window that appears. In the *When there are security updates* drop-down menu, select *Download and install automatically*. While you are about it, you can check out the other configuration options to see if you want to make other changes.

Disabling the Log Function

Zeitgeist makes sure that Ubuntu doesn't forget anything. For example, it remembers the files that you used (using *Windows + F*), the most recent programs that you used, and the most recent files that you downloaded (*Windows + A*). If you find *Zeitgeist* too verbose, look for the *Activity Log Manager* program in the *Zeitgeist* PPA. The tool deletes the *Zeitgeist* history and makes exceptions from the login process for individual programs.

You can use the PPA (Figure 7) and install the software by popping up a terminal (*Ctrl + Alt + T*) and doing:

```
$ sudo add-apt-repository &
  ppa:zeitgeist/ppa
$ sudo apt-get update
$ sudo apt-get install &
  activity-log-manager
```

The *Log Manager* offers three tabs to let you make various settings. In the *History* tab, you can set the period of time for

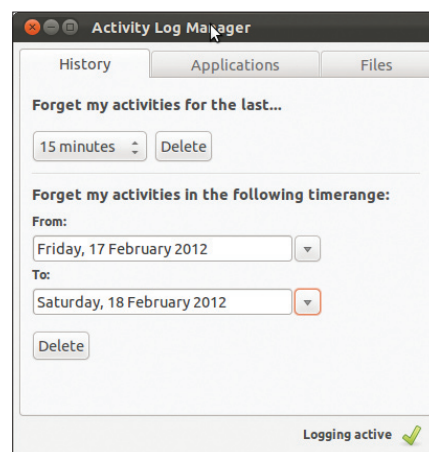


Figure 8: The *Activity Log Manager* helps you wipe *Zeitgeist*'s memory.

```
redaktion@redaktion:~$ sudo add-apt-repository ppa:zeitgeist/ppa
You are about to add the following PPA to your system:
Zeitgeist
Development snapshots of the Zeitgeist engine and related products.
More info: https://launchpad.net/~zeitgeist/+archive/ppa
Press [ENTER] to continue or ctrl-c to cancel adding it
```

Figure 7: Integrating the *Zeitgeist* PPA at the command line to install the *Activity Log Manager*.

which the software deletes the *Zeitgeist* data (Figure 8).

The range is between *15 minutes* and several days. If you put the applications on the blacklist in *Applications*, *Zeitgeist* will ignore them going forward. In the *Files* tab, you can exclude specific file formats, and clicking the *Logging active* button lets you disable the logging feature.

Terminating Banshee

Although it might be a bit strange to find a tip for terminating a program in this section, it is necessary in the case of *Banshee*, because you can't actually stop the program. While music is playing, closing the window or selecting *Media | Close* just makes the player continue playing in the background.

To restore the player to the front or go to the next song, click the small loud-speaker indicator icon in the top right corner and then select the song you are currently playing (Figure 9). To stop *Banshee*, you first must stop the music. This feature was a deliberate design decision, albeit one that is not intuitive for most users.

Wanted!

Are you familiar with clever approaches and shortcuts that make life easier for Ubuntu users? If so, please email them to us at redaktion@ubuntu-user.de. ■

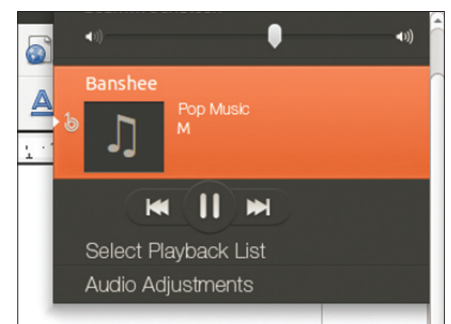


Figure 9: You cannot stop *Banshee* until after you stop the music.

INFO

[1] Indicators: <http://unity.ubuntu.com/projects/appindicators/>