Unity tweaks
TUNING SHOP

Unity is a desktop with clearly defined capabilities, but several tools give users the ability to customize the desktop. We'll show you a few of the most popular tweaks. **BY KRISTIAN KISSLING**

The message from the Unity developers is fairly clear: Not many computer users actually want to change their desktop settings, which is why Unity doesn't need many configuration options. If you read the forum posts and tweets, you will see that many users are taking advantage of graphical tools to tune their Unity desktops. In our lab, we checked out the capabilities of these tools.

Keep in mind that there are reasons why Ubuntu has not integrated these tools into the desktop. Some of the tools are unstable, which can cause your com-

puter to crash or even make a production system unusable. Unity Rotated, a plug-in for the *CompizConfig Settings Manager*, can be particularly problematic. But if you tread carefully, you'll find some useful tweaks that will help you customize your Unity configuration.

CompizConfig Settings Manager

The "classic" Unity tweaking tool can be installed in the package manager. Search for *CompizConfig Settings Manager*, install the software, and launch it by opening the Dash and typing *com*.

The software comes with a large collection of plug-ins that let you configure the desktop and the graphical effects that it offers. Whereas users a few years ago tended to turn their desktops into aquariums with wobbling windows, many users have adopted a more pragmatic approach to desktop effects today; after all, these effects unnecessarily consume resources.

One of the plugins in this collection is the *Ubuntu Unity Plugin*, which comprises numerous options for modifying Unity to suit your own taste, and I will be looking at them individually. The
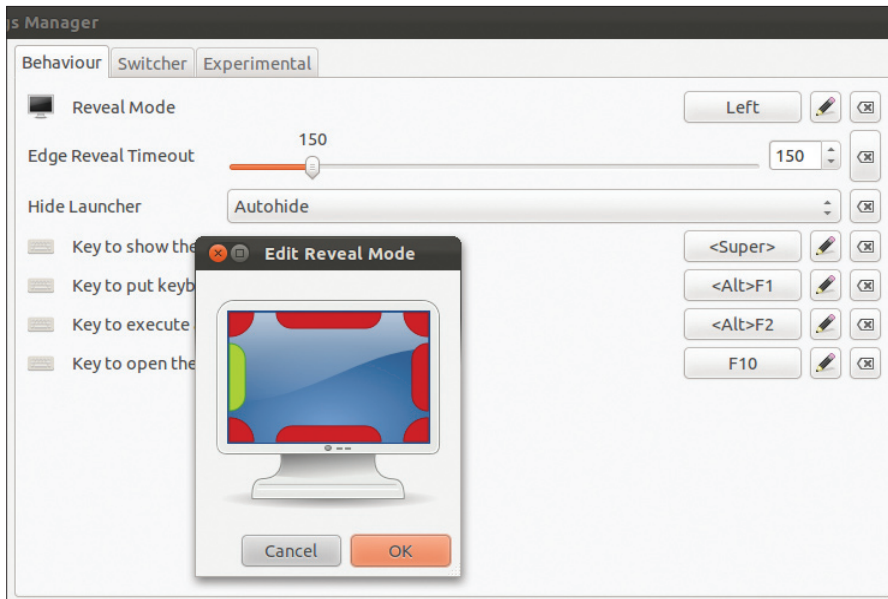
Figure 1: Reveal Mode in the CompizConfig Settings Manager still seems to be in a test phase.

plug-in lines up three tabs: *Behaviour*, *Switcher*, and *Experimental*, the first of which takes you to the promising sounding *Reveal Mode*. The idea behind this is that the launcher appears when you drag the mouse to a certain edge of the screen. By clicking on the button to the right of the feature (*Left*), you can define which edge (Figure 1).

Although this feature looks pretty neat, it isn't; we selected the whole right-hand side, including the corners, but nothing happened. Maybe Reveal Mode will not take off until Ubuntu 12.04. Canonical is working on support for multiple screens in the next version of Ubuntu, and Reveal Mode is expected to play an important role [1].

Currently, you can see the *Edge Reveal Timeout*. How long do you need to press your mouse against the left-hand side until the launcher appears? By pushing the slide control to the right, you can set the highest wait of 1,000 milliseconds. In this case, it will take a whole second until the launcher appears. A lower value is typically better.

The drop-down menu below controls when the launcher disappears. If you select *Never*, the launcher will stay visible at all times. The *Autohide* feature automatically hides the launcher if you are not hovering your mouse over it. The *Dodge Windows* and *Dodge Active Windows* features are only marginally different. In the first case, the launcher disappears while the window is in full-screen mode. In a second case, it appears if the

window you are currently using gives it enough space to do so, even if a window in the background is occupying the whole screen.

A list of four settings that define shortcuts follows:
- *Key to show the launcher*
- *Key to put keyboard-focus on launcher*
- *Key to execute a command*
- *Key to open the first panel menu*

The second tab, *Switcher*, mainly influences the behavior of the application page, which is traditionally activated by pressing Alt + Tab. The first option (*Automatically grid windows…*) might need some explanation. If you have three open LibreOffice documents on your computer, for example, you will only see one LibreOffice option in the Switcher. If

you enable the *Automatically grid windows…* option, the Switcher will show you all of the open documents.

The tab lists numerous keyboard shortcuts that let you modify the Switcher's behavior to suit your requirements. For example, you can view the separate preview for each window. To do so, press Alt + Tab, let go of the Tab key when you get to the window you are looking for, and press the Down Arrow. Using the Up Arrow closes the preview again. If you uncheck *Show minimized windows…*, the Switcher will not show you any iconized windows.

The *Experimental* lets you set the *Backlight Mode* (Figure 2), among other things. This fills the icons in the launcher and their borders with a color. The launcher does this by default, but you can have it only color icons in active applications. *Launch Animation* and *Urgent Animation* define what the icons do when the corresponding applications launch or report some activity.

This feature is followed by two slide controls that define the transparency for the upper panel and the launcher. Further down, another feature lets you change the icon size in the launcher, which is one of the most frequently requested features.

The *Hide Animation* drop-down menu lets you define the launcher's appearance. Normally, it uses a *Fade and Slide* transition to move into the foreground. The *Dash Blur* item relates to the Dash's ability to show applications in the background in a blurred view, which creates the illusion that the Dash is semi-trans-
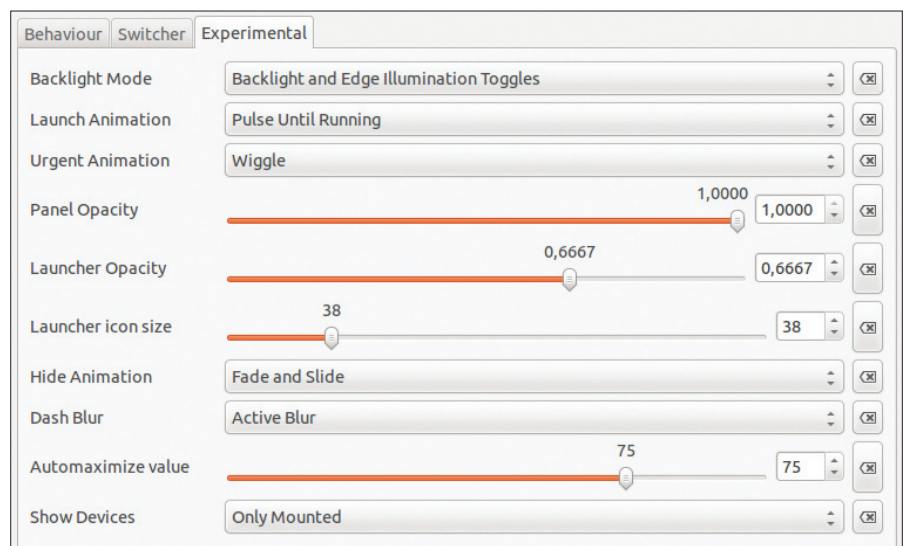

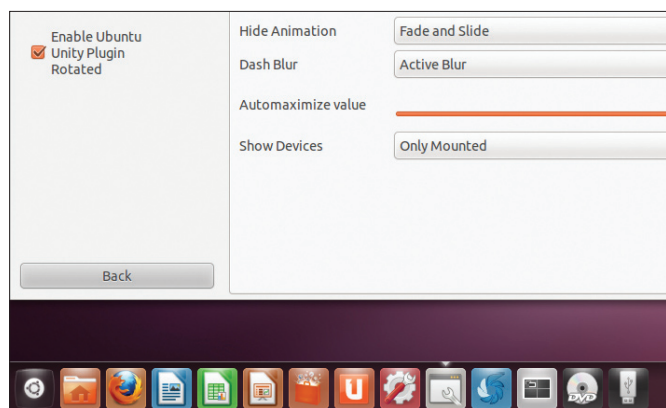**Figure 2: Many Unity configuration settings are listed in the "Experimental" tab.**

Figure 3: A special plug-in lets you move the launcher to the bottom edge of the desktop.

parent. Whereas *Automaximize value* defines a threshold for when Unity automatically drags a window into full screen mode, *Show Devices* lets you stipulate that only the partitions and USB memory sticks that are actually mounted appear in the launcher.

Ubuntu Unity Plugin Rotated

One option CompizConfig doesn't give you is the ability to move the launcher to a different side of the screen. Another plug-in for CompizConfig lets you position the launcher at the bottom edge of the screen (Figure 3), making it reminiscent of the classic docs from Gnome-Do to AWN. The whole thing is pretty unstable, and crashes are part of the normal setup process. Carefully consider whether you want to use this plug-in with your production systems. Before you commit to a full implementation, you might want to test the plug-in on a virtual machine, for example, a Virtual-Box system with the 3D acceleration option enabled.

To install the plug-in on your computer, use the external PPA to install the required packages.

```
$ sudo add-apt-repository ⤶
  ppa:paullo612/unityshell-rotated
$ sudo apt-get update
$ sudo apt-get install ⤶
  unityshell-rotated libnux-1.0-0 ⤶
  compizconfig-settings-manager
```

Next, press the Windows key and type *com* to launch the *CompizConfig Settings Manager* again. Uncheck *Ubuntu Unity Plugin* and check *Ubuntu Unity Plugin Rotated*. If you see a message to the effect

that the shortcut conflicts with another, simply click on *Disable Flip Left*. Next, check *Ubuntu Unity Plugin Rotated* again; the graphical interface will freeze and you will not be able to click any windows, but don't panic.

Press Ctrl + Alt + F1 to toggle to the first virtual terminal and login in text mode. To relaunch the login manager, type:

```
$ sudo service lightdm stop
$ sudo service lightdm start
```

You should automatically land on the desktop, and the launcher should be down at the bottom of your screen. You can use CompizConfig to modify Unity to suit your needs, or just leave the settings as they are. The settings survived sleep mode in our lab and even worked after restarting the computer.

Ubuntu Tweak

Ubuntu Tweak also claims to be able to change Unity. To try it, download version 0.6.0 as a Debian package [2] and then double-click to install the package manager. After launching the software in the Dash, you will hit the first wall.

When you try to click *Unity Settings* in the *Optimizations* tab, all you see is: *Unity Settings doesn't support unityshell-rotated*. Next, you will need to disable the Rotated plug-in, remove all the packages from the PPA, and delete the PPA from the package list before you can use Ubuntu Tweak. Additionally, you need to update the package list and reinstall *libnux* and *unity*:

```
$ sudo apt-get update && ⤶
  sudo apt-get install libnux-1.0.0 ⤶
  unity unity-2d
```

Whether this step is worth the effort is up to you. The Ubuntu Tweak configuration window only gives you a few well-known settings (Figure 4). You can change the launcher icon sizes, influence the transparency values, and decide how long to wait before the launcher appears. You will also find an option for modifying the Dash and a slide control that sets the panel transparency. That's all, folks.

Ubuntu Tweak's ability to allow icons on the desktop is more likely to be of interest (select *Optimizations | Desktop symbol settings*). You can also move the buttons in the window titles from the left to the right by choosing *Optimizations | Window manager settings*).

Other options available through Ubuntu Tweak relate to the login manager and the Nautilus file manager. In other words, this is quite an interesting tool, but one that doesn't offer many op-
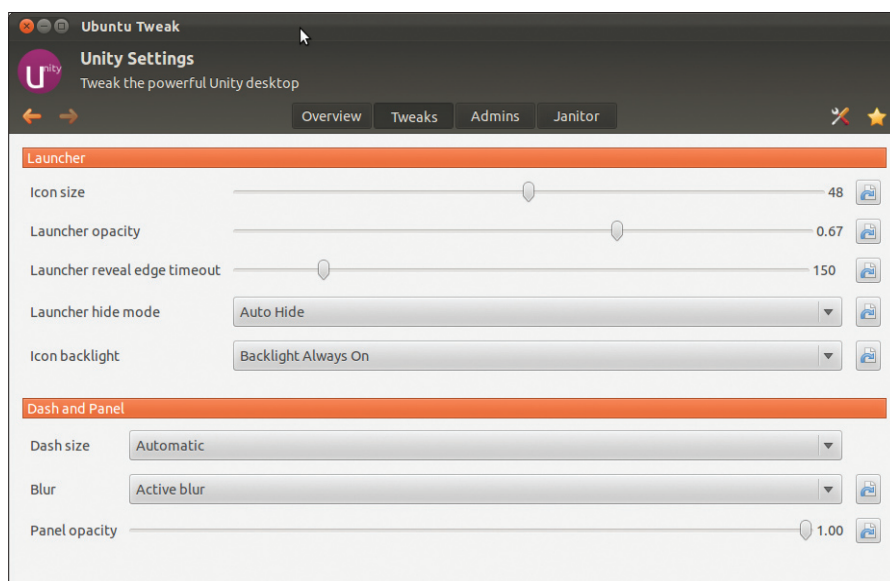

Figure 4: Ubuntu Tweak is generally quite useful for tuning the desktop, but offers little in terms of Unity configuration options.

tions for tuning Unity compared to Com-pizConfig.

MyUnity

MyUnity looks more exciting and has more sophisticated features. For the in-stall, you need a PPA:

```
$ sudo add-apt-repository ⤸
  ppa:myunity/ ppa
$ sudo apt-get update
$ sudo apt-get install myunity
```

Below the image, five tabs offer a variety of options (Figure 5).

Alternatively, you can use the black arrow on the right border to jump from tab to tab. Compared with CompizCon-fig, MyUnity doesn't offer many options, but the tool is easy to use and has sev-eral options, with the exception of the ability to rotate the launcher. The *fonts* tab can also come in handy. In fact, MyUnity is a good second choice if you don't want to use CompizConfig.

Gunity and Confity

Gunity and Confity both rolled out in Spring 2011. In our lab, we were unable to launch Gunity Version 11.05.13 [3] and we are not even sure whether the software is still maintained. Confity also disappointed. Confity includes all the major features for modifying Unity, but it arranges them in a single huge win-dow, which looks confusing (Figure 6).

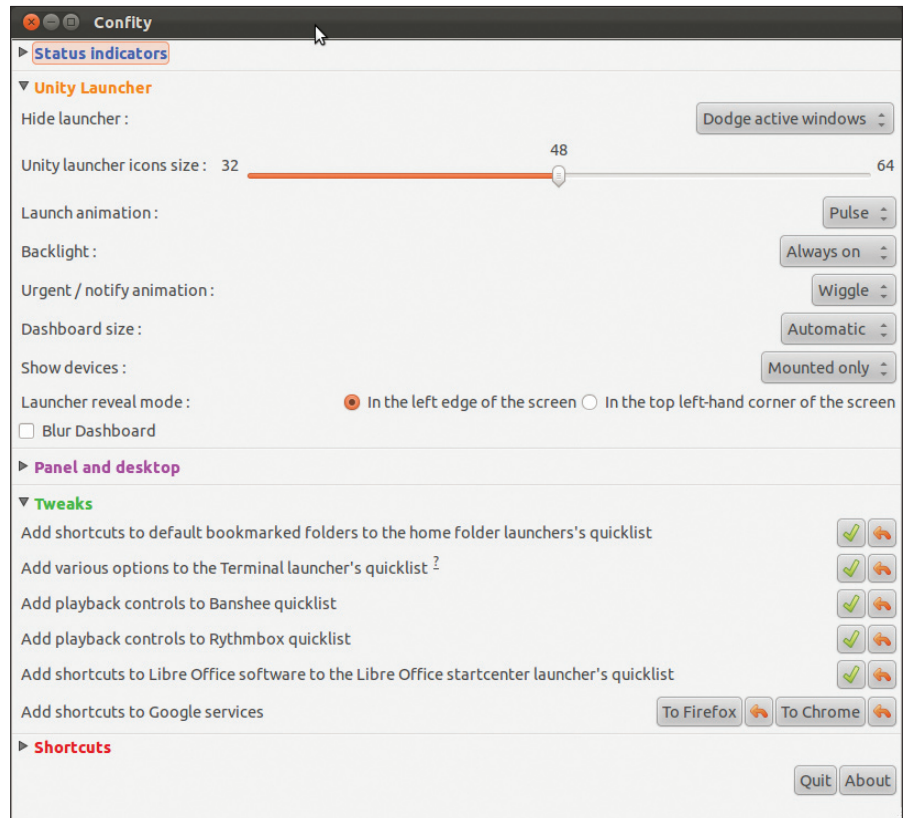To set up Confity, download version 1.7 from the website [4] and unpack the

Figure 6: Confity turns out to be pretty cluttered. Although you can set up for English, the procedure is somewhat convoluted.

archive in a directory of your choice. Edit the *confity.py* file and replace

```
locale.setlocale(locale.LC_ALL, ' ')
```

with

```
locale.setlocale(locale.LC_ALL, ⤸
  'en_US.UTF-8')
```

Then, launch the software by enter-ing *./confity.py* in the *confity* direc-tory. The only other options worthy of men-tion are those that set up the quick-lists for various programs. You can use a manual fix for this as de-scribed in the Quicklists article in this issue.

Conclusions

The tools in this article address

users of the 3D Unity version. If you use the 2D variant, try the Unity-2D Settings tool, which offers a handful of customi-zations. Unity-2D Settings is available for 32-bit and 64-bit systems [5].

CompizConfig is the best choice for modifying Unity. CompizConfig includes all the major options and can even nest in the launcher if you install the plug-in. MyUnity is a close second. With the ex-ception of Gunity, other tools are usable but still have defects. ◼

INFO

[1] Plans for the launcher: *http://design.canonical.com/2012/01/ launcher-reveal-prototype/*

[2] Ubuntu Tweak: *http://launchpad.net/ ubuntu-tweak/0.6.x/0.6.0/ +download/ubuntu-tweak_0.6. 0-1~oneiric1_all.deb*

[3] Gunity: *http://gunity.en.uptodown. com/ubuntu*

[4] Confity download: *http:// sourceforge.net/projects/confity/*

[5] Tuning Unity 2D: *http://marianochavero.wordpress. com/2011/10/14/unity-2d-settings-ui- for-ubuntu-11-10-oneiric-ocelot/*

Figure 5: MyUnity looks good and includes the major options for tuning Unity.