



The best new open source software on the planet

LXF Hot Picks



Graham Morrison

If you're running a Free Software/ open source project or writing a new game for Linux, let us know so we can tell all our readers about it – even if it's still in its early stages.

» GCstar » Genius » Osmo » Ind wikia » Gbrainy
» Comisat » Tasty Menu » Minirok » Brasero » Kile

Audio application

GCstar

Version 1.3.0 Web www.gcstar.org



You might not think of yourself, as a collector. But we know you are. We know you keep the unused sugar sachets from various cafés and restaurants. The question is, how do you organise it all? Well, *GCstar* is the answer. It's designed to manage collections like these, but it's also particularly adept at anything you can attach an image to. This means it's ideal for things like your CD collection, your DVD collection, or your video game collection. When you first start *GCstar*, you even get a helpful wizard that asks which kind of collection you want to catalogue. Choosing Music, for example, displays a customised template for all the fields you're likely to need when describing your collection. But the best thing about *GCstar* is that it's got a clever online lookup system. Enter the name of the album and click on the Fetch

Information button, and moments later the form will be filled with the track list, artist info and even the album cover, courtesy of the MusicBrainz online repository. This online retrieval isn't just for music either. If you create a video game collection, the equivalent data is skimmed from an Amazon site. It has the same functionality for a collection of movies, books and even board games! This removes a lot of the tedium from the process of adding each item to your collection: you can quickly add the titles and let various online repositories do the rest. What's even cooler is that the images that accompany each item are stacked onto a convincing virtual shelf.

Ad hoc collections

If one of the default collections doesn't suit your purpose, you can create your own

» Board Games also have their own collection template, as well as an online repository for downloading information about your games.

collection profile. It's like creating a custom form in a database. You add fields and limit what each field can contain. The form is then laid out automatically, and there's really very little difference between those you create yourself and those that come pre-packaged. The only thing missing is the ability to add an online repository for the data grabbing, but then we don't know anywhere that catalogues sugar packets anyway. If you've previously used another piece of cataloguing software, then *GCstar* can also import data from the *Alexandria* book collection manager, the *Ant Movie Catalog*, and *GCfilms*, which is a film-specific application that the developers worked on before moving onto the more general *GCstar*. But even if you're not an avid collector, *GCstar* gives you another good reason to go to the trouble of cataloguing your DVDs, CDs and Books – a lending database. We've all lent things to people, only to forget months later exactly who's got what. *GCstar* solves this problem by letting you create a list of people, and lend items in your collection to people in the list. You can even send automated email reminders to the people who have borrowed your stuff, and this gives *GCstar* a real purpose over and above the joy of itemising your collection. If your collection is getting out of hand, and you need somewhere to keep a list of all the CDs you never listen to, or the DVDs you never watch, then *GCstar* is a great way of itemising your collection.

The GCstar interface

Media playback

You can use GCstar as a front end to a media player. Select the album and press Play.

Virtual shelf

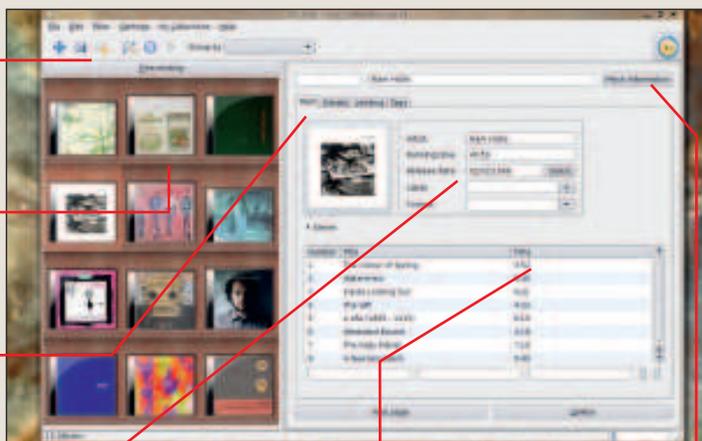
Any collection that can use an image can be stacked into a faux Ikea wood-effect cabinet.

Monitor loans

You can make a note of people you lend items to, and even get GCstars to email them.

Templates

GCstar comes with some popular collection templates, but you can also create your own.



Data view

Create data views, add notes, ratings and tags for each item.

Online retrieval

Books, CDs, DVDs and other data can be grabbed automatically.

Mathematics

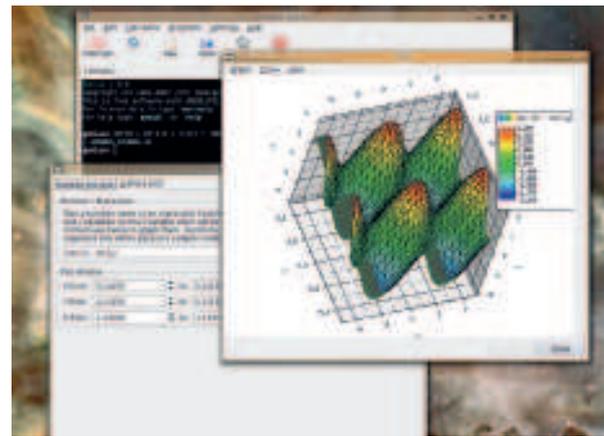
Genius

Version: 1.0.0 Web www.jirka.org/genius.html

We mentioned *Genius* in the 'Also released' section last month, and since then we've been able to get a closer look at it. Calling *Genius* a calculator is like calling the Great Pyramid of Giza a triangle. It's capable of calculus, statistics, numerical equation solving, modular arithmetic and calculus, using rational and complex numbers, and it can plot both 2D and 3D functions and output them using *LaTeX*, *Troff (eqn)* or *MathML*. It also has its own extension language called GEL, and all this functionality is accessed through a command line interface, rather than a desktop recreation of an HP-48. That all sounds intense to those of use who left the world of mathematics behind many years ago, yet surprisingly, this doesn't mean you need a Degree in Mathematics to find *Genius* useful. It's also capable of perfectly simple calculations. Type '1+2' on the CLI, and you quickly get the answer. More importantly, *Genius* can work with fractions just as

easily, which is something the average desktop calculator struggles with. In fact, *Genius* is a great desktop calculator replacement, as there's no struggling with faux LCD screens or clicking your mouse on a pixelated numeric keypad. Along with the pure CLI version, there's also a *GTK* frontend to *Genius*. This doesn't change the way you input calculations (this is still the same CLI), but it does add an interactive function plotter. From here you can create 2D and 3D plots of your equations, as well as surface plots that are rendered in a glaring psychedelic palette.

Any of these renders can be output as EPS or PNG files, and the only thing that's really missing is OpenGL acceleration. We'd also like to see mouse control for scaling



› You don't actually need to be a mathematical genius to find *Genius* useful. It's a great command-line calculator, and you can spend hours messing with the 3D plotting window.

and rotating the equations, as you currently need to click on arrows to rotate each axis independently. But these would be considered unessential frippery by any earnest mathematician that uses *Genius*, and they'd be right, though marketing folks will love the visual impact. The essential functionality is all mathematical, and the combination of a CLI and the GEL programming language makes this application tough to beat if you need a serious number grinder for your desktop. But don't let all this technical talk put you off installing it. It's just as good for day-to-day calculation, and better than desktop tools like *KCalc*.

“Create colourful 2D and 3D plots of your equations and calculations.”

Personal information manager

Osmo

Version 0.1.4 Web <http://clay.ll.pl/osmo>

You can't have too many Personal Information Managers. They're what we all like to spend our time with when we don't have enough time. They're like Dirk Gently's video recorders, silently scheduling events we have neither the ability or inclination to attend. *Osmo* is a small, unobtrusiveness PIM that doesn't take up much screen real estate. The latest release will even fit neatly into your Gnome or KDE taskbar. But it does provide every feature you could want through its calendar, task manager and contact list. Each function is accessed through a single tabbed window, which defaults to a monthly overview that even includes a neat moon phase indicator, as well as the week and day number for those of you counting the days left until Judgement Day. It would have been nice to see a brief list of upcoming tasks under the calendar, but this is only a single click away on the tasks page. The biggest problem with *Osmo* is that there's no integration with some of the

larger PIM suites such as *Evolution* or *Contact*. In fact, there no way to important calendars or tasks from any other application, and the only way to import a contact list is through a CSV file. This means that *Osmo* is really intended for light-desktop users who only need a simple tool to manage their day-to-day tasks, rather than the usual array of bloated applications that many of us are in the habit of using.

You wouldn't want to invest too much time adding everything to *Osmo* when there's no way of exporting your data, and we think the developers have missed a valuable feature here. But this doesn't mean *Osmo* suffers from a general lack of features. Nearly everything you could want



› *Osmo* is a simple PIM application, but it does everything you typically need, making it a great choice for a resurrected old PC.

is contained within its three pages. You can add contacts, highlight their birthdays, make secret notes about them, and mark events in your diary. Events can be filtered and categorised, and there are plenty of configuration options. If there was a PDA that used *GTK*, this would be a perfect PIM for it. The main calendar window is the perfect home screen, and the other pages can easily manage the day to day monotony of living. If you're looking for a simple PIM that doesn't take up too many resources, yet is well designed and easy to use, you could do far worse than try *Osmo*.

“Intended for lightweight desktop users who don't want to use bloated apps.”

Visual browsing

Indywikia

Version 0.9.2 Web <http://indywikia.sourceforge.net>

We all love Wikipedia. But accessing all that information through a humble web page is missing a lot of its potential. It's too linear, and there's no obvious way to see the relationship the current article has with some of the more disparate links. What we need is something that adds a little chaos to our browsing; and that's exactly what *Indywikia* sets out to do. It's Wikipedia browsing taken at a slightly different angle. Written in Python, it's not the fastest application on your desktop, but that doesn't really matter for a tool like this. But the view that greets you when you first

The eight buttons are in fact image holders: after a few moments, seemingly random images start to appear in their place.

Image conscious

These images have only a loose connection with the word you entered into the search box. *Indywikia* is grabbing images from articles related to the original term and not necessarily part of the original article. Clicking on any of these images effectively makes that image's article the new search term, and does the same thing for the new page. The effect is that you browse Wikipedia by following the pictures that

interest you, rather than the links in the main text, and you're quickly taken to articles you wouldn't have found previously. The middle panel will fill

“Browse through Wikipedia by following images that interest you.”

start it up is a little confusing. Eight large, shaded buttons dominate the top half of the window, with three smaller panels underneath. Unlike the real Wikipedia, there's no starting point, no daily news links or a featured article. From this point on, you're on your own. Look closer, though, and there's small box to the left of a tiny button marked 'Go'. Type something in here and press the Go button, and the interface sparks into life. The progress bar resets, and starts ticking back up to 100.

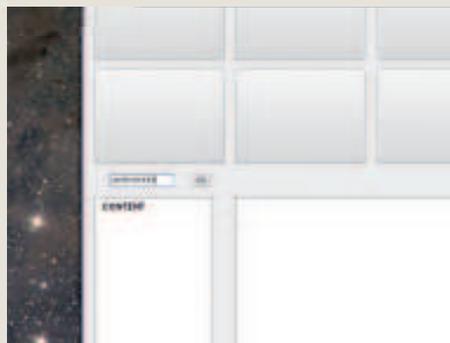
with the text of the article. This is the *Indywikia* equivalent to the ordinary Wikipedia web page, except that the links are copied from the article text to the third panel on the right, giving you an easy overview of connections from the current page. It's a very satisfying way to browse, and almost from the first click you're looking at articles you wouldn't ordinarily find by reading the text. You just click on images that look interesting, rather than words that look pertinent to the subject



› *Indywikia* lets you browse Wikipedia visually by selecting images you're interested in, rather than just the words.

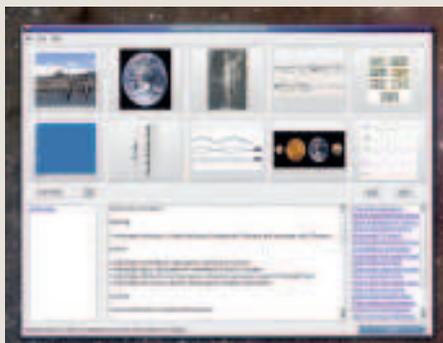
you're reading about. If the image is part of the main article, then you see a large version of the image instead of a new set of links. And that's the only real problem with *Indywikia*. The user-interface could do with some serious refinement. It's not scalable, for example, and you can't specify the number of image buttons you want to use. It would also be nice to have some kind of visual representation of your browsing history, so that you can skip back to a particularly interesting series of images and explore more from that point, rather than using the single Back button. We'd love to see some kind of web-view of links, so that you can see how all the images are related to the original article, and how you browse from along the threads of the web from one article to the next.

Browsing with Indywikia



› Start a search

Indywikia starts with a blank window. Search for any term and wait while the images appear.



› Article retrieval

After a few moments, images are retrieved that are related to the main article but not part of it.



› Visual browsing

Click on any of these new images, and you get taken to its article and a new group of images.

HotGames All play, and no work!

Game

Gbrainy

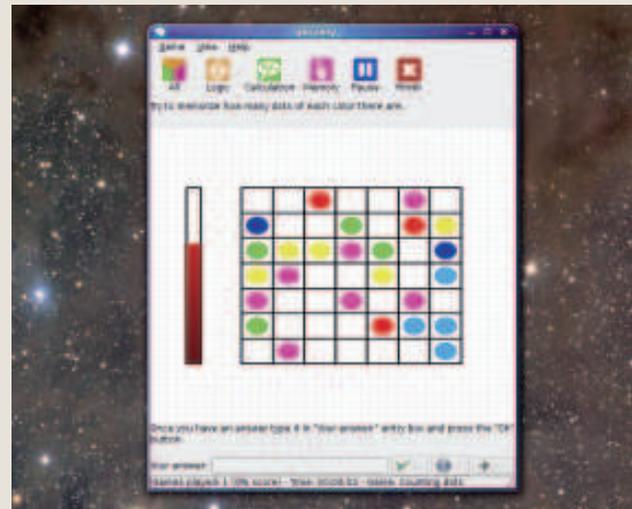
Version 0.41 **Web** <http://live.gnome.org/gbrainy>

Brain training games seem to be all the rage. They allow those of you with good short-term memory and handy reflexes to gloat over those of us with frazzled neurons and a shaking demeanour. *Gbrainy* is one such game, although it's not quite so demanding on the reflexes as some other kinds of games. It consists of three broad groups of training games. Logic puzzles to challenge your reasoning, mental calculations to improve your numeracy, and memory trainers that try to coax some activity from those battered neurons. The first thing you notice about this game is that everything looks fantastic. Questions are rendered onto a squared paper texture exactly like those we had at school, and thanks to the *Cairo* rendering engine, all the lines, shapes and images used look beautiful. The logic games are like those you find in an IQ test, where you typically need to visualise the problem before finding a solution. The

only problem is that the developers' use of English isn't quite up to scratch, especially in the context of problem solving. "A group of people evenly separated is sat in a round table. How many people are if the 4th person is in front of the 12th?", is one of the better examples. The memory and calculation tests don't have the same difficulty, as the English language is replaced with numbers, colours and matrices.

Clever clogs

There's plenty of variety in the questions, as you find yourself looking at a nine-coloured numeral one moment followed by a cube of squares the next. Regardless of the type of question, you type your answer into a small field at the bottom of the window and click 'Next' to move on to the next task. You can mix and match the questions in any way you like, using the toolbar to switch between the different types, or just take each one as it comes.



› Thanks to the *Cairo* graphics library, the images in *Gbrainy* look great and are super-smooth.

When you've had enough, click on the Finish button to find out how you did. *Gbrainy* takes into consideration your accuracy, the time you took to solve each problem, and whether you used any of the pop-up hints. Unlike some other games in this genre, you don't get a patronising appraisal of your ability, which makes you more inclined to give it another go.

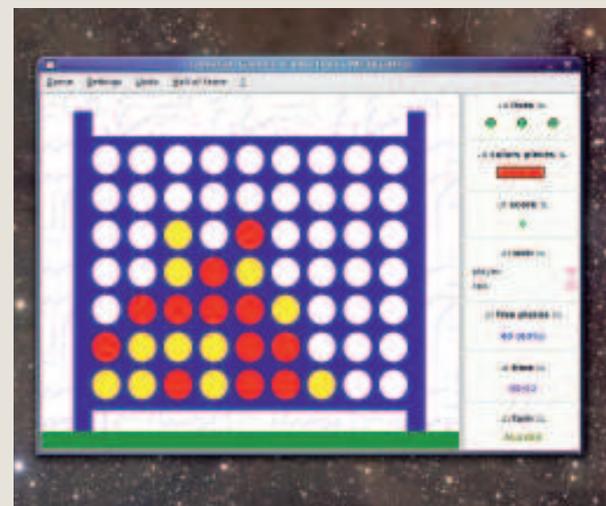
Game

Comisat

Version 0.5.2 **Web** <http://comisat-games.sourceforge.net>

Comisat might be a little old, but it's worth a look. It's a suite of games written in BASIC and *Qt*, and while it was written for version 1 of Gambas, we didn't have any problems loading and running the code using the latest Gambas editor on our Linux boxes. Just load the code from the **src** directory and click Run in the toolbar. You'll soon see the game startup wizard, from which you can choose any of the games that have been recreated in *Comisat*. It's got the same feel as one of those compendium board games you used to play: none of the games stand out on their own, but put them all together and you've got a worthwhile package. There are five in total: a faithful recreation of the original *Tetris*, a version of the board game *Connect 4* the author calls *Mr.*

Quattro, the same *Snake* game seen on so many mobile phones, along with versions of *Mastermind* and *Hangman*. Despite their age, each is well implemented and maintains the same playability that's made them all last the test of time. The sound effects have a similarly retro feel by using low-fidelity beeps and bars that seem well in tune with the whole experience: the 8-bit fanfare you get after you've earned a place on the high score table in *Tetris* is a perfect example. The only thing missing is the two-player element, as most of these games would work well for a couple of children who might want to waste an hour or two on your Linux box. There's even the space for it, but the split-screen view of games like *Tetris* is used to house the game statistics rather than the



› Who didn't spend hours of their youth trying to find a solution to the *Connect 4* conundrum?

playing zone for another player. It would also be nice if you could mix and match levels from each game, in a true form of arcade compendium. That way the whole package would hang together much better. But regardless, these games are a lot of fun, and still worth a try if you've got youngsters around who have missed the subtlety in something like *Mastermind*.

Menu management

Tasty Menu

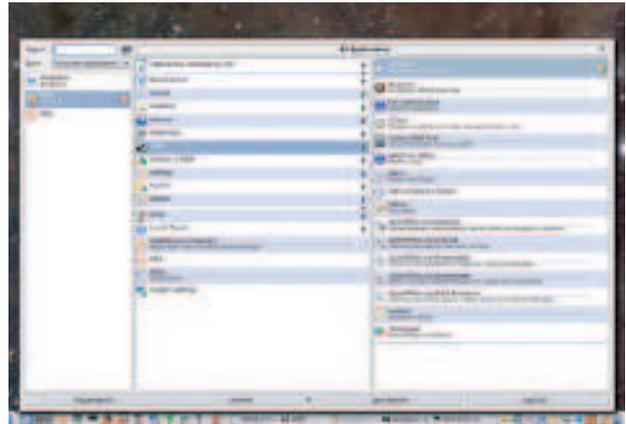
Version 1.0.5 Web www.notmart.org/tastymenu/index.html

It's a silly name, but *Tasty Menu* is, er, tasty, solving one of the longest running problems with the KDE desktop – the overburdened Launch menu. One thing that is particularly annoying about KDE, is that this menu has had, seemingly, no thought given to its design, and every distribution has its own take on how to fill it. Some simply use a hierarchy of task-based icons, while others lump everything into a single window. *Tasty Menu* solves these problems by dishing up a refined user-interface that's as likely to please KDE connoisseurs as it is the casual KDE user. It's implemented as a panel applet, which means you can use it alongside the original menu until you get the hang of things. After adding it to the bottom bar of your screen, it takes an identical form to the original menu, and it's only when you click on it that things start to look differently. A neat three-panel window appears, with favourite applications listed on the left, the top-level

menu in the middle, and the last menu you select in the far right. Unlike the original menu, the secondary lists are persistent. This means they don't disappear when you roll over the other options, making it easier to browse the available applications and choose the one you need. You can add applications you often access to the favourite list with a simple right click and menu selection. They can be removed just as easily as a small delete icon appears when you hover your mouse over the items in the favourite list.

Windows-esque

In a nod to Microsoft Windows, freshly installed applications are also highlighted, which is particularly useful when you don't



› Both KDE search engines, *Kerry* and *Strigi*, can be used for the integrated search tool.

know how the application you've installed is categorised. But the most powerful aspect of the whole application is the small search field in the top left. Type the partial name of the utility or application you're looking for, and the favourite lists will smoothly scroll to accommodate any applications that match. This is often the quickest way of running what you need, and is one of the best reasons for running *Tasty Menu* in the first place.

“A refined interface to please enthusiasts and casual users alike.”

Lightweight music player

Minirok

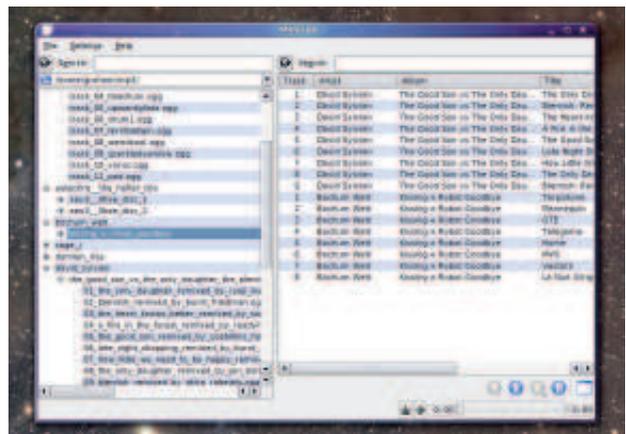
Version 0.7 Web <http://chistera.yi.org/~adeodato/code/minirok>

Amarok, the KDE music player, has a lot of admirers and its popularity is evident by the number of other applications that attempt to ape its user-interface. After all, imitation is the greatest form of flattery. At least *Minirok* doesn't try to hide its inspiration. It's a music player written in Python that's unashamedly based on *Amarok*. It has even taken part of its name. But as implied by the rest of its title, *Minirok* has left much of *Amarok's* feature-bloat behind. There's no song lyrics, no embedded Wikipedia searching, no album covers and not even a tag database. Instead, you get to browse your music collection just as it sits on your hard drive, dragging items from the folder view on the left, to the dynamic playlist on the right. This is almost a pixel-perfect recreation of *Amarok's* main music browsing window, only without the tabs that let you access everything else. And it works really well. Of course, you find

yourself spending far less time clicking on things, reading about things and messing around, but that's really what you need from a music player.

Play it again, Sam

And thanks to the playback being handled by the capable *GStreamer* engine (the same as *Amarok* uses), you're not restricted to certain formats either. *Minirok* played the same music collection we use with *Amarok* without any problems, and there's even a small control applet so that you don't need to stare at the same old playlist window if you don't want to. A handy search bar lets you search through your collection quickly, and as there's no



› Spot the difference! *Minirok* takes its inspiration from the *Amarok* media player.

pre-built database for your music collection, you can switch between several different music paths without worrying at all about the player's configuration. This makes *Minirok* a better option for playing a folder of music not organised into a collection – such as a new download to see whether it's worth keeping, and while you might be losing Magnatune integration and the ability to synchronise your collection with an MP3 player, there are plenty of other tools for doing those tasks.

Minirok is the perfect embodiment of that old tried-and-tested Unix philosophy of creating simple, easy to use tools to perform simple tasks.

“Switch between music paths without worrying about configuration.”

CD/DVD burning

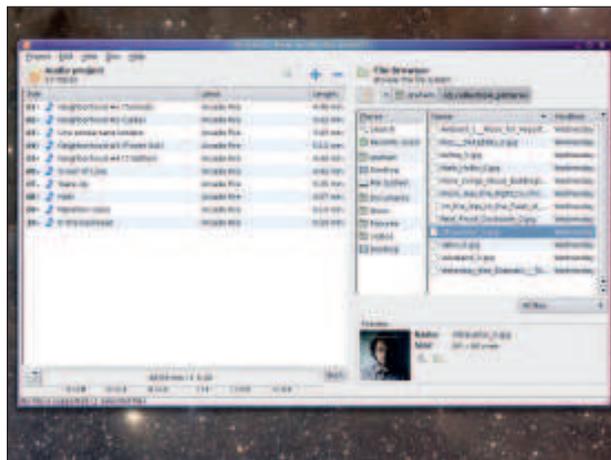
Brasero

Version 0.6.1 Web www.gnome.org/projects/brasero

When we last looked at *Brasero* in LXF82, it had the slightly more fitting name of *Bonfire*, at least for English speakers. But *Brasero* still has burning connotations, at least in Spanish and Mexican, where our Art Editor, Efrain, informs me that it can mean a small wood burning stove or a colloquial name given to the people who patrol the border between the United States and Mexico.

Brasero is a CD/DVD burning application for Gnome, a desktop that still doesn't have a dominant burning application in the same way KDE does with *K3b*. For a long time, many people presumed that *GnomeBaker* would become the default choice, but *Brasero* has gone from strength to strength in the last 12 months, and is now a great position. This is mainly because its easy to use. Many people find CD and DVD burning something of a dark art, and *Brasero* goes a long way to make things as easy as possible. Burning an audio CD is a simple

case of selecting Audio from the startup wizard and dragging your audio files into the burning window. *Brasero* takes care of the format conversion, as well updating the space you have left. It's a long way from the days when we used to do all this manually, and you can typically burn a disc in less than two minutes.



› Rather than being an item of lingerie, *Brasero* is a wonderful CD/DVD burning application for Gnome.

Typesetting editor

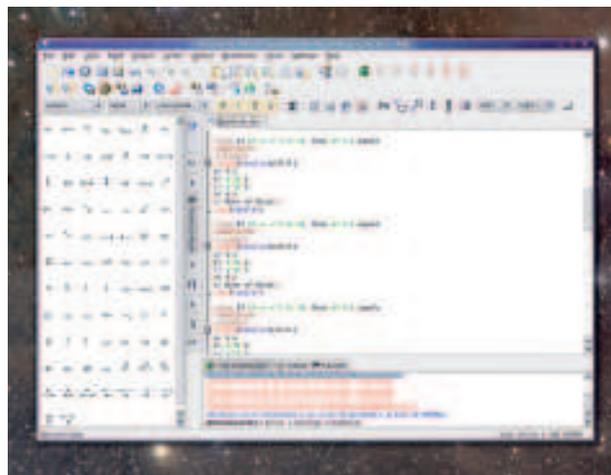
Kile

Version 2 Web <http://kile.sourceforge.net>

L*aTeX* is a popular typesetting, layout and formatting language used in the academic community, as well as by certain publishers. Of course, you can use any text editor to type out the markup the language uses to describe the layout, but it's much easier to use an editor that understands the syntax: *Kile* is just such an editor. As with the *Quanta* HTML editor, *Kile* saves you learning markup commands, as well as helping in command completion, syntax highlighting and structure overview. As you type, you can preview the final project, and output work as Postscript, PDF or HTML files. We last saw *Kile* in LXF69: the ChangeLog is massive – dozens of features bug fixes since then makes this one of the best supported KDE apps there is. *LaTeX* newbies may wonder why there's no real-time preview or graphical editing mode; this is missing the point – *LaTeX* is all about control, and the only way to get that kind of control over your copy is to manually add each kind of markup for your

text. *Kile* helps you do this by providing panels of symbols from which you can drag and drop into your own code, and the syntax highlighting and hierarchical folding helps to make sure there are no mistakes. It's the *LaTeX* writer's equivalent to an integrated development environment. LXF

› *Kile* is like an integrated development environment for marking up text using *LaTeX*.



Also released

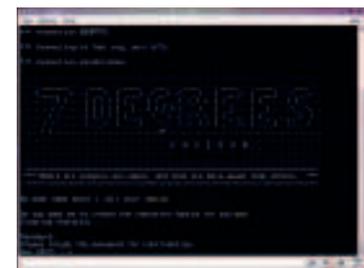
New and updated software that also deserves a look...

› **Rally 0.3.0** Don't fancy typing out RPM commands manually? *Rally* provides a GUI that deals with the mess of package installation itself. <http://crow-designer.sourceforge.net>

› **Freecycle 0.6.11** Our favourite audio beat slicer has just been updated to solve some 64-bit and GCC compilation problems. <http://freecycle.redsteamrecords.com>

› **gcin 1.3.71** This is a rather cool tool for adding Chinese character input to any of your X Windows applications. www.csie.nctu.edu.tw/~cp76/gcin/

› **Gajim 0.11.4** A *Jabber* client that uses *PyGTK* but doesn't require Gnome: great for recycled hardware and older machines. www.gajim.org



› The nice thing about text-based MUDs is that from a distance looks like you're working, and the constant typing on your keyboard should keep your boss happy.

› **GGMud 0.8** Not played a MUD for a while? This new version of one of the best clients is the perfect excuse. <http://ggmud.sourceforge.net>

› **Klick 0.5** Not to be confused with the *Klik* package installer, *Klick* is a very flexible JACK metronome. <http://das.nasophon.de/klick/>

› **Kid3 0.10** An ID3 tagger for KDE that now compiles under KDE 4. Great for large music collections. <http://kid3.sourceforge.net/>

› **'Q' DVD-Author 1.0** One of the few Linux apps that will help you generate DVD menus for use on your own discs. <http://qdvdauthor.sourceforge.net/>

› **mhWaveEdit 1.4.14** If *Audacity* isn't your think for audio editing, you could do far worse than look at this. <https://gna.org/projects/mhwaveedit>