When I first joined the Ubuntu community, I was extremely impressed with the amount of customization Ubuntu had to offer. People posted impressive screenshots, and mentioned the themes they were using. They soon led me to gnome-look.org, the number one place for GNOME visual customization. The screenshots there looked just as impressive, but I was very confused as to what the headings on the sidebar meant, and I had no idea how to use the files I downloaded. Hopefully, this guide will help you learn what I found out the slow way.

Wallpapers

This should be self explanatory. Wallpapers are what you decorate the background of your desktop with. Click on a wallpaper, and then click on the download link, and save the image to the harddisk, say, ~/Pictures/Wallpapers.

You may have noticed that gnome-look.org separates wallpapers into different categories, according to the size of the wallpaper in pixels. For the best quality, you want this to match your screen resolution. If you don't know what your screen resolution is, click System > Preferences > Screen Resolution. However, Ubuntu stretches wallpapers quite nicely if you picked the wrong size, so you needn't fret about it.

SVG is a special image format that doesn't use pixels; it uses shapes called vectors, which means you can make it as big as you want without losing quality. Don't hesitate to use these.

After you've finished downloading the wallpaper, simply open it in the image viewer, and click Image > Set as wallpaper.

You can also set your wallpaper by right-clicking on your desktop and selecting the appropriate button (you know which one!).

GTK: Controls

Don't let acronyms intimidate you; you don't have to know what the letters stand for to know what it is. Basically, GTK is the system GNOME uses to display things like buttons and controls. GNOME is Ubuntu's default desktop environment. I will only be dealing with GNOME customization here--sorry Kubuntu and Xubuntu folks!

Gnome-look.org distinguishes between two versions of GTK: 1.x and 2.x (x stands for any number). Ubuntu Hardy Heron can use both kinds, but I recommend GTK 2.x, as Ubuntu prefers this upgraded version.

Before we continue, let me make an important distinction between GTK themes and GTK

engines. Unfortunately, gnome-look.org categorizes both of them as theme/style, but you'll see why in a minute. GTK engines extend default GTK-theme functionality. They are like programs and are installed like programs: do a search for gtk-engines in synaptic and see for yourself. GTK themes style your controls; they usually depend on an engine. One engine can have lots of themes, and one theme can be re-done for several engines and made into several themes.

The reason why gnome-look.org lists both as theme/style is because an engine usually comes with a default theme named after the engine. Clearlooks, for example, is the name of both an engine and a theme.

All of the most popular engines are already installed by default in Ubuntu, so unless a theme's description specifically says it needs a specific engine, you don't need to worry about it. So pick a GTK theme and download to your hard disk. Then install by clicking System > Preferences >

Appearance > Install. Click Customize and your new theme should be listed under the Controls tab.

GTK themes are usually compressed with the .tar.gz filename extension.

Metacity: Window Borders
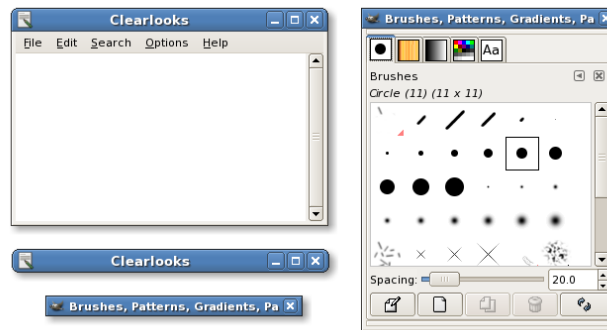
Metacity is the program that displays window borders, basically the title-bar including the minimize, maximize and close buttons (above). Window borders are also called window decorations. Metacity is used by default in Ubuntu for all the window borders. Alternatives include Emerald, which I'll cover later.

Metacity themes are pretty simple, for once :) . Just choose one, download it, and install it by clicking System > Preferences > Appearance

> Install, and find it by clicking Customize > Window Border. That's it!

Metacity themes have the .tar.gz filename extension.

Compiz: Visual Effects

Compiz Fusion is what's used when you enable visual effects. It has an insane number of options, which you can access by installing the compizconfig-settings-manager package from the repositories. All sorts of customizations for Compiz are shared on gnome-look.org in just one category, but I'll separate the main ones here:
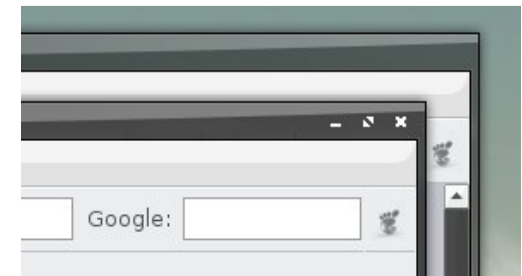
Emerald themes: like metacity, Emerald is a window decorator (above). However, it has more effects then Metacity, such as transparent title-bars. It requires Compiz and is not

installed by default. To use it, simply install the 'emerald' package from the repositories, press alt-F2, and type 'compiz - - replace' (that's two dashes). If you want to use this window decorator by default, launch Advanced Desktop Effects Settings (System, Preferences), click on the window decorations plugin, and change command to 'compiz - -replace'.

Installing An Emerald Theme Is Easy: download it, click System > Preferences > Emerald Theme Manager, click 'Import' and open your downloaded file. Click on a theme to apply it. Emerald themes have a .emerald extension.

Skydomes: Skydomes are background images for Compiz's cube plugin. Setting up the cube is beyond the scope of this guide but skydomes aren't. Simply download the skydome, click System > Preferences > Advanced Desktop Effects Settings > Desktop Cube > Appearance > Skydome and tick the 'Skydome' checkbox. Click on

the open button to load your skydome.

If your skydome doesn't load, don't worry, try another one. Compiz may refuse your skydome because it doesn't fit your screen, or because it is too big for your memory (I think!). Skydomes are image files so they have .jpg or .png file extension.

Beryl

Beryl used to be a competing project to Compiz, but now they've merged into Compiz Fusion, which Ubuntu uses by default, so I'll skip this section.

Icons

Gnome-look.org divides the icon category into two sub-categories:

Icons: these are just simple, single icons. You can find the GNOME logo here, for example. Icon themes: these interest us more. Each icon theme tries to customize a maximum number of icons on your system, so don't be surprised if your application logos your file type icons and your commonly used action icons change. Installing them is simple: just download an icon theme (or icon set), click System > Preferences > Appearance then Install and open your downloaded file. You can find your icon theme by clicking Customize > Icons.

Icon themes are the biggest files on gnome-look.org, and they have the .tar.gz extension.

GDM Themes: Login Welcome Screens

GDM is the login screen system that comes installed by default in Ubuntu. If you're tired of the brown default one, or you want one with a face browser (shows a list of users), you can install other ones. Simply download one to your liking, click

System > Administration > Login Window > Local > Add, and open your file. There are other options, such as randomly selecting a different login screen every session, which I'll let you explore.

By the way, did you notice that the login preferences window didn't have the same theme as the one you have on your desktop? That's because you ran it as root, and root has its own preferences for its themes.

GDM themes usually have the .tar.gz extension.

Splash screens

Unfortunately, gnome-look.org doesn't distinguish between different types of splash screens (above), and incorrectly categorizes them all as GNOME

splash screens, but I won't.

Grub splash screens: if you have more than two systems installed, say Ubuntu and Windows, and are dual-booting, then on every boot you are shown a list to choose from. By default, Ubuntu uses grub, with a menu that is black and white and ugly. However, you can add a background image to the grub bootmenu so you can feel good from the first few seconds after you turn the computer on.

Usplash splash screens: after you select Ubuntu from the grub menu, Ubuntu will proceed to load, while displaying the Ubuntu logo and a simple progress bar. You can replace this with another splash screen of your choosing.

GNOME splash screens: some of you may remember the days when this was enabled by default. A small window would appear after logging in, showing the icons of programs being loaded. If you want, you can bring it back.

First, make sure you have gnome-splashscreen-manager installed from the repositories. Select a GNOME

splash screen and download it. Click System > Preferences > Splash Screen, click 'Install' and open your downloaded file. Make sure 'Show splash screen on startup' is ticked, and you're done!

GNOME splash screens are images, and have .jpg or .png extensions.

Desklets

If you have installed gdesklets from the repositories, then you might be looking for more desklets than the ones that came by default. You can find them here. Installation is as simple as downloading the file, and then clicking File > Install Package from the gdesklets

manager. Gdesklets are simple desktop widgets that provide lots of different functionality.

Gdesklets generally have the .tar.gz extension.

Screenlets

Screenlets is a more up-to-date widget system for Linux and competes with Vista gadgets, as well as gdesklets. Screenlets is available in the Hardy Heron repositories. Download a screenlet from gnome-look.org, and install it using the 'Install Screenlet' button in the screenlets manager. You should be getting used to this by now!

Screenlets have the .tar.gz extension.

XMMS themes

XMMS is a media player for Linux, and it has its own theme

system. You can download some custom themes for it from gnome-look.org.

Screenshots

A place where people have uploaded screenshots of their desktops to show them off. We are, of course, impressed.

Fonts

Fonts are also called typesets. They determine what text looks like. Popular fonts you might have heard of are Times New Roman and Comic Sans MS. Both of these are Microsoft fonts and can be installed on your system with the msttcorefonts package from the Multiverse repository. Gnome-look.org has lots of truetype fonts to choose from. There are several ways to install them, the simplest being to just download a compressed archive of fonts and extract it to ~/.fonts (remember, that's a hidden folder).

That should be enough for most systems. If you find that the fonts don't show up in any applications, run this command in a terminal, and restart the applications.

```
fc-cache -f -v ~/.fonts
```

Truetype fonts have a .ttf extension, and usually come in a compressed archive like .tar.gz.

Clipart

This contains clipart for GNU/Linux and other open source projects. See if you find anything that interests you here.

System sounds

These are collections of system sounds. Unfortunately, they're usually just a bunch of sound files, and you have to manually select each type of system sound for each corresponding file. To do so, click System > Preferences > Sound then the Sounds tab.

The sound files are usually ogg files. Ogg Vorbis is a free-as-in-freedom alternative to restricted MP3.

X11 mouse themes

Mouse themes change your mouse cursors, also called pointers. Download a

pack, and install it using System > Preferences > Appearance > Install. You can find your mouse themes under Customize > Pointers.

If you're running Compiz Fusion, you'll always want to tell it to use the same mouse theme. Click System > Preferences > Advanced Desktop Effects Settings > General Options, and change the value of the cursor theme field to the exact name of your theme. Make sure you respect case.

Qt apps (KDE apps) use KDE's mouse theme. You can customize it by installing and running kcontrol. Mouse themes have the .tar.gz extension.

Topaz brainstorm

This is almost like brainstorm.ubuntu.com, except it's for GNOME. Plus it includes conceptual art. You can post your ideas and design documents here.

Cairo-clock themes

Cairo clock is a small clock widget that can be installed from the repositories. Its package name is cairo-clock. It basically transforms the look of your analog clock. Download one from gnome-look.org, open it and extract it to ~/.cairo-clock/themes . You will need to make that directory yourself. To do so, make sure you have enabled viewing of hidden files.

Cairo clock themes are generally downloaded inside a compressed archive with the .tar.gz extension.

Screensavers

You should know what these are. Ubuntu comes with a lot of them by default. Just load System > Preferences > Screensaver to select one.

Screensavers are actually programs, which means there are lots of different ways to install them. Just follow the instructions in the description and you should be fine.

Lock dialogs are also under this category. A lock dialog is the window you see after you lock the screen, and you want to return to your session. You can customize this as well. Follow the instructions in each lock dialog's description. If it asks you to edit a gconf key, just run and use gconf-editor.

Nautilus scripts

Nautilus is the default file explorer that comes with GNOME and Ubuntu. When you click on Places > Home Folder, you're using Nautilus.

You can extend Nautilus' functionality using scripts; think of them as extensions, if you like. Simply download one from gnome-look.org and extract the archive into ~/.gnome2/nautilus-scripts (remember to enable viewing hidden folders). That's it!

Scripts don't have extensions, but they're usually contained inside a compressed archive: either .tar.gz or .tar.bz2.

Conclusion

Enjoy your new powers of customization! If you're still hungry for more, I'd like to mention art.gnome.org, ubuntu-art.org, docks like AWN, cairo-dock and Kiba dock, and my still-in-development project complete-look hosted on launchpad.net.