Ubuntu and Your Digital Life

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Computers used to be specialized devices used in universities and laboratories, of little use to any of us normal people. Somewhere along the way, however, computers got to be very good at little things that actually matter to us, and in almost no time at all they have become central parts of everyday life. Ubuntu, of course, features all the best in free "digital lifestyle" software to help you be organized, creative, and in control of your data.

Photo Management

It seems we all have digital cameras these days, even if only in a cell phone or a computer. With so many pictures being taken, it's awfully helpful to have an application dedicated to viewing them, browsing through them all, making minor adjustments to make them better reflect the fond memories they inspire. Ubuntu ships with Shotwell, a photo manager and digital darkroom that should suit most people's needs for a fast, easy-to-use photo organizer.

Shotwell can be launched two ways; click on the Ubuntu logo in the top left corner and type *Shotwell* in the search bar, or simply click on the *View Photos* button. Shotwell opens in full screen mode and already you'll probably get a good idea of how it works.

Naturally the first thing you'll need to do is import photographs into the application. This can be done in many different ways, given the many different possible sources of photographs. If your photographs exist on a CD or an SD card or on a hard drive (perhaps from another computer, or from your former operating system), then all you need to do is insert that disk, card, or drive, and move to the top of the screen until the global menu appears. Select the *File* menu and click on *Import from Folder*.

Of course, a great number of photographs these days come from phones. Getting photos from your phone or similar mobile device can be transferred to your computer over Bluetooth if your computer is has that feature. Finding out is easy; click the Ubuntu logo in the left corner, and type in Bluetooth into the search field. Open the Bluetooth Preferences. If your computer has Bluetooth then it will show up here, and you can pair your computer to your phone and then transfer files. Otherwise, you can plug your phone into your computer and treat it as a USB drive, or simply email yourself photos from the device.

Once your photographs have been imported, you can browse through them as thumbnails, and organize them into *Events* by selecting a number of photographs that should be grouped together and then selecting the *Events* menu to create a *New Event* (or hit [*Ctrl*] + [*N*] with the photos can be transferred to your computer over Bluetooth if your computer is has that feature). Finding out is easy; click the Ubuntu logo in the left corner, and type in Bluetooth into the search field. Open the Bluetooth Preferences. If your computer has Bluetooth then it will show up here, and you can pair your computer to your phone and then transfer files. Otherwise, you can plug your phone into your computer and treat it as a USB drive, or simply email yourself photos from the device.

Once your photographs have been imported, you can browse through them as thumbnails, and organize them into *Events* by selecting a number of photographs that should be grouped together and then selecting the *Events* menu to create a New Event (or hit [*Ctrl*] + [*N*] with the photos selected).
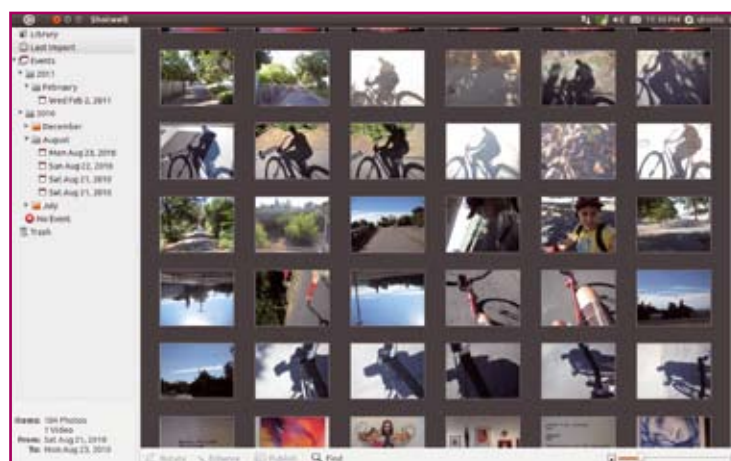

Figure 1. *Shotwell, the friendliest Photo Manager this side of Unix*

Modifying the photographs with simple, traditional darkroom techniques can be done automatically by clicking the *Enhance* button at the bottom of the screen. This lets the computer analyze and make basic improvements to the photo. For more control, double click on the photograph and all of the finer controls appear at the bottom of Shotwell's screen. You can crop your photo, correct for red-eye, rotate, or adjust color saturation, contrast, exposure, and more.

The typical workflow is to ingest the photos, correct and adjust them, and then post them to some photo sharing site online. Shotwell makes this easy from the main screen: select the photos you want to post online and click the *Publish* button at the bottom of the Shotwell window. You can post automatically from Shotwell to Flickr, Picasa, Facebook, and Piwigo.

If you want to send the photos to some other online service or email them individually to friends, you can export your adjusted photograph out of Shotwell. To do this, select the photograph or photographs you want to export, click on the *File* menu, and select *Export*. You can export the photo in a number of formats; the best for email or integrat-ing into a website is png or jpg. You may define a new size for the photograph, and then click *OK*.

If you feel that Shotwell is too pedestrian for you and require something more professional-grade, you will want to look at Digikam and GIMP. The former is a full-featured digital darkroom application and the latter is a Photoshop-like re-touching and graphic design tool. Both of these can be found in Ubuntu Software Center (*Graphics –> Painting & Editing for the GIMP, Graphics –> Photography for Digikam*).

Email

It seems many people these days use webmail almost exclusively, but there are many advantages to using a proper email client. An email application takes a little effort to set up (email server settings can be both mysterious and confusing) but they save you from constantly logging into your webmail site, they allow you to compose and read email even when you're not online, and they are usually faster than webmail since web-based email applications must constantly pull data from the web in an effort to show you all of your messages.

Two popular email applications for Linux are Thunderbird (by Mozil-la, the group responsible for Firefox) and Evolution (the default in Ubuntu). Evolution can be configured and accessed by clicking the email icon to the left of the clock in the upper right corner of your desktop screen.

The setup for Evolution will ask you the typical questions required to access a mail server. First, you should provide the name you wish people to see in their *From* field when you email them. Enter your email address, and click the *Forward* button. Next you'll want to choose how you view your email; the two most common choices are either POP3 or IMAP. POP3 takes your email from the server and saves it to your computer. This allows you to view it at any time, whether you are online or not, and also saves space in your email account. It is common to have your main computer use POP3, while setting your mobile devices (like your phone) to use IMAP, such that you are simply viewing your email on your portable device, but actually downloading your mail to your main computer.

The server name itself will vary depending on what email service you use. Often, email server names start with "mail" or "incoming", such as *mail.bluehost.com.* The username is something given to you by your email service provider and is often whatever is before the @ symbol in your email address.

Next, you'll need to define how you access the mail server. Most email providers support SSL encryption, and many of the free email accounts offered to the public will use password authentication. You don't have to enter the password yet; you'll be prompted for that later.

The next important setting will be how to Send Email. Again, the exact details of this should be provided by your email provider, but usually the agent you'll use to send mail is SMTP. The server address for sending mail usually starts with SMTP, but really it could be anything, so check with your provider or in the *Help* section of your webmail interface.

It's rare for an SMTP server to not require authentication. Sometimes this is the same as the username
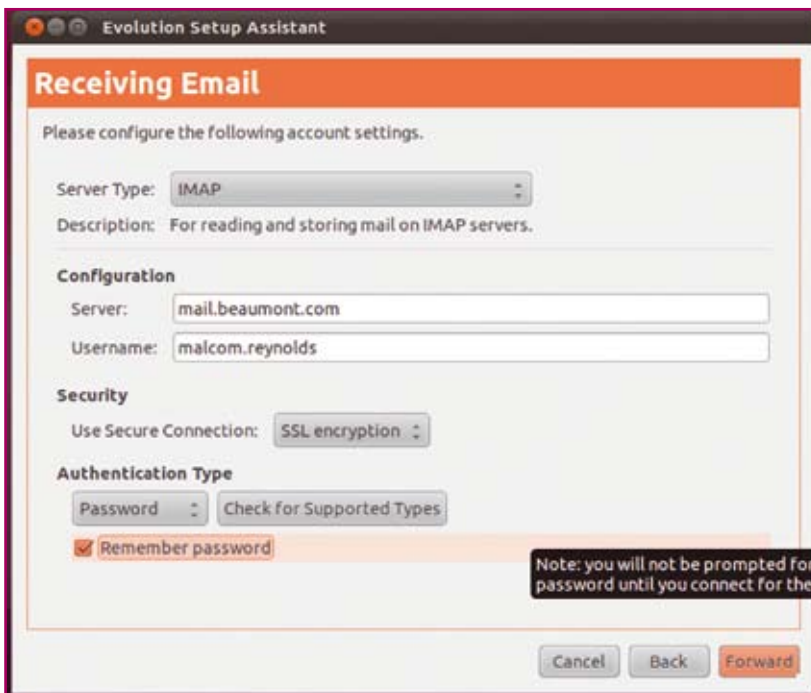

Figure 2. *Know your email provider's settings, and configuring email will be a breeze*

and password you use to check mail, other times it is a unique name and password used only for sending. Most providers support SSL, which ensures that you really are contacting the email server you think you are contacting; clicking the *Check for supported Types* will probe the server to find out what authentication methods are preferred.

A few more clicks and you're finished, and in no time you'll be looking at your Evolution mail client. If you've ever used Outlook or Apple Mail, then you'll already be familiar with this. You can create new email messages, schedule appointments in your calendar, create memos to yourself, and so on.

Of course, you can email friends, import contacts, send photos and pictures, and anything else you would typically do from any email application.

Chat

Email is great for those lengthy conversations but lately text messaging and instant messaging have taken over the realm of casual online contact. Ubuntu recognizes this and places a chat icon in the upper right corner of the screen so that it's easily available whenever you need it.

Click on the chat icon just to the right of the clock and select the *Chat Accounts* menu item to set up your account information. The chat application, Empathy, interfaces with an astonishing number of chat services, including Facebook, Google Chat, AOL, Yahoo, Myspace, IRC, and more. If you do not already have an account with one of these services, you can choose to create a new Jabber account, which interfaces with Google Chat and Jabber.

To see your buddy, or contacts, list, then you'll need to open Empathy directly from the application menu. To reach this, just click on the Ubuntu logo in the upper left corner of the screen, and type in *Empathy* into the search bar. Launch Empathy and manage your contacts there.

Music

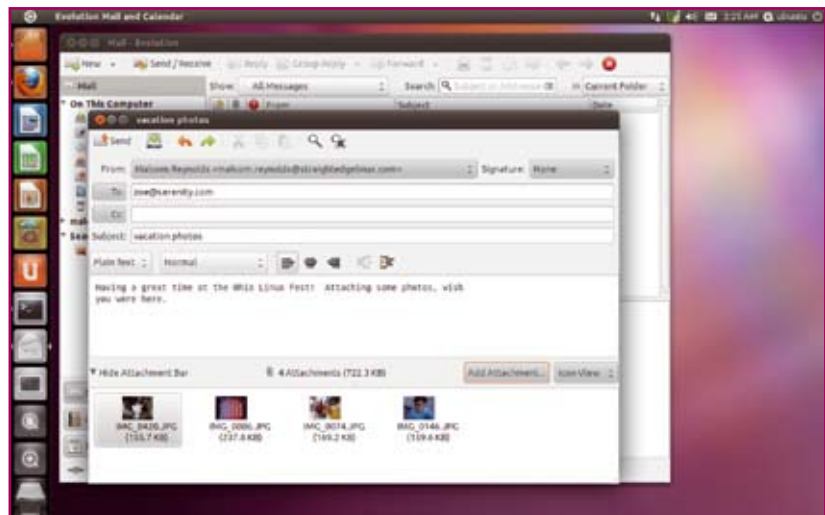Enjoying and managing your personal music collection, like mp3 and

Figure 3. *Send photos to friends and family*

m4a files, is a breeze in Ubuntu with Banshee Music Player. Banshee is a popular and focused music client that concentrates on simplicity and ease of use. It uses the common "music database" model that is popular among consumers these days, so that you think less about organizing all your music files and more about what you want to play next.

To launch Banshee, click the Ubuntu logo and choose *Listen to Music*. If you've used a music player on any computer within the last five years, the interface will already be familiar to you. On the left is a list of categories, like albums, videos, and audiobooks. The right panel contains the list of files within those categories, or in other words, all of your stuff.

The real star of Banshee Music Player is its interface to the world wide web. New media is at your fingertips, with Podcasts, the Internet Archive, and the Ubuntu One Store. The Ubuntu One Music Store delivers major record label albums for purchase and download. The interface is friendly and intuitive.

More importantly, independent and progressive entertainment is available from Internet Archive and via Podcasts. The Miro Podcast directory can help you discover new shows, which in turn can do everything from entertain you with new independent music, or educate you with university courses and even Linux tutorial shows. A whole new world of independent and creative art and information
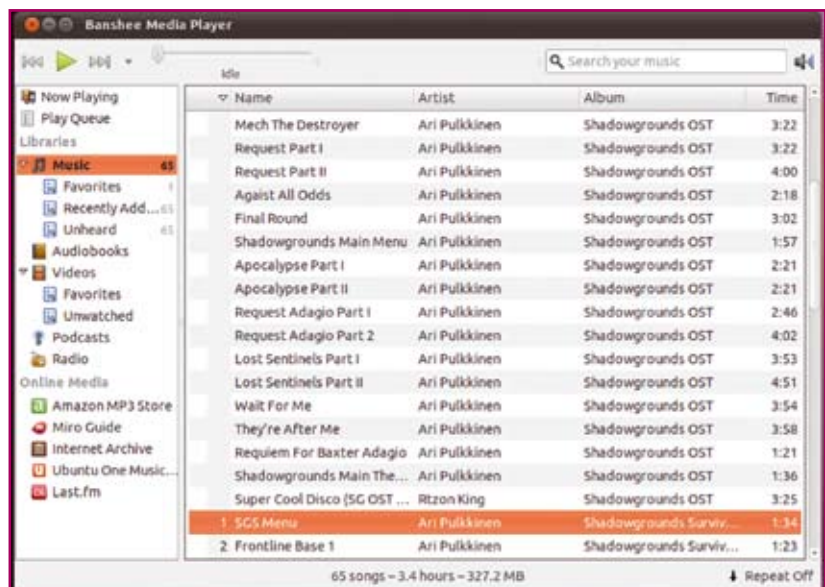

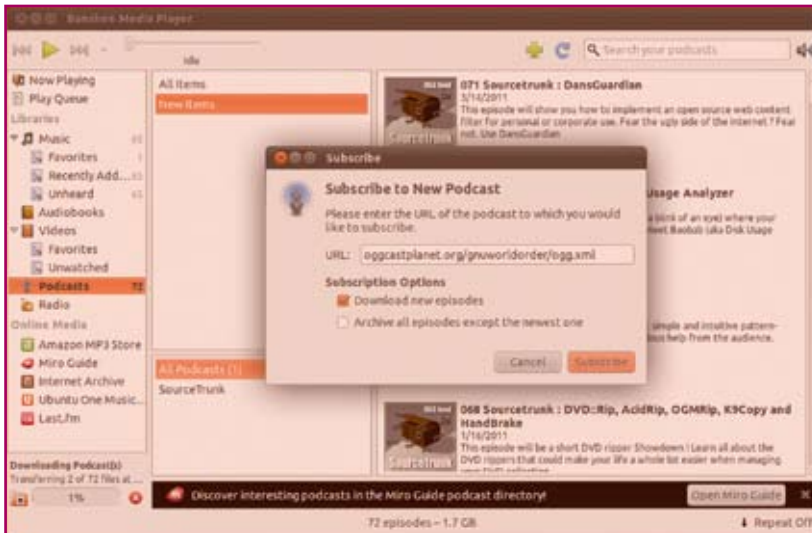**Figure 4.** *Browse through your music with Banshee music player*

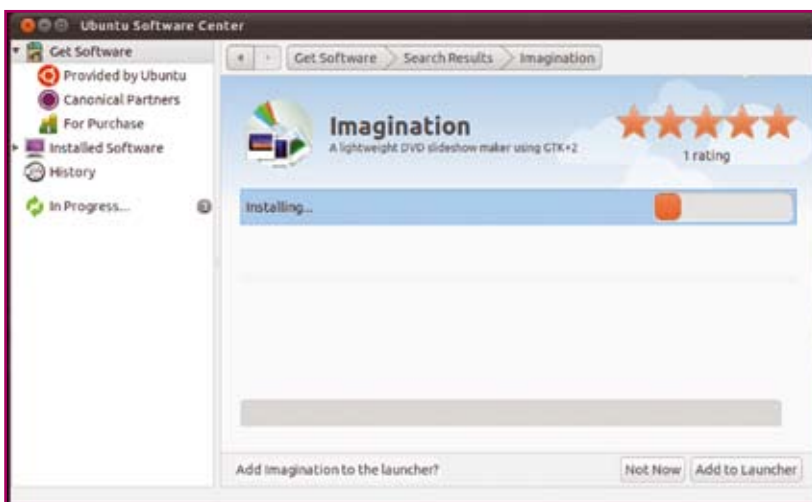**Figure 5.** *Discover independent entertainment with free podcasts!*

Figure 6. *Install new applications with the Ubuntu Software Center, including the slideshow creator app, Imagination*
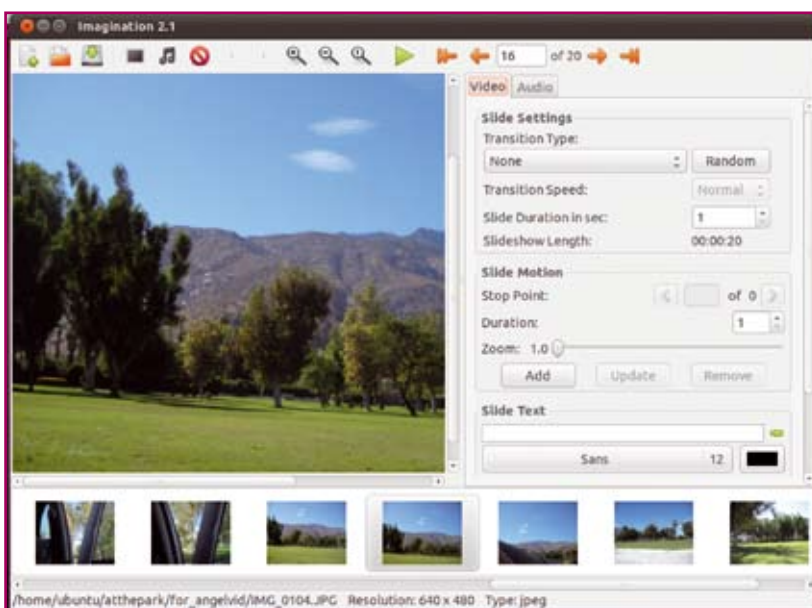

Figure 7. *Create beautiful slideshows in just a few clicks*

is available to you, for free, and with only a few clicks of a mouse.

Slideshows

Now that you know how to manage photos and music, what could be better than bringing them together into a slideshow that you can share with your friends? To do this, you'll need to add an application called Imagination.

To add software to Ubuntu, you can use the Ubuntu One Software Center. This is a software store (although, granted, most of the prices are free) that is about as easy to use as, for instance, the Ubuntu One Music Store. Simply open the application (it's in the dock on the left) and search for *slideshow*. Imagination will be one of the top hits. First allow the computer to connect to the server that Imagination is kept on, and then click to install the application.

Once it's installed, you can launch it, as usual, from the Ubuntu logo in the top left.

Imagination is easy to use and does just what it claims: it creates simple slideshows with attractive transitions and optional music that can then be burned to a DVD or posted online. The first task, then, will be to add photographs to the slideshow. Click the *Import Pictures* button on the top menu bar to select the photographs you want in your slideshow. Once added, they will appear in sequence at the bottom of the Imagination window.

You can customize the transitions between the pictures using the controls in the right panel. The most common transition is a cross fade but there are many more ways of getting from one picture to another, so try them all. Once you've gotten the transitions right, you can add music by clicking the *Import Music* button.

Once you've completed your slideshow, go to the top panel on the Ubuntu screen to make the Imagination menu bar appear. In the Slideshow menu, hover over the *Export* option, and choose how you'd like to export the files: VOB for a DVD, OGV for general use on your computer or for posting online,

Flash for posting online, or 3GP for use on your mobile.

Video Editing

Taking your foray into combining images and sound a step further, you might want to try video editing on Ubuntu using another add-on application called PiTiVi. Install it the same way that you installed Imagination.

Pitivi is designed to be a basic video editor that is easy to use but robust in what file formats it can ingest. Getting video off of a camera onto your computer is complex because there are so many different ways camera manufacturers choose to implement the transfer. Generally speaking, it breaks down into two methodologies: drag-and-drop from an SD card or similar media, or press play on the camera and record on your computer.

In the first scenario, you simply plug in your camera or insert your media card and use them like an external drive. Drag the files into your *Videos* folder (reach this by clicking the *House* icon in the left dock). Now your video is imported.

In the second scenario, you'll need a recording application and quite probably a video device driver. More often than not, this means you'll need to install the driver set called video4linux (you can find it via the Ubuntu One Software Center). To record video input, install GUVCview.

Once these are installed, connect your camera to your computer, turn it on, and open GUVCview. Click the *Capture Video* button at the bottom of GUVCview and then press play on your camera. It must capture the footage in realtime, so this is a longer method than the first, but it may be unavoidable if your camera is tape-based.

Once the footage is captured, you can launch Pitivi and import your footage. All video editing applications, Pitivi included, really refer short, manageable, "bite size" video clips, so if possible you should import lots of short video clips rather than importing one monolithic video file. Either way, once the clips are in Pitivi, you can add them to the timeline and edit them.

Figure 8. *Capturing video on Ubuntu*

Pitivi has all the typical features of a normal video editor; volume adjustment, fades in and out, the ability to splice, and so on. It's a solid video editor, with the support of an active and dedicated community behind it.

Export your movie to share with friends either online or on DVD.

DVD Creation

There is a decreasing need for DVD creation as more and more internet sites offer easy ways to share videos. However, it's still a fairly common task on computers for both archiving important data and sharing videos and slideshows.

Ubuntu's one-stop solution for DVD creation is Brasero, available in the application menu (the Ubuntu logo in the top left corner). As you're probably starting to expect, this application is simple, easy to use, and effective.

When you first launch Brasero, you are greeted with five options: create an audio disc, a data disc, a video disc, copy a disc, or burn a CD or DVD image. The interface for all of them is basically drag-and-drop; take the files from your computer (all of your personal data files can be found via the *House* icon in the left dock) and drag them into the Brasero window. When you're finished, click *Burn*. It's as simple as that.

Conclusion

Ubuntu ships with all the applications you'd expect from a user-friendly and creative operating system. More powerful applications are clicks away via the Ubuntu One Software Center. Ubuntu can be as simple as you want, or as complex as you are willing to make it. The sky is the limit, and Ubuntu your guide. ■
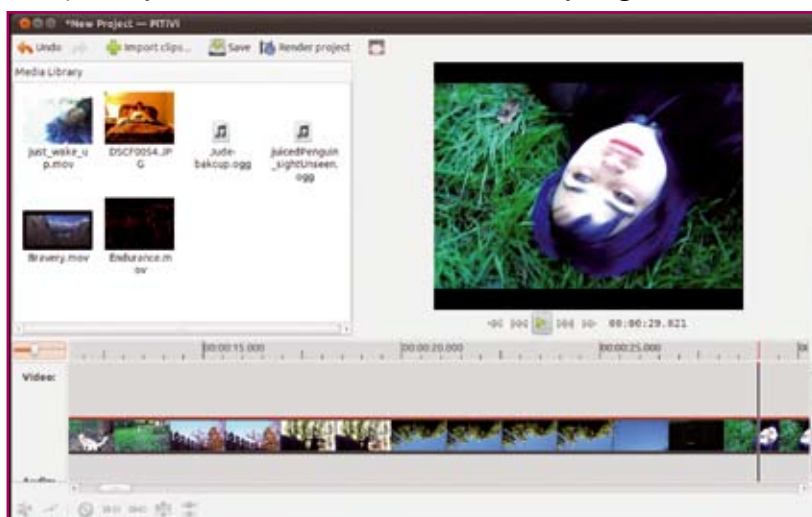

Figure 9. *Edit footage into a movie to share with the world!*