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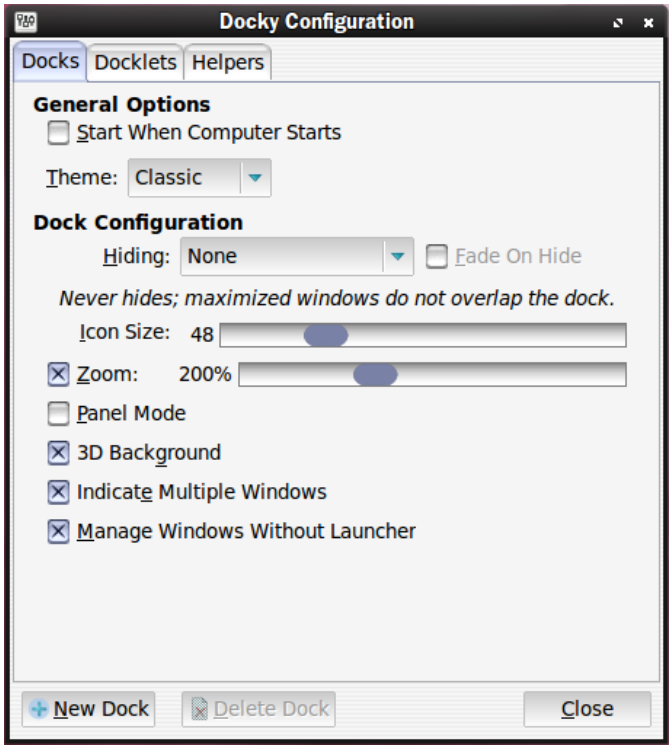
AWN vs Cairo Dock vs Docky: Mac Style Linux Docks Reviewed

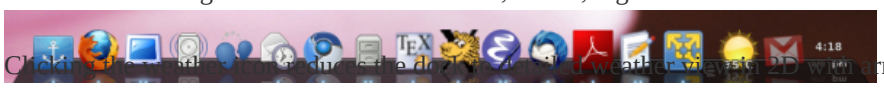
Mac style docks or launchers have become very popular among *nix users with the increase in popularity of Macs. And unlike Snow Leopard users there are quite a few free options for Linux users. I am going to review three such popular docks. The platform that i am using is Ubuntu 10.04 Lucid Lynx, but I would expect my conclusions to hold true for most of popular *nix systems be it Fedora 13 or OpenSUSE 11.2.

Docky]
Procedure to install Docky is standard, launch **synaptic or corresponding Software Installer for your *nix,** and search for and install docky. The standard installation of Docky looks something like this.

It is basically showing all the currently running applications. In addition you can choose to enable various "Docklets" (small dock applications, e.g. to display weather and time, mail box status etc.) by clicking on the "Anchor" icon and selecting Docklets tab as shown below or enable Helpers which are various application specific tools for more customized experience. It comes with 6 themes by default, and an option to enable 3D view. The icon animation effect is only limited to basic zoom functionality which you can configure to change the amount of zoom.



With the 3D background enabled and weather, Gmail, digital clock Docklets in action, it looks like this



Clicking the weather icon reduces the dock and shows weather view in 2D with arrows to swtich between various weather details. Once you move your mouse away it resumes the default Dock view. Further by enabling Indicate Multiple Windows option in the setup, one can switch between different windows of the running application, e.g. choose between multiple open emacs frames or instances. However, **Docky configuration** doesn't allow you to change the location or orientation of the Dock, but apparently you can change the location when the config dialogue is open, you need to click on the dock and drag it to the required screen edge.

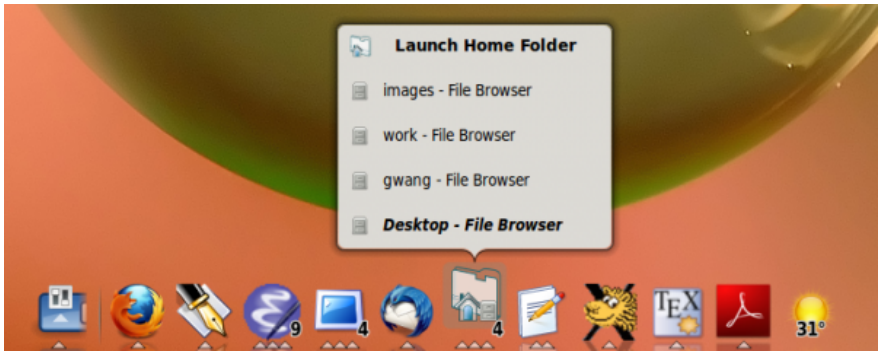
The default position is bottom center.

AWN (Avant Window Navigator)

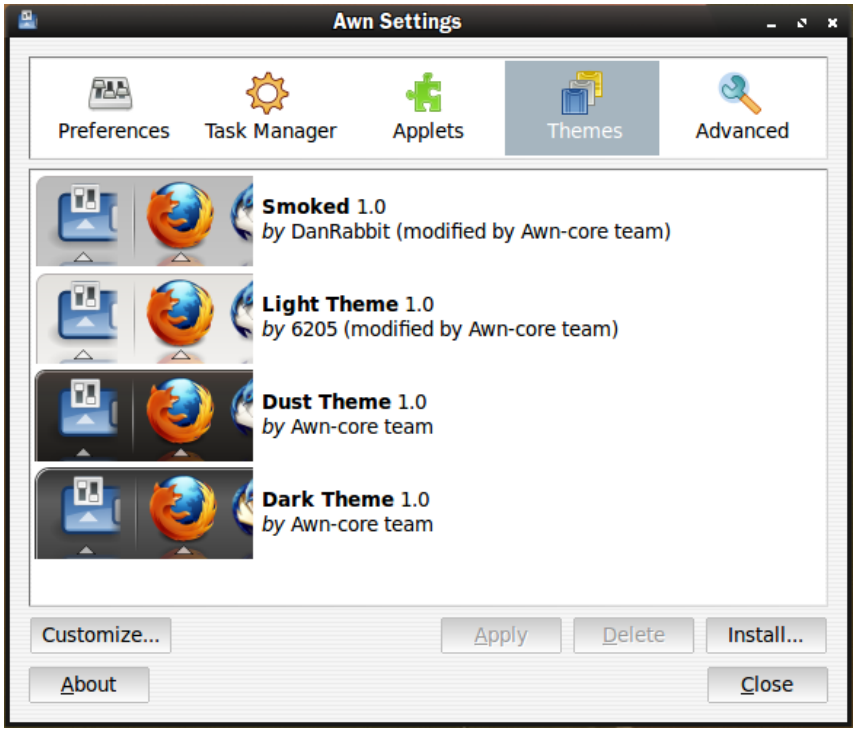
AWN in offers all the features that Docky has to offer, and a few more. Installation is again standard, search for avant-window-navigator in synaptic or do

sudo apt-get install avant-window-navigator

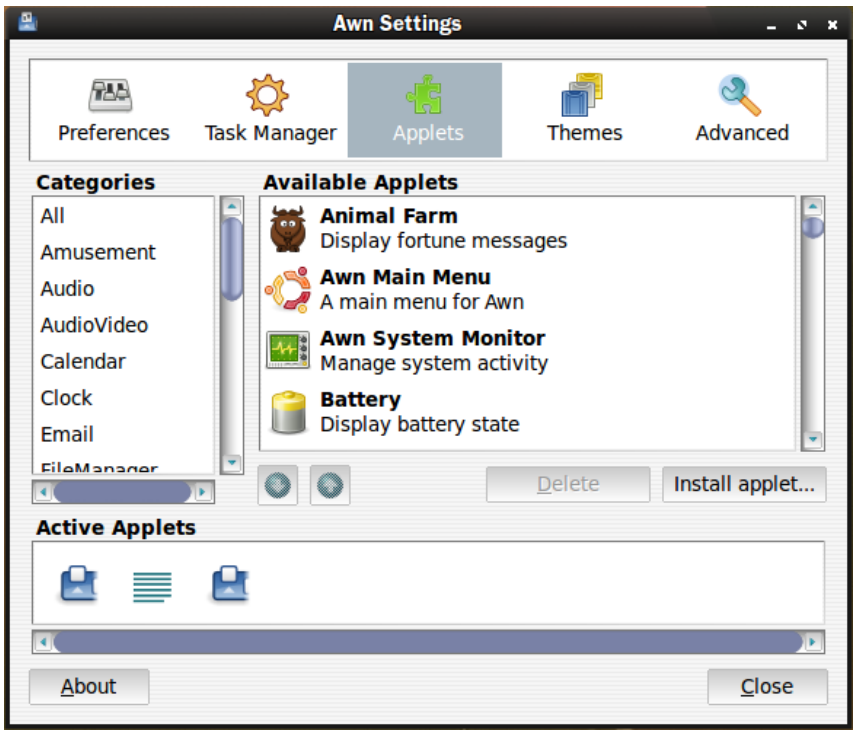
The dock as such as a more "finished" look to it in comparison to Docky. Multiple windows or instances of a particular applications are denoted by multiple triangles below the icon, you can also choose different sizes for icons. Clicking on an icon takes you directly to it, if only one instance is running, if there are multiple instances running then you are presented with the list of all the instances to choose from, which I thought is very well done.



The configuration can be done by clicking the first icon in the dock which is by default the AWN settings icon. AWN comes installed with 4 themes each of which is available in both 2D and 3D view, and you need to switch your view to 3D everytime you change your theme as switching themes automatically sets the 2D view.



AWN offers a wide range of applets just like Docky which can be activated from the Applets screen.

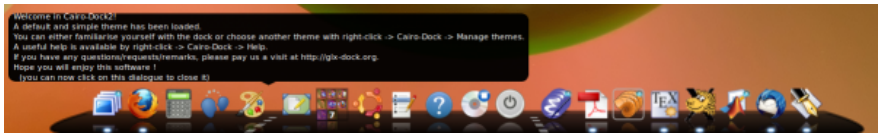


The weather applet has a nice curved display mode for forecasts which looks really cool.

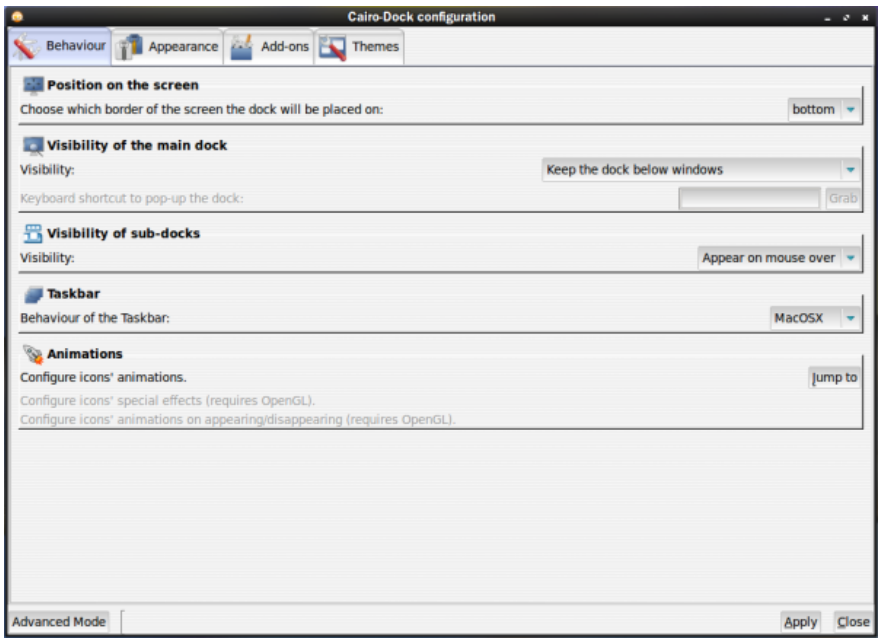
While Docky only offers the standard zoom effect for the icons, AWN has as many as 10 (1 - custom) icon effects. The zoom effect is rather subtle for AWN and there is no option for changing the amount of zoom. I personally prefer the Squish effect and rotate effect.

Cairo Dock

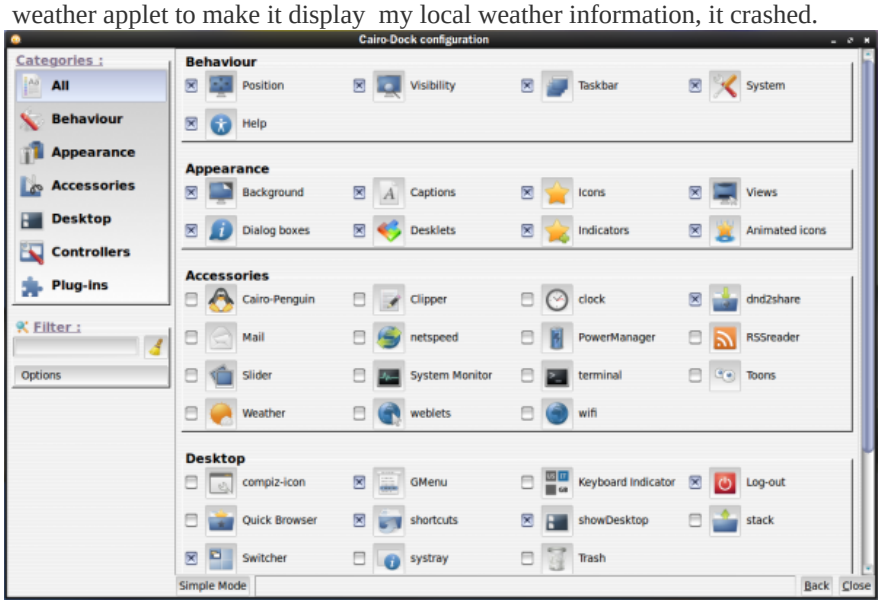
Now lets look at the Cairo Dock. It clearly offers users with far more options than Docky and AWN put together.



It offers a simple configuration mode with less number of options (this less might be more than adequate for many).



Another mode is available for advanced configuration for those who want complete control. The discussion of all these options would have to be continued in another post. Cairo Dock also has a large collection of applets and comes installed with plenty of themes, modes, by default (by default I mean with the selection of most standard packages available for Cairo dock). **Cairo dock also** gives you the option to detach the applets and drop them on the desktop like widgets and you can choose to show your icons in 3D (e.g. in a elliptic cloud and other ways) . However, I also found Cairo dock to be less stable, e.g. when I tried to configure weather applet to make it display my local weather information, it crashed.



Bottomline: Docky is for all those who want simple and easy to use no hassle interface. AWN is probably a compromise between the two extremes, and Cairo Dock is for those who want total customization and complete control by getting your hands dirty. I personally like AWN the most simply because it strikes a good balance between customization and performance.