DESIGN

This is not a war, but we will need a lot of good people not to lose.

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With ideas for a modern Ubuntu Desktop

Vienna/Austria, Oct. 2017

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This is part 2 of 3 of my project - "**Finding Ubuntu**".
I recommend reading the first part "Introducing", then part 3 "The Present".

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Design overview

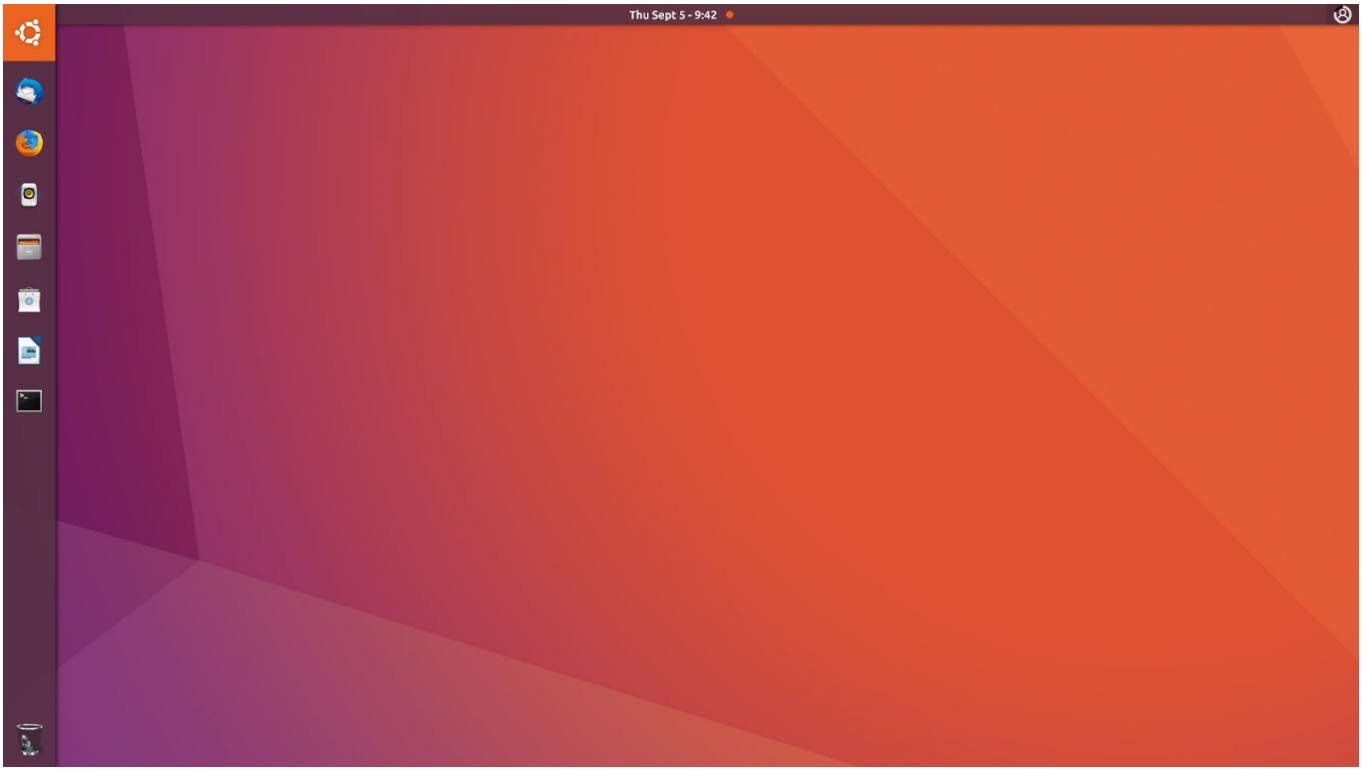
At first I spend time just to find out what I see in the Ubuntu desktop. Then, how it developed over the last years. After that I had a look at a lot of other desktops and distributions, in perspective of my workflow.

- What is the way I work?
- How is the understanding of the end-user to a lot of tasks?
- What is a logical and understandable way to define a desktop?
- How does that fit the old design?
- What colors are the right ones?
- What do you really need?
- What is redundant?

I found out that I liked the way it was, but also disliked how the Unity launcher was working.
At the same time, I like the idea of lenses, the dock and also the top-bar.

Note:

It took some time and a few redesigns and this is what my interpretation of the desktop was looking like:



At first, it seems to be quite the same like always, but at that point, it already has a lot of thoughts in it.

The Desktop Design

It was important to me to pick up the old and use it as a base. As if you were renovating a house. Ubuntu had a kind of good workflow and a certain design and feeling. I did not want to lose that.

- The bars on the desktop have a shadow like before, but also to be distinctive from each other. The dock on the left is always on top.
- Also, they have transparency, this makes it more modern and I use dark transparent tones to define areas or buttons.
- The text elements don´t have a shadow anymore, giving it a more flat design. Also most elements are dark, so no shadow needed.
- The colors are from the Ubuntu color palette, Ubuntu orange and Canonical aubergine.
- And: There is no way to mistake it with Windows or macOS, even with any other Linux distribution

The Dock

It is quite the same... but…

- The new **dock**[1] is still on the left side, but FINALLY it stretches from the top to the bottom. No more wasted space or confusion with words like "Activities" (what's that...?)
- **Logo**[1] = Branding. Why? Because Ubuntu as a brand is also important. Let the people get used to it and use it as a start-up point.

- **Apps**[1]- like before, you can pin and start your preferred apps on the dock, every open app is shown here - like before. Apps-notifications would be nice, a darker layer under the icon when the app is open (you can see that below) and an orange dot shows, how many windows of the app/program are open. But, the icons are not that big anymore, making it less playful and more serious. And please: When clicking on an app on the dock it should minimize.
- **Trash**[1] - it is still an important and useful thing and people are used to it - let's keep it this way, until we invent something better.

The Top-Bar

Same same, but different

- Starts left, beginning from the Dock, not the screen-edge
- Like in Gnome, there is the date and time and the notification-indicator (orange dot). Click to open the new "**Information Center**"
- On the right, I did get rid of every unnecessary item. Do you really need to know how strong your WIFI is all the time? How the volume is set? If Bluetooth is on? Most of us don't, in particular end-users should not care about it all the time. What's left is the (not the final name...) "**Me**[1]**and**[1]**the**[1]**machine**" button as a concept for a multiple-indicator and button. So for example, when you have a laptop, the circle around the user-icon shows the charge. There is a possibility to have more simple information build in that button, like when bluetooth is connected or when problems appear. It's a kind of new way to handle that - simple but more than enough.

So you see, it is a lot like the old, but with a few new ways and some simple design rules. And showing just what you really need to see. No deflections, nor overload. But still every element is always there for you when you need to do or see something.

I would love to see that you can change the color (aubergine) in the settings to make it more personal. To give the user a way to change the whole system by changing just one color.
This could be handled with predefined colors to stay on a certain level of brightness we need.
A quick example:

The colors are still dark, quiet and at the same time the whole desktop changes.

The three points of contact

It sounds a little sexual, but it's not. Certainly.

The three points of contact are:

1. The "**What**" or "**The Launcher**"
2. The "**Information-Center**"
3. The "**Me and the machine**"

It was not enough to give all of it an adjusted or new design. It also should have a thought behind it, to give the opportunity, to have a kind of logical interaction. So the user can separate the actual need to the three parts. Future developments and changes can follow these rules too.

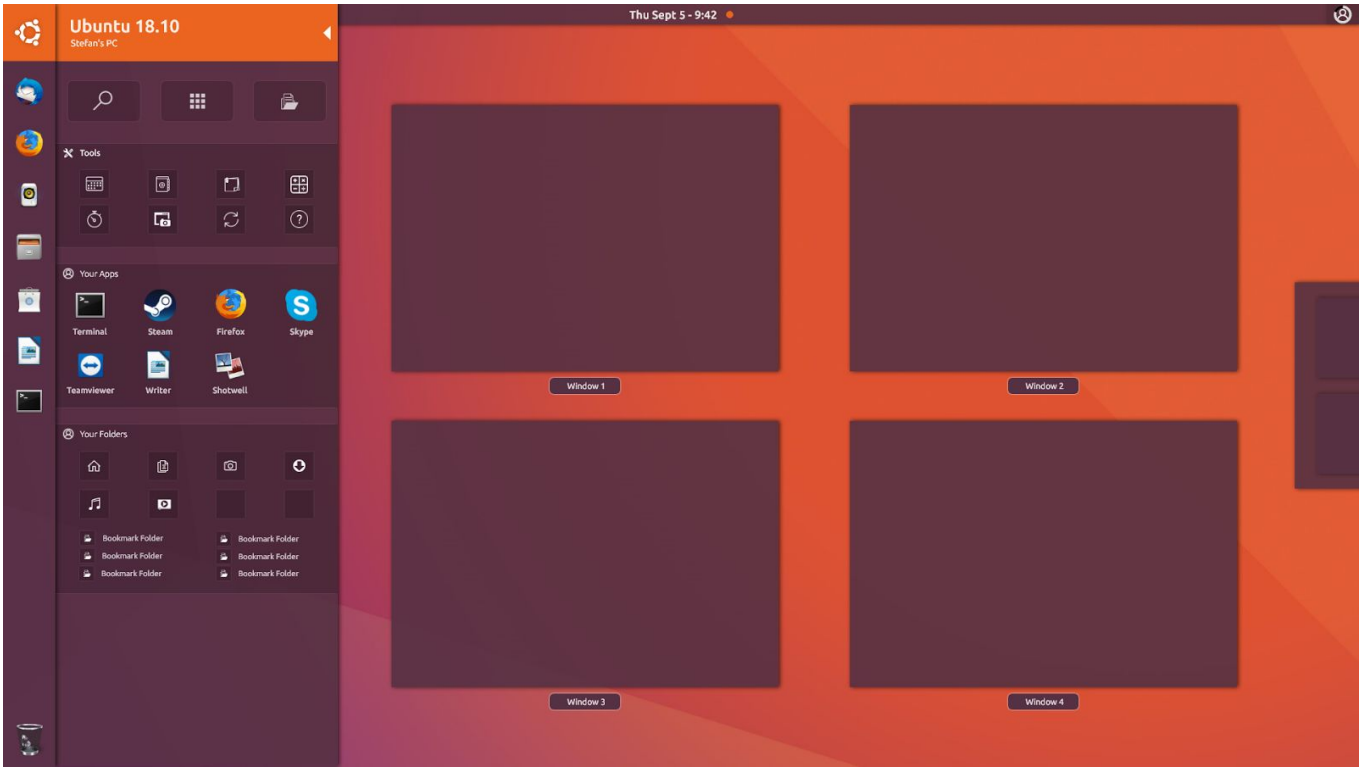
The **"What"**, or the "**Launcher**"

This is the well-known button from a lot of systems. And like a lot of systems, it starts with apps and files. But not as big and overwhelming as in Gnome or Unity, (it felt like for really small screens, or maybe to use it from a mile away, at least on my 27" monitor...), simple and with a good and logical overview. With the opportunity to make it much more personal then it was before.

The main thoughts behind the launcher are:

- Be simple and easy to understand
- Clean, modern and especially useful
- Be quicker and search less
- Shorten a lot of ways to get to apps, files or folders
- Be somewhat intelligent (recent files and folders)
- Be able to personalize it to your needs
- Room for extensions
- Be modular
- Show people new or unknown apps/features
- Also serve the pro-user
- Be prepared to have a "Knowledge Base", which is an intelligent lense that answers all kinds of questions. But starts with calculations and Wikipedia and so on (Gnome search interpretation)

What - it defines with **what** app or program you work/play/use, but also with **what** file you work.



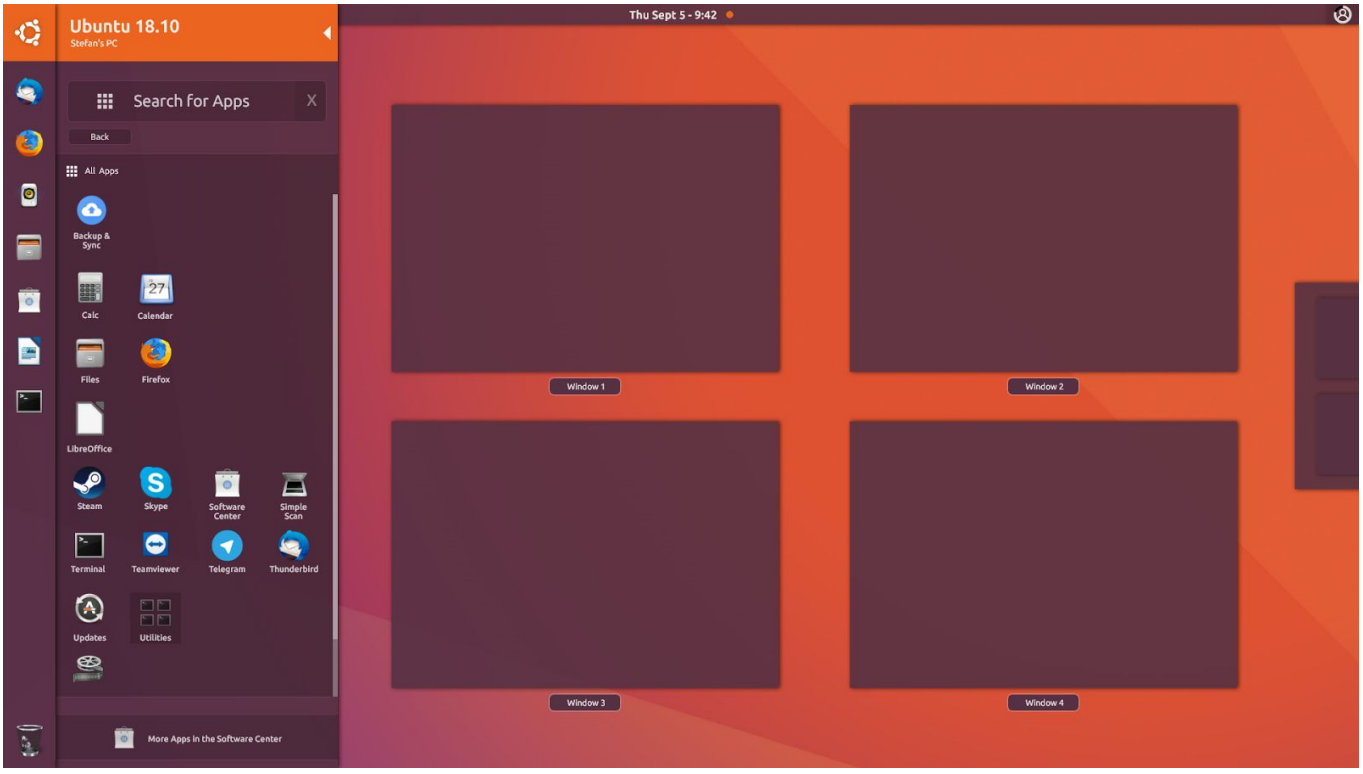
The launcher is modular, the modules are called "**Lenses**" (hello again...). So, the launcher will have a nice and logic way of working out of the box. Users have the opportunity to change the order, minimize/delete lenses or add other lenses to the main launcher site. Like getting rid of the “Tools” lense, but add a lense with the recent files from your download folder.

But let's start from above:

- **Branding!**[1] Show the user what system he is using, including what version of it. This is a simple way to make the user more loyal - because just below there is the name of the user’s PC. Maybe a click on it brings us to the settings, to change the name from PC-37278788 to "Stefans PC". So I - as well as the user - can see: This is MY computer. In a company it should be useful when support is needed, the user can find the PC name right here. The little white triangle on the right closes the launcher.
- **Searching** - when the menu is open the user just types and the search starts. More a little later.
- **Search**, **Apps**[1] and **Files**[1] **Buttons**[1] - The search button is expanding the search field. The apps button brings you to the apps. And the files button to the files site of the launcher. You will see more a little later.
- **Tools**[1] - this is where I added some useful tools/apps. Like "Contacts", "Software Update", "Help", "Screen Snapshot" and - "Calculator". Why the calculator? Because people always calculate on the phone, like there is no way to calculate on a PC... I would like to see that you can change the apps/tools your way. The standard configuration is showing the ordinary user what also to do with their system. And yes, clock and notes are not included in Gnome/Ubuntu right now. Spoiler!
- **Your**[1] **Apps** - This is a hybrid, because it learns and it can be ruled. It shows the last used apps for a quick access to what you may need. Also, you can pin apps here, to let the user decide. I like to see that it can expand from one to multiple lines.

- **Your[1] Folders** - This is a quick access to your standard folders and your bookmarked folders. Would also be nice to give the opportunity to let the user change the folder and icon.
- **Windows[1] overview** -like in Gnome, the open windows are sorted in the middle of the screen for a quick overview. We'll see how this works out in real work life, because it could be too distracting, always have a movement when clicking the super-key. For now, it's good.
- **Workspaces[1]** - like in Gnome, you can choose your workspaces on the right, it expands with every added workspace. Something that's not used a lot, we'll see.

Now we click on the "Apps" button

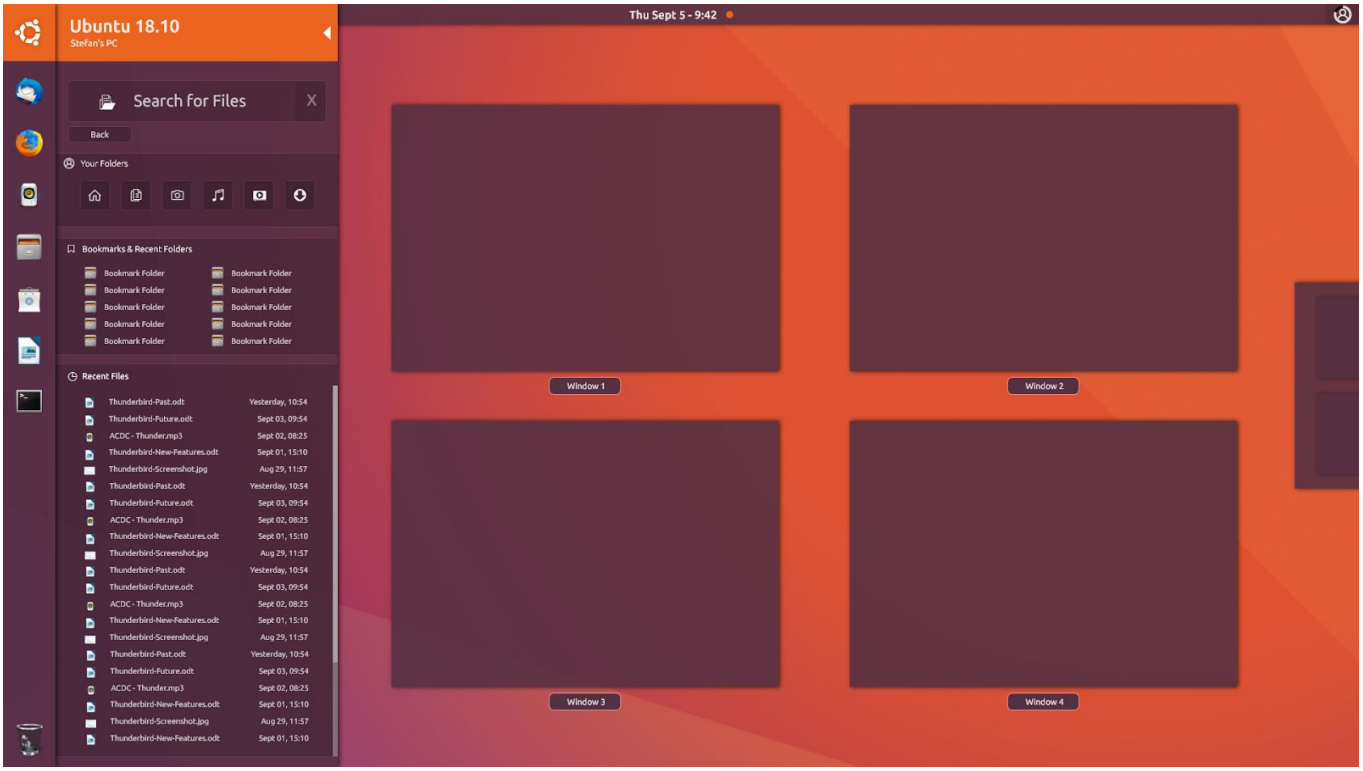


It's simply a whole list of your apps and programs. I would like to have folders and recommend to put some "not end-user" friendly apps in a sub-folder, also maybe not show every possible app/program here, like "Language support" and "Input Method" - those should be found in the settings.

On the bottom there is a fixed button to the Software Center.

When you type you search just for apps.

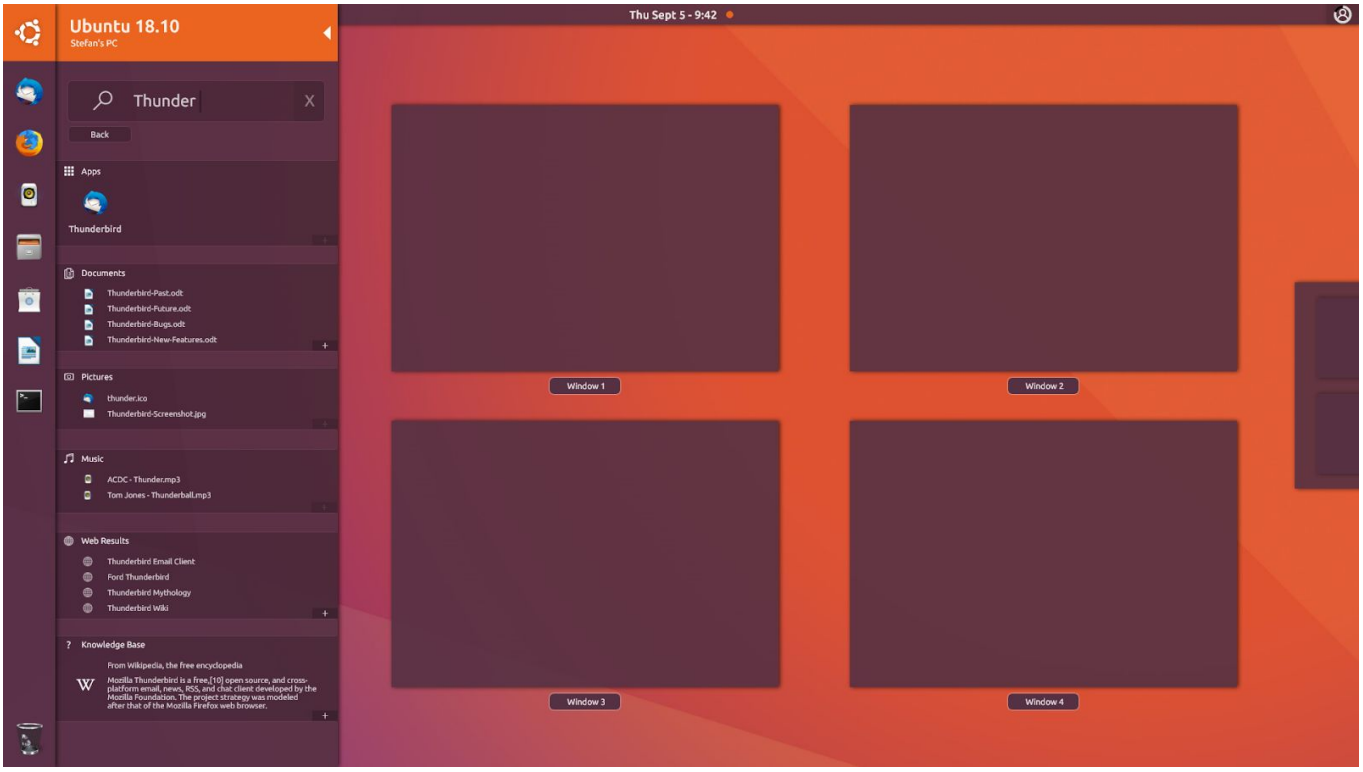
Now, we click on files:



Like before, you find “Your Folders” here, but “Bookmarks & Recent Folders” are separated and much more expanded, to give you quicker access to more folders.

After that there is the “Recent Files” lense: self-explaining.
When you type, it will only search for files, sorted as file-types (like you will see next).

Next, we're pretending we've just opened the launcher and have written something:



This part of "**What**"[1]is defined through the search engine, as implemented in Gnome. The user types, the engine finds apps, documents, pictures, music, files, web-results and results of the "Knowledge Base", like "5+6=11". When there are more than (for example) four results, you can expand the lense, the other lenses minimize.

The user should be able to switch the lenses on/off in the settings. Further, it is possible to build shopping lenses, more knowledge lenses, wiki-lenses and so on. Kind of revival, but also just an extension of the Gnome Search Engine. And when used right, a really helpful one.

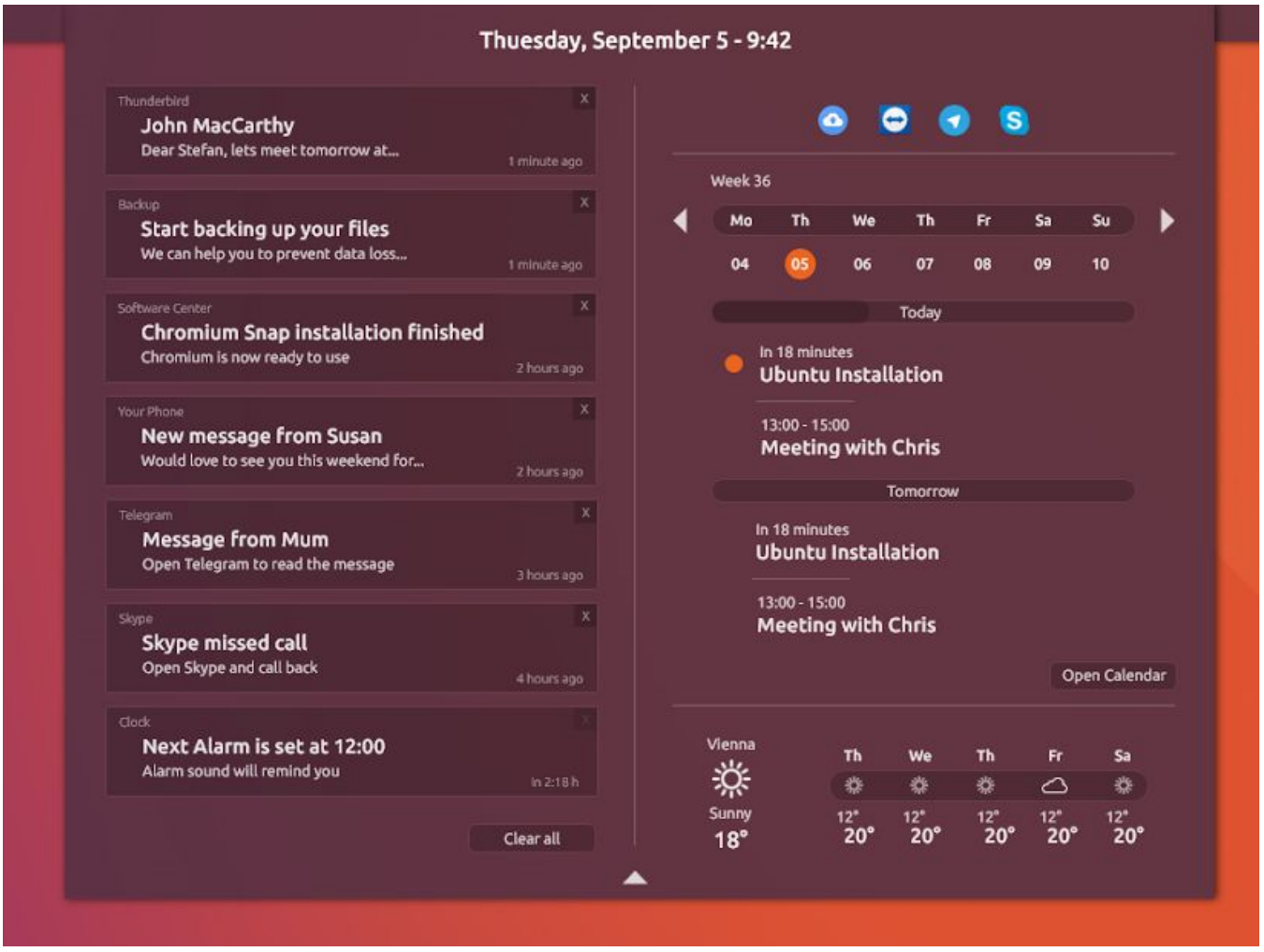
For me a hint for future development when searching via the "Knowledge Base". Intelligent assistants are more and more present. Let's try to make Ubuntu more intelligent, without the need of spying on the user and his behavior.

The modularity of the launcher allows the user to personalize it to the real user needs. This is kind of a new concept, but I think the opportunity of the simple modularity entitles the development of a new launcher. For a useful, simple and forward-looking way to interact with your files, apps and needed information. Also the gap between ordinary and power-users may shrink, because it can serve both of them. Out of the box for the average consumer and personalized with own written lenses for the real power user.

So the "**What**" is defined through apps, files, answers and whatever the user needs to get work done.

The **"Information-Center"**

This is just an evolution to the actual information-center in Gnome. But there are some improvements, especially for the office/work day:



To get to the right information quickly is always a benefit for a working user, and to help him with little hints to make life a little easier.

- At the top, the date is now in full words and it grows to be a **headline** for the information-center
- On the left side, quite everything is the same. But we don't show calendar events in here anymore. Calendar events are not notifications!
- The right side, on the top - here you can find the **background apps**. Be true - they have to be somewhere. There is a symbol for Google´s Backup & Sync too. I still hope...
- Then there is the **calendar area**. I have to say that I don’t need the whole month in here, because for that, I have the calendar app. But a quick week overview with the calendar week (this is very common in companies) is nice. After that you find an indicator for "Today" - the bar fills up from 0-24 or 0AM-12PM (maybe customizable to fit the user's office-hours). After that, you find the next appointments in your calendar - with an indicator for the next upcoming appointment, including a countdown in hours/minutes. No calculation needed, just see which

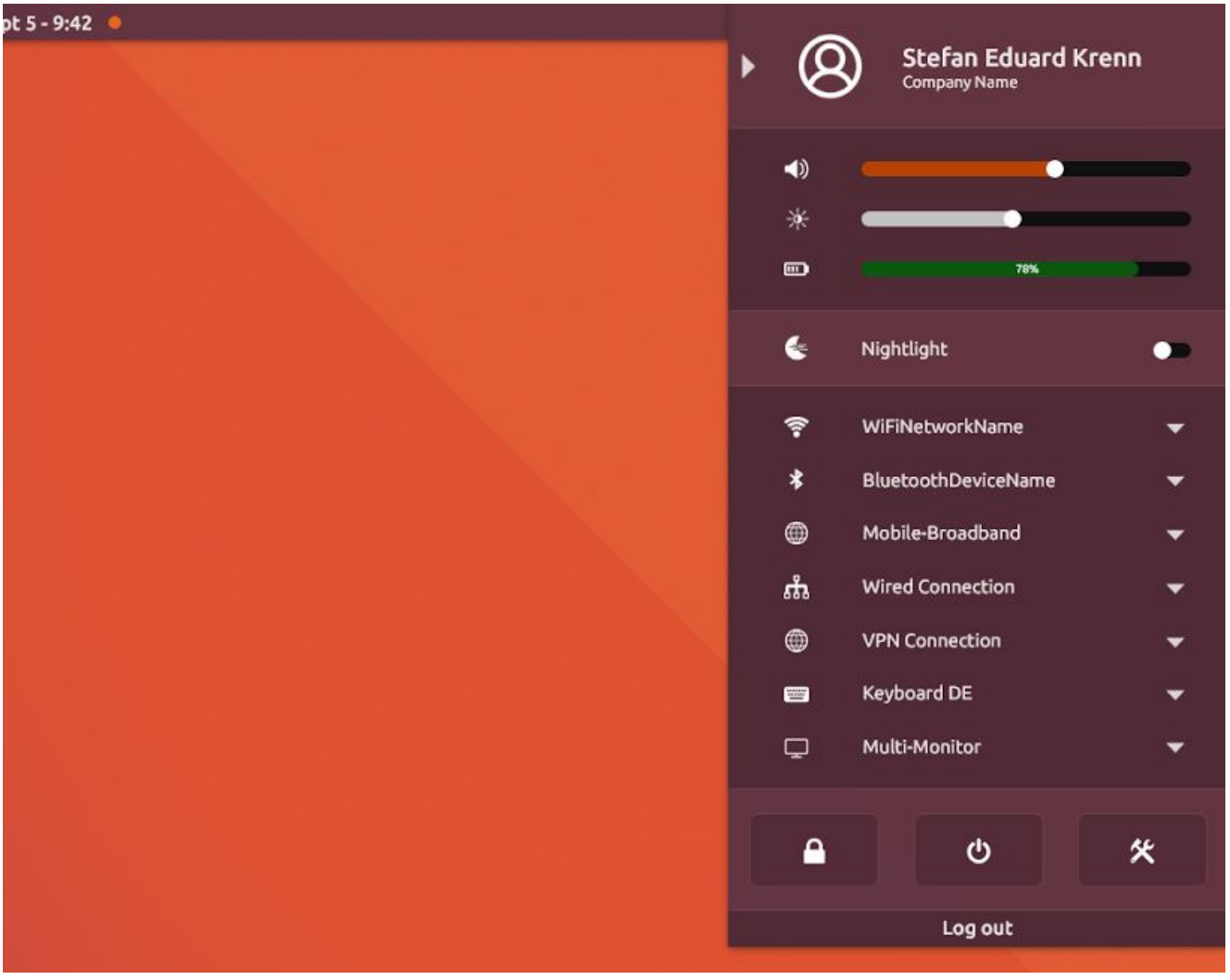
appointment is next, and how many minutes you have to eat your lunch. Of course this must be linked to the calendar app.
- After that, there is the **weather**. Because everybody likes to know what the weather is like and will be, especially if you spend the whole day in front of the computer. This exists of course already in Gnome, let's bring it to the next level. Gnome tries to describe it in words - that is just not practical and you always have to click to find out about tomorrow or the weekend…

For the Information-Center, there are a lot of more thoughts going on. Like making it a little bigger, bringing more information into here and what's maybe missing. Time will answer that, I guess. For now: Let's start with the basic needs.

The "**Me and the machine**"

I like that wording, but it needs to be more on the point - which means shorter.
This is where the user can "**interact**" with the PC.

And it looks like that:



So, everything you need to handle your needs:

- **The[1]User[1]**- here we have the user name to display that he is the owner, or user. Like before, it gives a personal touch and the user's name is kind of implemented in the system. Nice! And there is the possibility to display the company name, also good for branding inside a company. And lastly: It tells the user he is the number one priority, not like in Gnome, where the username is on the bottom, even below the VPN he is maybe not even using. The white triangle on the left closes the "Me and the Machine" area.
- **Soundbar[1]**- it tells the user fast and visual everything he needs to know. Of course, there will always be a pop-up when changing it with keys. It's like on phones, you don't need to see how loud the speakers are. Could maybe be changed by the mouse wheel, in case no other setting is interrupted by it. Click on the symbol for more settings.
- **Brightness** - adjust the screen brightness. Only shown if using a laptop/AIO.
- **Battery[1]** - simple bar, simple statement - percentage included. Click on the symbol for more settings. Only shown if using a laptop.
- **Night[1]Light** - Stop hiding the nice function deep in the settings: present it to the user! Click on the symbol for more settings.
- **WIFI[1]**- shows the network you're in, opens up to a sub-menu, giving you the choice of switching it on/off (with an on/off toggle), and a list to choose for more wifi-networks nearby. Click on the symbol for more settings. Only shown when WIFI is available on the device.
- **Bluetooth[1]**- shows connected devices, opens a submenu, giving you the choice of switching it on/off (with an on/off toggle), and a list of nearby devices. Click on the symbol for more settings. Only shown, when Bluetooth is available on the device.
- **Mobile Broadband** - Only shown, when available on the device.
- **Wired Connection** - self explaining.
- **VPN[1]** - to choose for connections and switch it on/off (with an on/off toggle). Only in the list when pre-configured - because a lot of people don't even know what that should be. Click on the symbol for more settings.
- **Keyboard[1]DE** - that's something maybe only seen in countries with Non-English keyboards. For example - you can switch the input from a German keyboard to an English keyboard. Nice to have, but mostly not needed. Click on the symbol for more settings.
- **Multi-Monitor** - bringing the multi-monitor settings to the front. Simple like "Only monitor 1 or 2" "Duplicate" or "Expand". Only available when more than one screen is plugged.
- The **Lock**, the **Settings[1]** and the **Power[1]**- Buttons. Quite self explaining. Big, nice, stylish- and handy!
- "**Log[1] out**" - always present on the bottom. I don't know why this is hidden in Gnome and Ubuntu, because there is enough space, and it is kind of useful when you work in a company with shared PC's, or when your family PC has more than one user. Or when a visitor just needs your PC and you don't want to give him access to all of your files: Log out and start a guest session (hope the guest session **will** be re-implemented in future versions).

It is a little bit crowded in the test setup, but the message is clear - you tell the machine what to do, the machine gives information back. Now with a little more style and more functionality - but only, if necessary.

Easy, right?

To make things a little easier, I think of a different way to get to the three parts: pressing the super key once, the launcher opens. You hold down the super key for a second, the information center opens. So the main contacts points are available with one key. Only for the me and the machine menu,

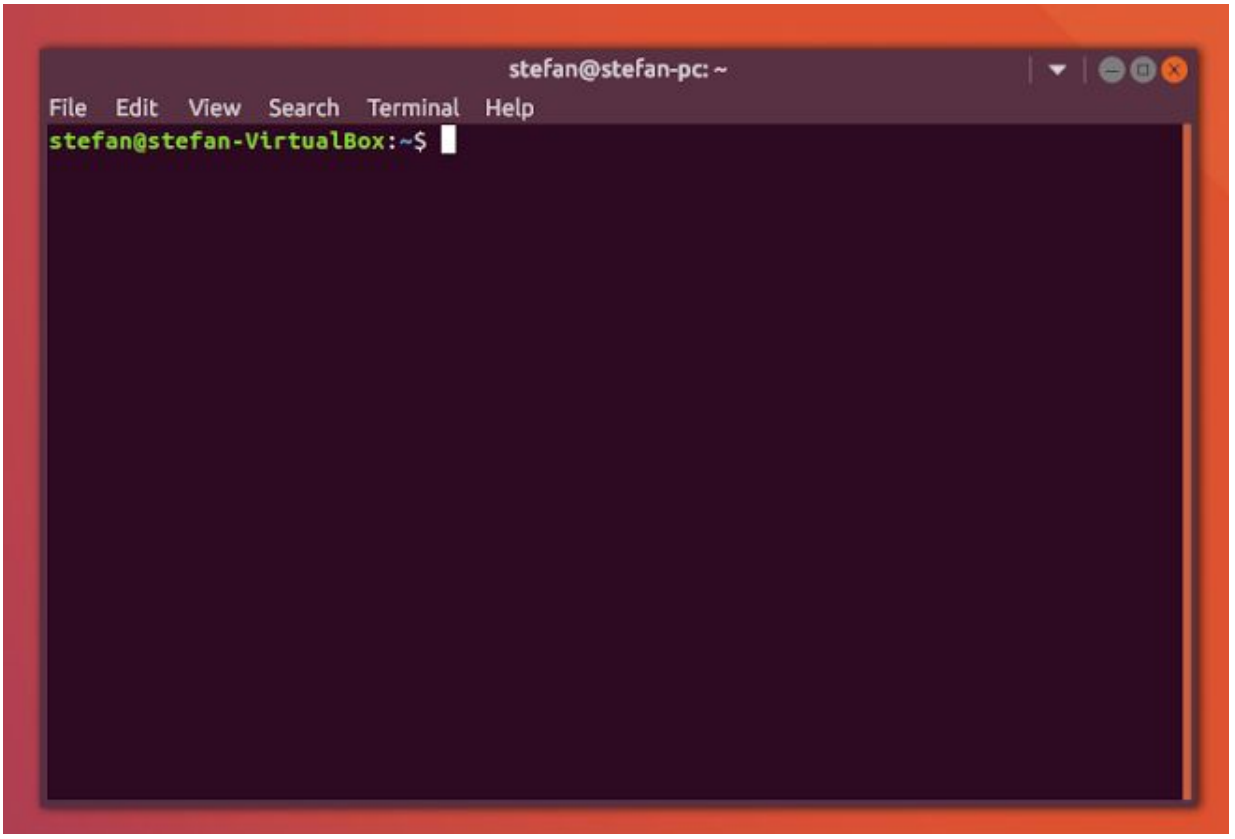
we would need another easy way to jump in, like holding down the ALT key when pressing the super key… but this needs to be tested out.

Window design

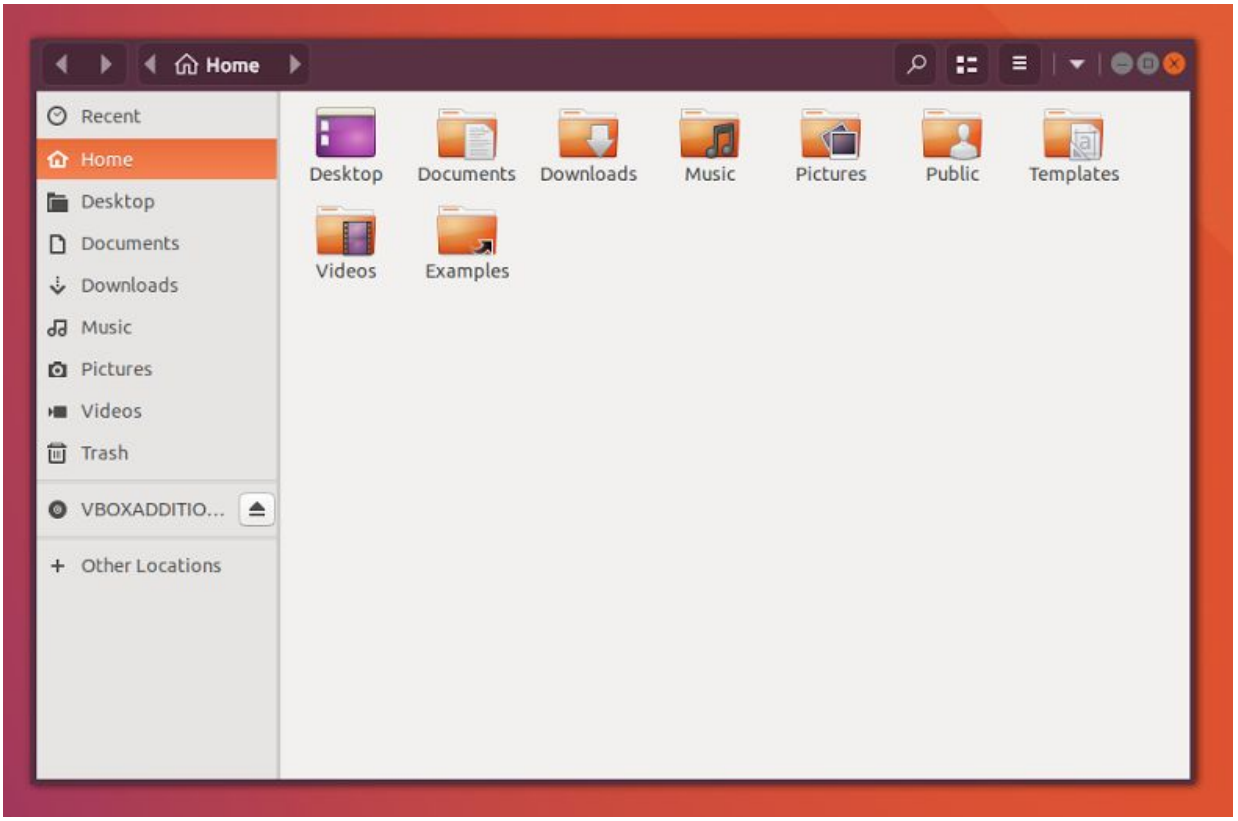
After breaking down the main desktop, it is time to spend some thoughts on the windows. As we know, we have two types of windows (not including the quite expensive operating system):

- Regular windows
- Gnome app styled windows.

Here are the mockups for the two: First the Terminal, straight like always.



Next the Gnome Files:



As you can see, the window background is the same design like the dock and bar, but less transparent because it is too much distraction when windows from above are shining through. Buttons are in the same darker tone (just a transparent layer of black, with a brighter outline) and the window settings are next to the window buttons.

I think it is too confusing when the window settings are somewhere else - you should have it on the window (like it is here) or maybe on the dock - but not somewhere you don't expect it to be. Be true, they don't seem to fit into the top-bar.

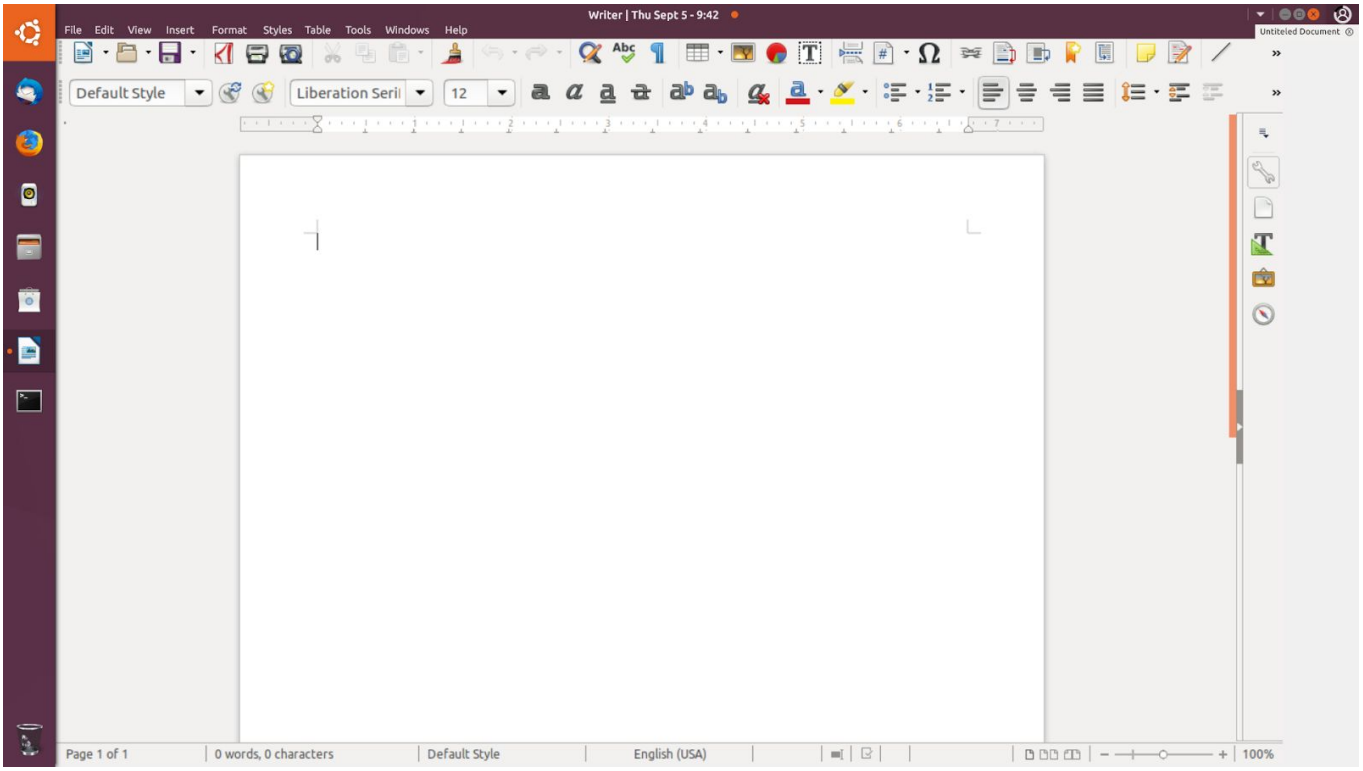
Maximized Window

What challenged me was the maximized window part. Because one thing was clear - I don't want to waste space, especially in height. Because most of us have 16:9 or 16:10 displays, my display even got a ratio of 21:9. So - no wasting of height!

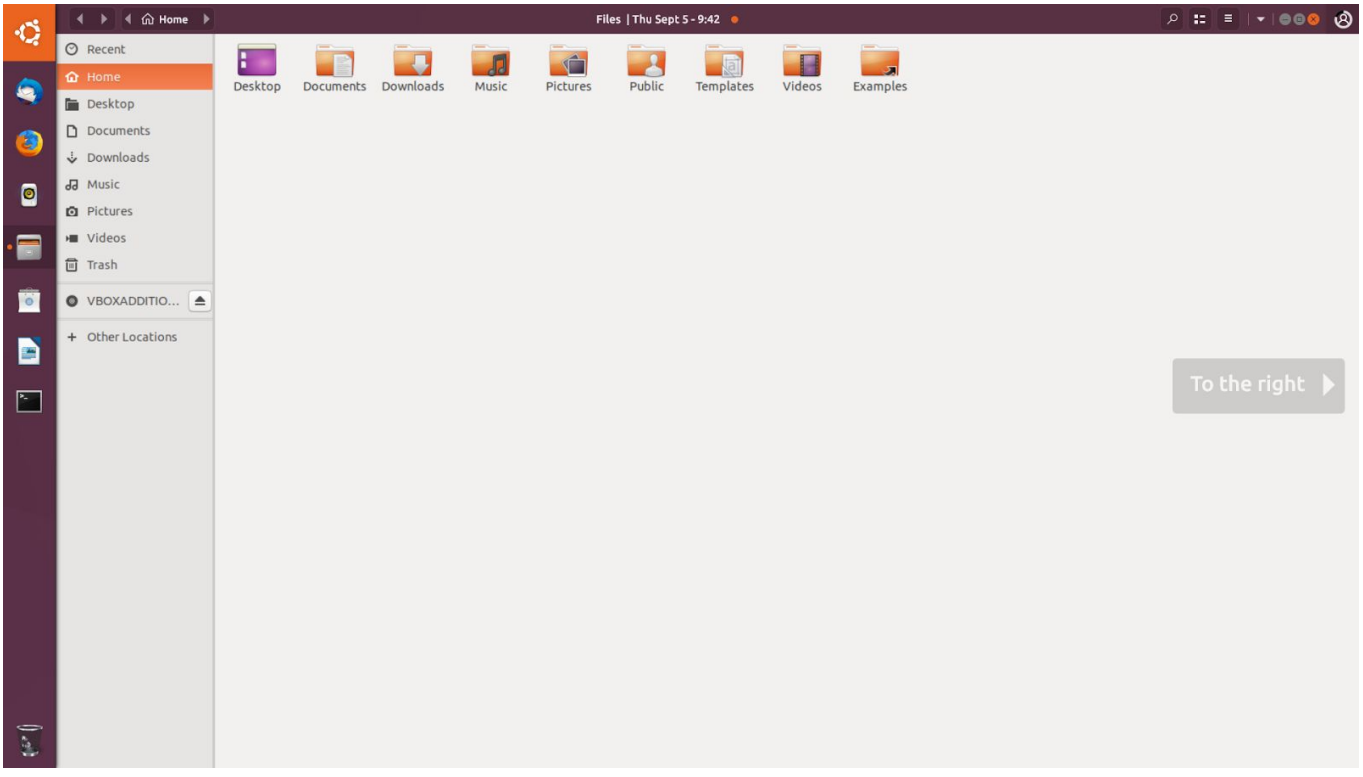
This was one thing I really appreciated in Unity and miss in every other distribution. And no, macOS' maximized window is not an alternative, because at the same time you lose fast access to everything else. But - a full screen (maybe focused?) mode is maybe a nice idea for the future.

The solution was to handle that with the window decorations and completely hide the top-bar.
How will that look without confusing people?

Like that for ordinary windows, but LibreOffice needs to have a little fix (the "Untitled Document" part). The content (screenshot) is not right scaled/filled, I know:

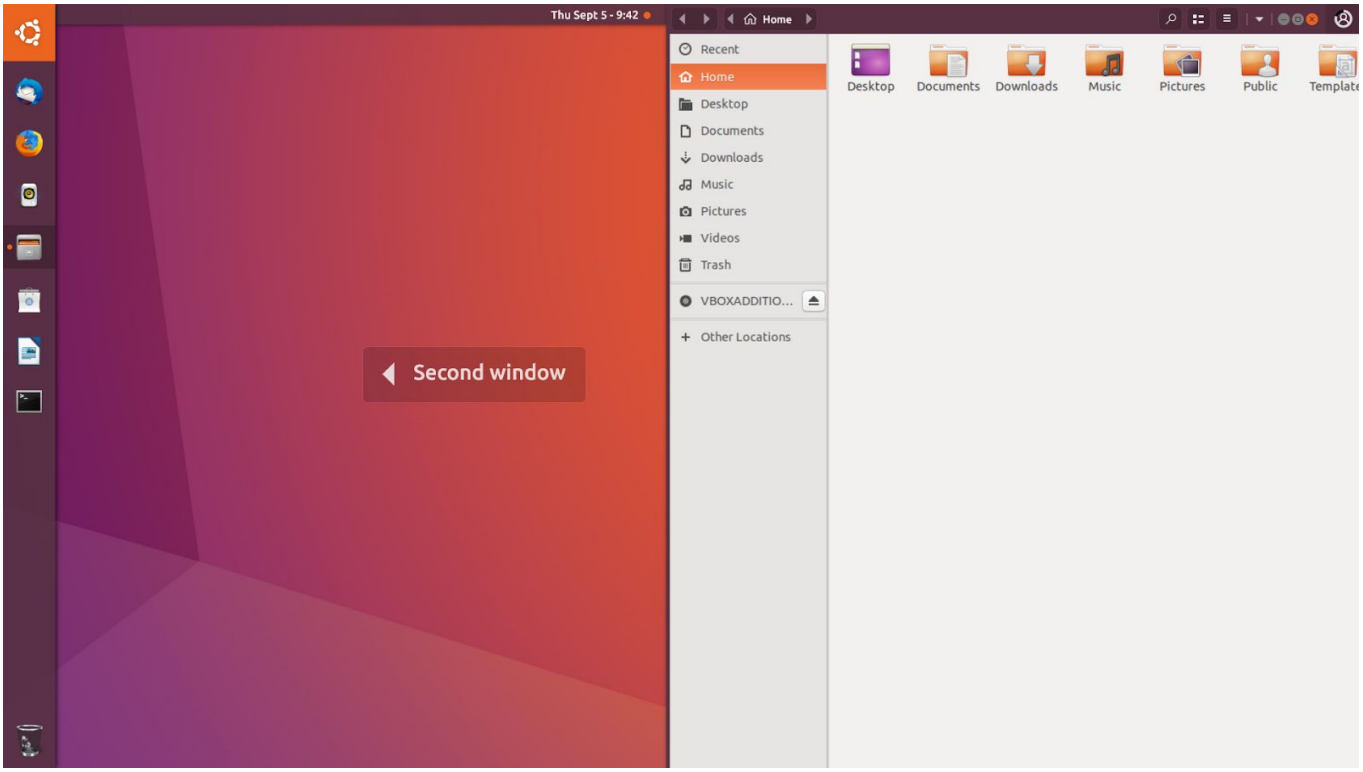


Like that for Gnome apps:



Well, you're right: The "Information-Center" and the "Me and the Machine" button still work like before. The app-name is written next to the date and time. The window buttons are next to the "Me and the Machine" button. Everything is still where you expect it. Maybe we even can get rid of the window name next to the date and time.

Half Maximized Window

But one more thing was really bugging me - I like to have two windows next to each other. Like two file windows, or a PDF and the LibreOffice Writer. The date and clock moves a little to the side, giving the possibility to have full height, presenting the rest of the screen as a separated area.

What about that: The window on the right: