

Manage Your Money with Skrooge

Cash Register

Keeping track of your money is one of the unfortunate responsibilities that comes with adulthood and financial independence. If you need to balance the books, Skrooge might be just what the accountant ordered.

By Joe "Zonker" Brockmeier

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Skrooge is a KDE application for personal financial management. If you want to manage your money and analyze your expenses, then Skrooge is a great app for getting started. It allows you to manage your accounts fairly intuitively and has some powerful reporting and search features that will appeal to users who want to see in great detail how money is being spent or earned.

Finding Skrooge

Skrooge should be available from most Linux distros that ship KDE as part of the Extragear packages. The Skrooge website [1] also has source code for download in case your favorite distro doesn't package Skrooge or doesn't have the very latest version.

Ubuntu 10.04 ships with a slightly older version of Skrooge than is current, but the team makes current packages available via a Personal Package Archive (PPA). In fact, they provide two PPAs: one with the current stable release and one with the beta. Adventurous users can manage their money using the beta, but I'll stick with the stable release to track my funds.

If you want the latest and greatest on Ubuntu, add these lines to your `/etc/apt/sources.list` file:

```
deb http://ppa.launchpad.net/z
      s-mankowski/ppa/ubuntu lucid main
deb-src http://ppa.launchpad.net/z
      /s-mankowski/ppa/ubuntu lucid main
```

Next, you'll need to grab the GPG key and install Skrooge:

```
sudo apt-key adv z
--keyserver keyserver.ubuntu.com z
--recv-keys 796FFDFC
sudo apt-get update
sudo apt-get install skrooge
```

Now you should have the latest stable version of Skrooge. As of this writing, that's v0.7.1.

Setting Up Accounts

Skrooge should now appear under *Applications | Office* (if you're using Gnome), or just run the command `skrooge`. Then, take a second to familiarize yourself with the Skrooge interface. Skrooge uses a tabbed interface with several "docks"

on the left-hand side. The docks display your transaction history, the context chooser, bookmarks within the application, and so on.

When Skrooge fires up the first time, you'll see a blank Dashboard (as shown in Figure 1) and have the option of starting a new bank account or importing an account using one of the supported types.

Skrooge supports several popular types of financial management apps. If you're using KMyMoney, GnuCash, Grisbi, or an app that provides QIF, QXF, or CSV files, you should be able to import your transactions with no problem. Before working with Skrooge, I hadn't been using an application to track my finances, but my bank provides QIF files with transaction history. The Skrooge project lists these types of files as problematic because the QIF format is not well documented, but my data seem to have imported correctly. As far as I could tell, I was able to import a year's worth of transactions flawlessly.

To start from scratch and set up banking information without importing, just select *Bank and Account* from the Welcome to Skrooge Dashboard page.

Managing Transactions

Once you have the information in for a bare-bones account, you can start managing your money in Skrooge. One of the things I like about Skrooge is that it's fairly simple, and you don't need to learn double-entry accounting or anything fancy to balance your books.

First, I'll take a look at how to enter a deposit. From the *Dashboard* tab, select the account you want to work on. This will take you to the operations page. If you imported account data from your bank or another tool, you should already see some transactions here. At the bottom of the tab, as shown in Figure 2, you have an Operations dialog.

Here, you can enter the account that the deposit will go into, the date, amount, and so on. Skrooge has one slightly counterintuitive characteristic I should mention here. Some applications allow you to choose between debits and credits. Skrooge doesn't. If a transaction is a debit, you need to add a minus sign (-) in front of the currency amount.

What happens if you make a mistake? From the History dock on the left-hand side, just *Undo* the transaction or transactions that were mistaken and start over. Unfortunately, *Undo* takes you back to the state of the account before the operation that was reversed. So, if you enter three checks and find that you entered the wrong amount in the first one, undoing the first amount will also undo the other checks entered afterward.

Scheduling Transactions

Certain expenses and credits are predictable. For example, you probably know how much your rent or mortgage is every month, and if you're salaried, you probably know how much to expect in each paycheck. A good measure is to go ahead and schedule those transactions, so you not only track your money but predict what you'll have down the road.

To schedule a transaction, you need to set up the first entry in the *Operations* Tab. After the first entry is set up, click *Schedule*. Then, in the Context Chooser pane on the left, select *Scheduled operations* (Figure 3).

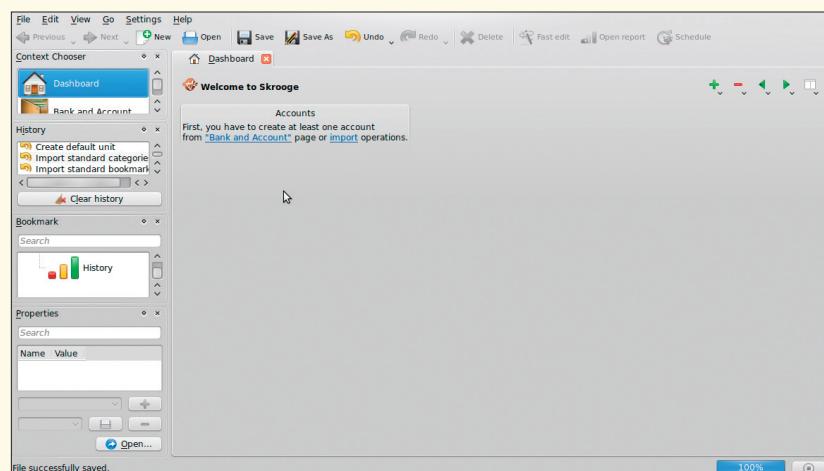


Figure 1: Skrooge's basic layout.

File successfully saved.

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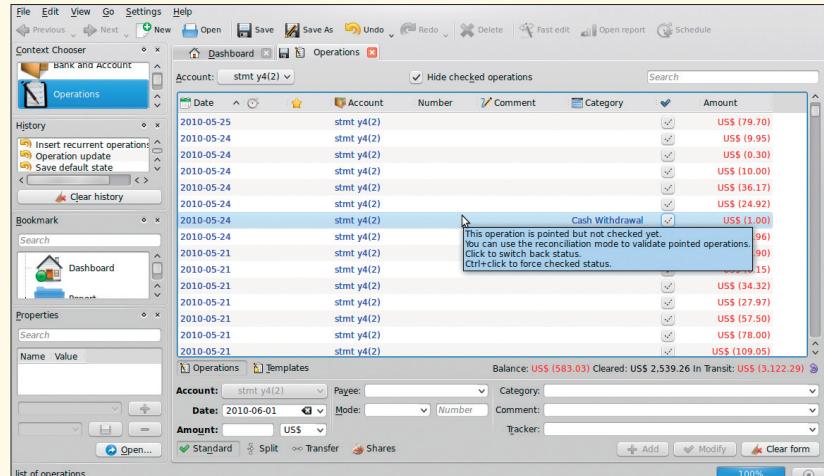


Figure 2: The Skrooge Operations tab dialog.

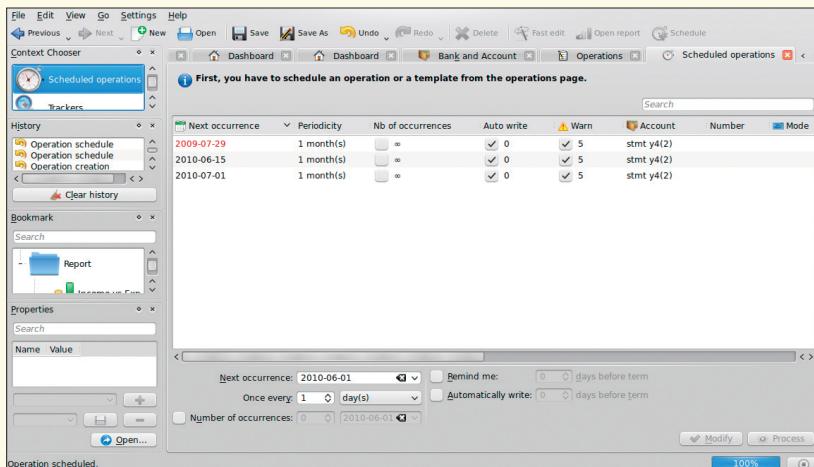


Figure 3: Skrooge's scheduled operations.

report for a time period or set of transactions on the fly. Just select *Report* from the context menu and click *Open*; Skrooge automatically creates a report for you, as shown in Figure 4.

One way I use this report is to get a quick-and-dirty picture of how much I'm transferring from checking into savings. To start, I search for a term common to all of the transactions then generate a quick report, which allows me to graph the amount over the past 12 months and see which months I've managed to sock away a fair amount and which months I'm lean. Also, you could use this report to break out how much is spent on rent, groceries, or just about anything.

Additionally, you can work with your report information outside Skrooge. For instance, right-click on the graph and you can copy the image or export the graph as a PDF, SVG, or PNG. On the left-hand side of the display, you can right-click and export the report as a CVS or text file.

Another way to generate reports is by using categories. Simply open the *Categories* tab and right-click on the category from which you want to generate a report. Then, select *Open Report*, and you're off to the races.

Be Careful Out There

As always, you want to be as careful as possible with your banking data. Even if Skrooge doesn't contain any data that would allow someone to use your bank accounts, you might not want to give away your transaction history if someone steals your laptop.

Skrooge uses the KDE Wallet to store a password for your information. To set a new password, go to *File | Change Password*, just enter it twice, then save. Note that Skrooge doesn't actually ask you to set up a password on the first go, so it wouldn't be obvious that it has this feature at first glance.

INFO

[1] Skrooge website: <http://skrooge.org/>

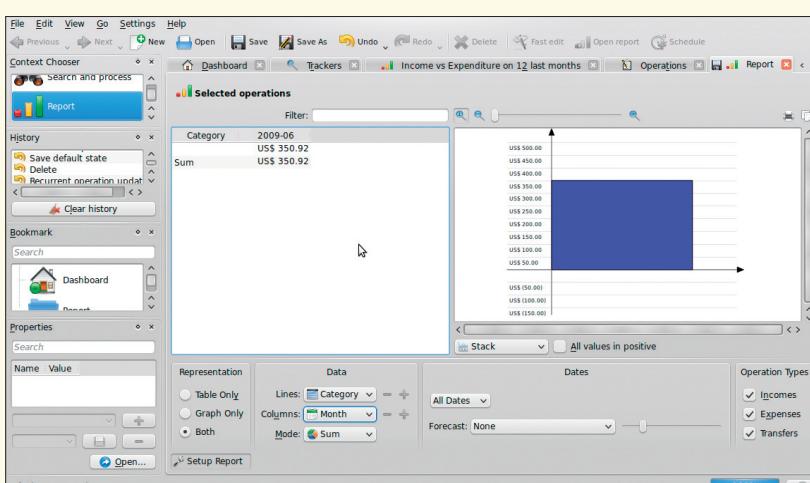


Figure 4: Skrooge report from selected operations.

Here, you can tweak the scheduling, set the number of recurring operations, and tell Skrooge if and when to notify you before a transaction goes through.

Reports

What good would a financial application be without reports? On the Dashboard page, Skrooge gives a very basic overview of the current and previous month's income and expenditures, although you'll probably want a slightly more fine-grained look into your finances.

Several pre-made reports are in the *Bookmark* dock. Here, you can see Income vs. Expenses for the past year, History from your accounts, and so on. By highlighting a number of transactions in the *Operations* tab, you can generate a

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Checking Out

Skrooge isn't perfect. It doesn't tie into online banking directly as do some apps for Windows and Mac OS X, so you'll have to do a bit of manual labor. However, I had good luck importing information into Skrooge from my bank's QIF files. Naturally, I've only scratched the surface of Skrooge's capabilities. Skrooge takes a little while to get used to, as far as navigating the application, and it could be a bit simpler to use. Then again, it's hard to make financial management entirely simple. The application is robust, and I recommend it for any Linux user who's been on the hunt for a finance management application that doesn't require having to learn double-entry accounting. ■■■